# In From the Cold

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**Summary**

Following the events trending as #shieldfiledump and #hydragate, Steve goes hunting for the Winter Soldier, goes looking for his best friend. What he finds is a very broken man. Meanwhile, other agents of SHIELD are picking up their own pieces. Since it's one of the few secure places left, everyone heads to Stark Tower. Coulson's rather sudden reappearance to the team after three years of alleged death doesn't go entirely smoothly; especially where his former relationship with Clint and the resumption thereof are concerned. Ultimately luckily for everyone, Natasha has no patience for anyone's BS once she gets back from her post-#hydragate disappearance.  

(Canon compliant through Winter Soldier, semi-AoS compliant)
Chapter 1

It was sometime around three in the morning. Steve had been wending his way down the Eastern Seaboard for almost a month, zigzagging and backtracking, following a feeble trail of blurry cellphone videos and hearsay in a self-financed attempt to track down Bucky. Now, tired and hungry and damp from an early spring rain, he shuffled into a near empty Waffle House in North Carolina and ordered half the menu. At the counter, a woman in pink scrubs was talking to the waitress.

"You know how I swear weird shit happens on the full moon? Yeah, well, I'd have sworn it was a full moon tonight until I got outside." She took a bite of hashbrowns. "This John Doe wanders into emergency around ten, no clue where he is or who he is or anything."

"Police bring him in?"

"No, no, he walked himself in. He was babbling in about four languages, seemed confused about the date too, we got him in a bay and he was pretty chill considering the fact he seemed to be having vivid hallucinations. We thought he was on drugs so we had to run a tox screen. Poor Mathew goes in there to draw blood and this guy flips his shit. Tore up half of emergency, punched a hole or five in the nurses' station, took a door off its hinges before security tackled him. Took all the security staff on that floor to hold him long enough to get some lorazepam in him and knock him out."

"Damn."

"I know."

"More tea?"

"Please. Anyway, after that, working theory changed from crazy druggie to some Navy SEAL or something back from the Middle East with one hell of a case of PTSD. That theory has the bonus of explaining why he's an amputee and where the hell he got such a fancy prosthetic. When I left, they had him unconscious, handcuffed to a cot, arguing about trying to get an MRI, make sure his brain is all together, but nobody can tell how to get the metal arm off a him."

Steve set his fork down and crossed the small restaurant. "I don't mean to intrude, but what hospital is this at?"

The nurse blinked at him. "Duke University Hospital. Buddy, if you're a reporter or a lawyer or something—"

The waitress smacked her hand on the counter. "Hang on, are you—? You can't be. But you are, aren't you?" She looked at the nurse while gesturing at Steve. "My grandmother was a Cappette."

Steve tried very hard not to sigh but wound up sighing a little anyway. "The man at the hospital is my friend and may be a threat to national security."

The nurse pushed her plate away. "Well, guess I'm going back to work."

"Thank you."
The moment Steve walked into the hospital, every eye turned to him. A little boy sitting on his mother's lap was staring open mouthed. After a moment of quiet, all the nurses moved in sync to point across the wreckage of half the E.R. toward the closed door of an examination room flanked by two nervous looking security guards. Steve nodded and made his way to the room. A young, redhead doctor with the beginnings of what was going to be a nasty bruise forming on his cheek intercepted him at the door. "Sir, I—"

"I got the story from one of the nurses."

"Right, well, even so sir, or Captain, or how should I address you?"

"Captain is fine," Steve said impatiently.

"Why exactly are you here, Captain?"

"I know who your John Doe is, and I need to take him. For security reasons. So if you don't mind." He gestured at the door.

"Of course..." The doctor opened the door and followed Steve in.

Awake but staring blankly at a spot on the ceiling, Bucky was laying on a cot, ankles and right wrist shackled to the frame with padded cuffs. The other arm, the metal one, was lashed to the frame with at least a dozen jumbo zip ties. Steve shot the doctor a look.

"He broke the cuff," the doctor muttered, ghosting a finger against the bruise on his cheek.

"Right." Steve nodded and sighed then went to the cot. "Buck? You there?"

A muscle next to Bucky's eye twitched then, slowly, he turned his head and managed to focus on Steve's face. He blinked blearily. "Steve...?"

"Yeah, Buck." He blinked again.

"...why are you so big?"

Heart tight, Steve still couldn't help but smile. "It's a long story." He looked back over at the doctor. "He—"

"He was delirious when he came in and we've had to sedate him. We have no idea what's wrong, his tox screen came back clear and we can't run the usual scans because of that arm. If we could take it off—"

"I don't think it comes off."

"What kind of prosthetic doesn't come off?" The doctor sounded dumbfounded.

"The kind that's way above your pay grade."

The frame of the cot rattled as Bucky noticed he was shackled and tugged at his cuffs. "Wha...? Why am— Steve? Did Hydra— Hydra..."

Bucky fell silent, his eyes glazed over, then snapped back to focus on Steve's face, and he started shouting in Russian, pulling roughly against his restraints. The doctor grabbed something off a tray, brushed Steve aside, and injected the contents of a syringe into a cath on the back of Bucky's right hand. After a minute of continued struggle, Bucky slipped into unconsciousness. The doctor let out a breath, looked at Steve, and gestured at the limp body on the cot. "Does he have
insurance?"

Steve hesitated. "No."

"Well, somebody needs to pay for all this, but then, by all means get him out of here." Steve scrubbed a hand over his face.

"I need to make a phone call."

"Be my guest." The doctor left the room.

With an internal groan, Steve fished his phone out of his pocket and punched a number he'd really hoped to not ever need. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he listened to the ringback in his ear. After what felt like an eternity, the line picked up. "Do you have any idea what time it is, old timer?"

"You don't sound like you were asleep."

"That's not the point, Old Glory, you never call me. You never call anyone. It's nearly five a.m. What gives?"

"I need you to foot a bill."

"Ah, party get a little out of hand, run up your tab?"

"Stark."

"Don't you have cash?"

Steve glanced out the window in the door at the wrecked nurses' station. "Not this much cash and my S.H.I.E.L.D. credit card doesn't work anymore."

"Fine, fine. What am I paying for?"

"An E.R. visit."

"Yikes, what did you do?"

Steve's phone beeped in his ear, possibly with a money transfer. "It's not for me. I'll explain later. Also I might need to house a couple people at the tower for a while?"

"As long as that couple people includes you, my offer from New York still stands. I've linked your phone into my accounts. Tap on the little icon that looks like a wallet and pay for whatever."

"And I sort of need to buy a car."

"Buy all the cars you want, Cap."

"I should probably thank you for this."

Tony made a sound through his nose. "I'll just tease you about it for the rest of forever."

"Fair enough."

After a quick jaunt two miles down the road to a Ford dealership and coming back to pay the
hospital bill, Steve buckled an unconscious and thoroughly sedated Bucky into the reclined passenger seat of a shiny new, bright red pickup truck. He had reluctantly tied Bucky's metal arm to the seat with rubber surgical tubing, just to be safe.

A nurse, a different one than before but also in pink scrubs, came out to the parking lot and pressed a bag of pre-filled syringes on him. "In case you have to knock him out again. This stuff, just jabbing him in a muscle will do. It's faster if you get a vein but..." She shook her head, morning sun glinting off a clip in her hair. "Last thing this country needs right now is Captain America running off the road 'cause a some crazy in the passenger seat."

"Thank you."

"Not a problem."

She went back inside. He checked his bike in the bed of the truck, got behind the wheel, and turned north. Ten hours and two shots of sedative later, Steve turned out of the city evening traffic into the Stark Tower parking deck. Leaving his bike to be dealt with later, Steve hoisted Bucky onto his shoulder and took the elevator up to the tower's private floors, pushed the first unlocked bedroom door he found open with a foot, and dumped his burden rather less gently than he'd meant to into the bed. He let out a breath, carefully smoothed a lock of hair away from the familiar face, brushed a thumb along the unshaven line of jaw, then jumped at someone clearing their throat behind him. He turned to find Tony, arms crossed, leaning in the doorframe.

"So, this is what Jarvis meant by 'The Captain seems to have brought in a potential security threat.'"

"He's confused—"

"By all accounts, including Natasha's lovely little press conference circuit, he knew exactly what he was doing when he was trying to kill, oh, everyone."

"Yeah, he sure did, but at the hospital in North Carolina where I found him, he thought it was still the 1940s for a minute, then he started yelling in Russian. He's confused, unwell, and currently heavily sedated." Steve shooed Tony out into the hallway, followed him out, and shut the door. "Haven't you Hulk-proofed, anyway?"

"Yes, I have—Banner is asleep down the hall, by the way, yeah I know it's only like seven, he and I both have screwed up sleep schedules—but Hulk-proofed or not I don't want the fucking Winter Soldier in my tower."

"He's my friend."

"Uh, maybe he used to be."

The two of them started down the hall to the floor's common room.

"Whatever's happened to him, he's still my friend."

"Yeah, friends don't normally fire rocket launchers at each other. I don't want him here, this place just finished getting rebuilt from the chitauri bullshit."

"I just got here, I'm not leaving again right now, and even if I did, this is the most secure place to have him. Mama S.H.I.E.L.D. isn't here to clean up anymore, remember? Can you give him half a chance to heal?"

"Why should I?"
"How many third and fourth chances have you gotten, huh?"

"Don't start comparing your little boyfriend to me."

Steve half choked. "My what?"

"Oh-ho, have I touched a nerve?"

The elevator chose that exact moment to ding open and disgorge a rather ragged looking Barton. He stared at the two men in front of him, then pointed an accusing finger at Steve.

"You, fuck you, thanks for the whole saving the world thing, but fuck you." He dropped his tattered backpack and bow on the floor, stalked to the nearest sofa, and lay down, either not seeing or ignoring Tony's cringe as he dirtied the white upholstery. "I was in goddamn Argentina, way down in Rio Gallegos, and I don't know why, but when you brought those fucking helicarriers down, all my fucking tech went dead. Phone, GPS, laptop, everything but my flashlight and my quiver bricked up. Even my fucking hearing aids. Fun fact, I'm damn near completely deaf. You know why you didn't know that? I have fucking fantastic tiny little in-ear hearing aids I wear all the fucking time, _that stopped fucking working_. Have you got any idea how paranoid that makes me? Don't answer that, I'm not looking at you. And I hope I'm shouting _obnoxiously_ loud."

Steve and Tony glanced at each other. Tony took a breath. "We'll finish this argument later." Tony moved around the sofa and pulled Clint's arm from over his eyes. "I'm getting you a drink."

"Water and food first. Then you're telling me exactly what's going on. _Then_ you are getting me very, _very_ drunk off hard lemonade." He hid his face in his elbow again.

Tony went to order pizza. Not sure what else to do with himself, Steve brought Clint a glass of water. Clint sat up with a groan and took the glass. "Thanks."

"Are you okay?" Steve sat across from him.

"As okay as anyone would be after hitchhiking back from South America missing a sense they're used to having." He emptied his glass and leaned back, staring at the ceiling. "Was more than a little worried I'd get here and find a nine-eleven redux instead of a tower. Until I got here I hadn't heard from anyone. Everything I know about what happened comes from news channels on TVs in public places." He looked at Steve again. "Where's Nat?"

"No idea."

"Say again?" With a slight jolt, Steve realized he'd been looking at the floor. He made sure to face Clint before speaking again. "I don't know where she is."

"Went off to figure out a new cover?"

Steve nodded.


The two blonds sat in silence on opposite sofas until Tony returned with pizza. After everyone had taken a few bites, Tony waved a hand to get Clint's attention, then, ever tactful, he asked, "So, did you go to a loud Lady Gaga concert or were you Born This Way?"

Clint dusted crumbs off his fingers. "Tony, please never make any hard of hearing friends other than me. The answer is 'neither,' though. I lost my hearing when I was ten, just woke up one day
and everything was quiet. It wasn't *completely* gone, I can still technically hear you if you speak loudly, but I don't get enough auditory information to understand what is being said. Everything is muffled, really muffled. You've both been in explosions, seems like somebody turned the volume down on the world and what you do get is distorted for a while afterward? It's like that."

"Hm." Tony leaned back in his seat.

"This month is the longest I've gone without average or better hearing since S.H.I.E.L.D. picked me up in my teens. I'm not sure if I'd forgotten how much I hate it, or if I hadn't realized how dependent I've gotten on my hearing aids, or both. Luckily, working in intelligence has kept my lip reading skills up." He inhaled another slice of pizza. "Don't get me wrong, nothing against the Deaf community, I just get really jumpy when I can't hear things sneaking up to kill me. On that note, Stark, if you sneak up on me before you've made me a new pair of aids, I will rip your throat out."

"I'm making you hearing aids?"

"You better be."

"Do you not have spares?"

"I do. None of the S.H.I.E.L.D. issue ones work and the only civilian pair I had were in my office at the Triscalion, which is now rubble according to CNN."

"You have an office?" Tony snickered, picturing Barton in a cubical doing paperwork.

"I *used* to have a very nice office."

"Did you ever use it?"

"When I didn't want anyone to bother me, yes."

Steve set aside a pizza box he'd emptied by himself, grateful Clint's arrival had distracted Tony. A moment later, he realized he'd sent up that silent thanks a little early.

"Steve...?"

Both Steve and Tony looked toward the hallway. Following their gazes, Clint looked too, and his mouth fell open. Shuffling down the hall, leaning on the wall for support, left arm hanging limply at his side, was Bucky.

"Steve, I think—" He paused and blinked as Steve stood. He straightened up, looking for all the world like a chastised schoolboy. "Oh, uh, Mr. Joseph, I was just, just looking for Steve."

For a moment, Steve didn't say anything, then he cleared his throat and said gruffly with a touch of what might have been an Irish accent, "Well, he ent here. Go home, Barnes."

"Sorry, sir." Bucky turned and retreated to the bedroom Steve had dumped him in. Tony gestured down the hallway.

"What the hell was that?"

"He thinks I'm my dad." Steve headed after Bucky. As Steve left, Clint pointed after him, looking at Tony.

"Was that—?"
"Yeah, Cap dragged in the Winter Soldier. Yes, that's who shot Fury. Also happens to be Cap's buddy from the forties."

"Damn."

Steve slowly opened the door to the bedroom. Bucky was curled up in the corner of the small bed, his back pressed against the wall. He sat up quickly and stared at Steve. Steve shut the door behind him, shrinking the chink of light from the hallway until it vanished. For a long moment, neither of them moved. Bucky ran his knuckles along the metal of his arm. "Who are you?"

The broken confusion in his voice squeezed at Steve's heart. He took a step forward. "It's me, Buck, it's Steve."

Bucky shook his head. Carefully, slowly, feeling like he was dealing with a stray dog instead of his best guy, Steve sat on the edge of the mattress. Bucky shrank back, then, haltingly, he reached out and touched Steve's arm as though to assure himself Steve was really there. Suddenly, he surged forward and grabbed Steve around the chest. Steve tensed, ready to fight him off, then he realized Bucky's lunge wasn't an attack, but rather a desperate child's move to cling to something comforting. He rubbed Bucky's back, his throat tight with memories of too many nights Bucky had held him like that, comforting him through his father's lashing out, his mother's illness and then death, his own feeble health. But Steve was alone with those memories. Bucky was blank. His steel-gray eyes were empty. For several long minutes, Bucky clung to him, breathing hard. The he stilled, sat up straight, and cocked his head to the side. "Wo sind wir?"

Where are we?

It took Steve a second to switch his brain over to German. "Gute Frage. Du bist in Sicherheit."

Good question. You're safe.

Bucky made a sound through his nose, leaned back against the wall, took a breath to say something else, then didn't. He went blank again. Steve reached over and patted his knee. Eventually, Bucky shook himself. He looked at Steve, his eyes widened, he dropped his face into his hands, and his shoulders started to shake. He took a ragged breath and started mumbling apologies.

"Hey, it's okay, you're okay."

"I've killed so many people."

Steve hesitated. "I know."

"I thought—I didn't—I wasn't—They—"

"I know."

"I'm sorry."

"I know." Steve put an arm around Bucky's shoulders and let him cry—until it was back to Russian with a metal hand around his throat.
Bruce woke up shortly after five in the morning. Still in his sweatpants and a loose t-shirt, he went out into the hall on a quest for coffee. He stopped halfway down the hall, his path blocked by a limp body on the floor. He sighed; it was Captain America, sprawled gracelessly on the carpet like a frat boy, snoring softly, shoulder propped against the door behind him. Bruce noticed the doorknob had been turned around so it locked from outside. He decided he was better off not knowing, stepped over Steve's legs, and continued down the hall. In the common room, he found Tony and Clint reclined haphazardly on sofas, surrounded by laptops, pizza boxes, and empty hard lemonade bottles. Vaguely wondering when Cap and Hawkeye had gotten there, he shook his head and went up a floor to the kitchen to make coffee. He wasn't the only one who was going to need it.

Bruce was still in the kitchen two hours later, reading a science journal and munching sweet potato chips when Clint dragged himself in. Before Bruce could say a word, Clint waved a hand in a fairly universal "shut up" gesture then continued in sign language: *Don't talk. Can't hear. Hung over. Coffee?*

Having only understood about half of Clint's signing, Bruce pointed at the coffee pot. After most of a mug of coffee, Clint pulled himself up onto a stool at the island across from Bruce and reached over to steal a chip. Bruce pushed the bowl toward him and haltingly signed: *Hi. I know ASL not very much sorry.*

Clint groaned and lay his head down. "At least you know some."

They sat together munching quietly for a while before Steve wandered in, rubbing at a crick in his neck that Bruce was completely unsurprised he had. Bruce set his tablet down. "Did the three of you go on a bender last night?"

"Huh?" Steve blinked at him. "Oh, no. Or, he and Tony might have. I don't know." He poured himself the rest of the coffee and took a sip. "I was trying not to get strangled. Why does this thing have so many buttons?"

Bruce got up to help Steve with the top of the line, Swiss-made coffee maker. "What do you mean you were trying not to get strangled?"

"Coffee, then explanations."

"Alcohol doesn't affect you, right?" Bruce crossed one arm over his chest. "Then why would caffeine?"

"Because I think it does."

Clint ate another chip, not even trying to catch any of the conversation going on behind him. Bruce leaned against the fridge. "Fine. But who was trying to strangle you?"

Steve rubbed at his neck more. "Uh, the Winter Soldier."

Bruce's eyebrows shot up. "He was here?"

"He is here; I brought him here."

"Why would you bring him here?"
"Where else would I bring him?" Steve drank more of his coffee and shrugged. "S.H.I.E.L.D.’s non-operational, he doesn't belong in any kind of ordinary prison. Is this Avengers' Tower or not? 'Cause that's what the sign says."

"You have a point." Bruce opened the fridge, pulled out a glass dish of lasagna, which he stuck in the oven to heat, and a bowl of tabbouleh, which he started eating with a spoon. "You get lasagna for breakfast. Why was he trying to strangle you? Other than the obvious explanation of 'he's a killer,' that is."

"What part of 'he's my friend' is so hard for people to understand?"

"The part where he tried to killed you, and Natasha, and Fury, and—who's the guy with the wings? —Sam, and a whole bunch of other people."

"Yeah, well, you broke Harlem. And a helicarrier."

Bruce pointed at him with his spoon. "You've crashed three at once. Also that sort of wasn't my fault."

"Not Bucky's fault either."

Bruce opened his mouth, shut it, then shrugged and ate another bite of tabbouleh. "Point taken. Where'd you find him?"

"An E.R. in North Carolina."

"Barton help you bring him in?"

"Actually, he walked in, in the middle of Stark berating me for bringing Bucky here."

"Why can't he hear? I feel weird talking like he's not in the room but..." He looked at Clint slumped on the counter with his face in the crook of his elbow. "Was he in an explosion?"

"No, apparently he's been hard of hearing since he was ten."

"Really?"

Steve shrugged. "That's what he said last night. Apparently he had S.H.I.E.L.D. issue hearing aids that went dead along with all his other gadgets when S.H.I.E.L.D. fell apart."

"Hm. On the subject of gadgets, how much do you know about your buddy's arm?"

"It hurts when around your throat but it doesn't beat Tony's Hulk-proofed doorjambs. And it prevented the E.R. from giving him an MRI. Other than that, I don't know anything."

"It's just, you know I have a side interest in biomechanics and the like, which includes orthotics and prosthetics." He scraped some dregs of tabbouleh together, spoon clinking against the bowl. "Actually got an email from Wounded Warrior Project a while back even though that's not my usual field. No one has anything like what he's got, just based on what little I already know. I'm particularly curious about the neuro-interface—"

"Doctor," Steve looked at Bruce over his coffee, "I don't know anything."

Tony appeared in the doorway, his hair sticking up at odd angles. "Tell me there's coffee."

Bruce reached behind Steve for the carafe, poured a mug, and held it out to Tony. "And there will
be lasagna in about five minutes."

"Mm." Tony sipped his coffee appreciatively. "You are a much better housewife than Pepper, you know that?"

"She's a CEO, that doesn't generally coincide well with housespouse."

"Neither does multi-disciplinary physicist." Tony put a hand on Clint's shoulder, causing him to look up. "You alive, Angry Bird?"

"Alive, headache-y, light sensitive, glad to have the world on mute for once, but alive."

"Great."

Clint returned to his elbow.

Tony shrugged and looked at the other two men. "And now we know why he's always Nat's designated driver."

Bruce set aside his now-empty bowl. "I dunno, there are a lot of empty bottles downstairs."

Tony shrugged again, sipped his coffee, and looked at Steve. "How'd you know where the kitchen was."

"I didn't." It was Steve's turn to shrug. "I followed the smell of coffee."

After the three of them who weren't vegetarian had had lasagna, Steve made a peanut butter and honey sandwich, took it downstairs, and carefully let himself into Bucky's room. Bucky was flat on his back in bed with his left hand held toward the ceiling, watching his fingers flex. What had been a nice glass and metal desk the night before was now a pile of ragged shards and twisted aluminum. Bucky lowered his hand and sat up. Steve held out the sandwich on its paper plate. It was the least weaponizable meal he could think of. Bucky took it and ate voraciously then let the plate fall to the floor. Steve sat in the as of yet still intact desk chair. "Can I ask you some questions?"

Bucky nodded.

"What's your name?"

He opened his mouth, shut it, then frowned. "I don't know."

"What year is it?"

"Nineteen..." he shook his head, "seventy-six?"

"Where are we?"

"I have no idea."

"Who do you work for?"

Bucky shrugged. "I don't know. I—do I even have a job? I don't—I can't remember anything." He paused. "I don't know who I am. I don't know." He looked up at Steve, on the verge of hyperventilating. "Do you know?"

"Yeah, I know."
"Who am I?"

Steve took a breath. "Your name is James Buchanan Barnes, and you're my best friend."

"I don't know who you are."

"I know." He hesitated then continued. "You're suffering from brain damage of some sort, it's messing with your memory. I honestly don't know if you're going to remember this conversation five minutes from now but," he leaned forward and took Bucky's right hand in both his own, "I promise I'm going to find a way to help you. Okay?"

"Okay." Bucky nodded then glanced at the remains of the desk. "Did I do that?"

"Yeah..." Steve stood up, grabbed the trashcan from the corner, and carefully started clearing up the broken glass and metal. The last thing he needed was to provide the Winter Soldier with improvised weapons whenever Bucky started fragmenting again. "You want more to eat?"

Bucky nodded.

"How much more?"

"A lot more."

In his workshop, Tony tinkered with a wireframe blueprint while watching security feeds of Steve making a stack of sandwiches, Clint asleep on a couch, and Barnes staring off into space. Bruce was in the room with him, so he didn't feel the need to creep on him like he was doing the others. The door to the workshop opened, Maria Hill strode in and went to lean with faux nonchalance on Tony's workbench. "So I get here, and Jarvis tells me that you could use my expertise up here. Given the many potentially questionable things I have expertise in and the many even more questionable things you tend to get yourself into, I'm a little bit worried."

"Hm, I hadn't even asked him to get you. Good thinking, Jarv."

"You're welcome, sir."

"Anyway," Tony collapsed the wireframe he was working on, "your various expertise could prove valuable on a couple of little issues we've got. Number one is a very cranky, hungover, deaf Barton —"

"Barton's hard of hearing, not deaf; yes, the difference matters—hang on, is he here?"

Tony pointed at Clint's unconscious form on the video feed. "Showed up last night. Other issue is that Mr. Rogers also showed up last night and he brought a new neighbor with him."

Maria crossed her arms. "Would you care to clarify that?"

"Captain America has the Winter Soldier locked in one of my guest rooms." Tony pointed at a different feed.

"Well, that's...not what I was expecting."
"Yeah, me neither, and believe you me I'm not a fan of having the bastard who shot Fury in my tower but, as Capsicle is quick to point out, there's not really anywhere else to stick him. You have a psych degree of some kind, right? Mind trying to at least partially defuse the ticking time bomb Rogers is currently making sandwiches for?"

Maria took a step toward the screen, watching as Barnes suddenly grabbed an alarm clock and threw it viciously against the wall. "If that's even possible."

When Steve came back down from the kitchen, he was intercepted by Maria. He blinked. "Agent Hill."

"Not an agent anymore."

"Right. Well, uh, if you'll excuse me." He tried to get around her with his stack of sandwiches.

"Hold up, Captain." She caught his arm. "Stark wants me to evaluate Barnes."

"I really don't think he's up to that."

"Which is exactly why it needs to happen. Tony's got security feeds routed to his workshop, I saw. Barnes is clearly unstable. He's dangerous—"

"Which is why I'd rather not put you, or anyone else, in a room with him."

"Steve, I know this is personal for you, but tea and sympathy and sandwiches aren't going to fix seventy years of God knows what got done to him. You are not trained to handle this kind of severe psychological damage and we don't even know what kind of physical damage there may be."

"Maria, are you a doctor?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Then you're no better than me."

"I have a psych degree. Let me come in with you."

Steve glanced between Maria, the plate of sandwiches, and the door down the hall. "Fine."

"Thank you."

As soon as Steve opened the door, the now badly battered alarm clock bounced off the frame, accompanied by a barrage of German profanities. Steve quickly shut the door again. Maria raised an eyebrow at him. He sighed. "Do you speak German?"

"Ja, Kapitän."

"Gut." Steve opened the door again, leading with the sandwiches. "Willst du Frühstück?"

Do you want breakfast?

Standing in the middle of the room, Bucky eyed the sandwiches with suspicion. Steve smiled
hopefully. Bucky grabbed the plate and retreated to the corner of the room, reminding Steve once again of a touchy stray dog. His eyes flicked to Maria. She stepped forward. "Guten Morgen."

Bucky pressed himself against the wall. "Wer seid ihr? Was wöllt ihr?"

*Who are you two? What do you want?*

Maria sat on the floor and responded in German. "*My name is Maria, this is Steve. I just want to ask you a few questions, is that okay?*

For a moment Bucky looked calculating. "*I'll talk to you, miss, not him.*" He glanced at the sandwiches. "*And you can't expect me to eat these with nothing to drink.*"

Steve and Maria had a silent staring match, then Steve left the room and headed back to the kitchen.

Twelve hours later, the sun had set, Maria and Steve had been in and out of Bucky's room all day. Maria had determined that Bucky was certifiably unstable and really needed to be looked at by a medical doctor. She'd set Jarvis on a hunt for an MD with the necessary qualifications. Bucky had spent most of the day alternating between being a near total amnesiac and a thoroughly indoctrinated Stasi agent who didn't like to talk to men. He'd flicker through other places in his memory for a few minutes at a time like he had been doing the night before. Finally, he'd fallen asleep. Maria locked the door and looked up at Steve. "You are emotionally exhausted, and I don't need my psych training to figure that one out. Take it easy, try not to worry about him for a little while. Sleep, or something."

"I'll try."

She clapped a hand on his shoulder. "I'm going to go call Pepper, and then get take out. I think I'm staying the night here."

"Sounds good."

"Go relax." Maria headed down the hall, pulling her phone out of her pocket as she walked. "Hey, Pepper. Yes, I know what time it is in Vienna, and I don't care. There are things happening you need to know about and I don't trust any of these men to catch you up."

In the workshop, Bruce snickered at the security feed. He turned to Tony. "She has a point, you know."

"Wasn't paying attention."

"Of course you weren't. What are you doing?"

"Frowning at the stats Jarvis has picked up on Barnes. His vitals all look to be within the normal range, which is good. Still got nothing on his brain. Don't have much on that arm. I'd like to get him down here so I can figure out the tech he's got going there but he's way too nuts for that. Come here, you've got more experience with this than me."

"Wounded Warrior Project emailed me one time and I did a little reading up." Bruce obediently
moved to look at the display called up on the table top in front of Tony while Tony moved back toward the monitors relaying the video feeds from upstairs. There was a ballet-like grace to the efficiency they'd learned to move around each other with in the workshop. The lab. It was a multi-functional space.

Tony tapped on his chin with a pen, scanning the video screens. "Hey! Twitter's awake!"

"What?"

"Barton. Hawkeye, bird, Twitter—nevermind."

"Oh, yeah, he's been up for hours. Been online ever since, making up for lost time and lack of intel I guess."

"Probably."

"Aren't you supposed to be building him something?"

"Ah shit." Tony pulled up another wireframe. "Yes. Yes, I am."

A while later, Maria swung by with Chinese food. Shortly after that, the rest of the tower went to bed. By one in the morning, Tony and Bruce were both dozing at their workbenches. A loud, urgent-sounding beep came through the speakers in every room of the tower, followed by Jarvis's voice. "Sergeant Barnes has escaped."

Tony sat up so quickly he smacked his head on a lamp. Bruce halfway fell off his stool. In their respective rooms, Steve and Maria had each rolled out of bed and were gearing up like the diligent soldiers they were. Even Clint was responding, Jarvis having significantly upped the volume in his room, cut the lights on, and put his message up on the screen built into the window. Within minutes, everyone was gathered in the hallway outside of Bucky's room. Maria looked at Tony and, for Clint's benefit, signed as she demanded, "I thought you said he couldn't break out, you'd Hulk-proofed the tower."

Bruce frowned slightly, noticing that Maria had just gestured at him to indicate "Hulk," and he wasn't sure how he felt about that. Of course, he mused, depending on how good her sign language was, that may have been by far the simplest way to get the point across.

"He didn't break out." Steve bent down and picked up the remains of the alarm clock. "He picked the lock."

Maria quickly interpreted Steve's words into ASL, knowing from past experience that Clint's general grouchiness and paranoia from being denied his hearing for more than about an hour got significantly worse when he had to try to follow fast, multi-person conversations, and no one had time for his touchiness right now.

"Well that's just great," Tony spat. "What now, we go catch him?"

"I would highly suggest it," Jarvis responded.

"I should stay here," Clint said, putting a hand over Maria's to still them. "Barnes is fast and when he thinks he's Hydra, he's ruthless and psycho and I don't trust myself right now to do the rest of you any good. I can keep an eye on things here."

"I should stay too." Bruce tugged absently at his sleeve.
"In that case," Maria pulled out her phone, "Steve, Tony, suit up, get out there and catch up to him. I'll give the local authorities a heads up."

"Don't hurt him," Steve said as he made for the elevator with Tony.

Maria ignored Tony's derisive snort. "Non-lethal force only, copy, Captain."

As he and Iron Man hit the streets, Captain America cursed the fact that even in the small hours of the morning, New York was busy.

On the phone with NYPD, Maria hesitated half a breath. "Yes, subject is armed. No it's not a gun. I'd call it a blunt force weapon."

There was a clear trail of smashed street vendors' carts and traumatized pedestrians for a few blocks, then it got harder for Steve and Tony to follow where Barnes had gone. Even with NYPD sending them every sighting they got and Jarvis relaying Bruce's predictions of paths Barnes could take and Clint and Maria's findings from the security cameras they'd hacked into all over the city, the trail went cold long before sunrise. Tony landed on the sidewalk. "Well, this sucks."

"Yeah..." Steve said, not really listening to Iron Man. He let out a breath and looked up at the nearest street sign. After a moment, he had a thought and took off down the street at a run.

"Excuse me," Tony said, flying after him, "but where the hell are you going?"

"Home."

"The tower is the other direction, Cap."

"I mean my old home, Brooklyn."

They stopped in front of an old walk up with weathered plaster that had recently been repainted. Steve looked up at the building. Tony looked at the building, then at Steve. "You used to live here? And it hasn't been condemned, or made into a museum?"

Steve didn't intend to answer that, and a woman's scream from inside gave him an excuse not to. They ran inside and up to the fifth floor where a young wiry-haired woman wrapped in a towel was standing on the landing looking horrified. She saw them, pointed to a door that had the distinct appearance of having been kicked in, and started shouting at them in Spanish. Steve went into the open apartment, leaving Tony to deal with the woman it belonged to. He had been right that this was where Bucky would go, a haven of familiarity in a changed city, but it wasn't Bucky Steve found in the apartment. The Winter Soldier kicked at him before he could get his shield up, dirty bare foot connecting hard with his ribs. He grabbed an elbow in time to prevent it from smashing into his nose then blocked the swipe of a large kitchen knife with the shield and shoved, sending the Winter Soldier stumbling backward. This was worse than fighting him on the helicarrier had been. This time, Barnes had no armor, he was in sweatpants and a tanktop and Steve could see the scars around the edge of the metal on his shoulder. Steve lifted his shield, ready for another attack, but a small projectile shot across the room and struck Barnes in the neck. He swayed and collapsed to the floor. In the doorway, a small firearm folded itself back into the wrist of the Iron Man armor. "Before you get your panties in a bunch, it's a tranq dart."

Steve let out a breath and lowered his shield. He ran a hand over his face and let out a short laugh that sounded strained and demented even to his own ears. He laughed again and then he couldn't stop laughing even though he hated it. He leaned against the wall and slid down it. Then the laughing turned into panicky crying and he still couldn't stop. "Wh-what am I even doing? I just
chased my best friend from Manhattan to Brooklyn on foot, then he tried to kill me—and it's not
the first time he's tried to kill me—and then you shot him." Another bubble of laughter made its
way out of his mouth. "This is insane."

"Cap," Tony said, lifting his visor, "are you okay?"

Steve shook his head.

"Well, you need to be. Hey, look at me." Tony leaned over him. "Your buddy's a basket case right
now and that sucks and, yeah, he keeps trying to kill you but he's brainwashed, right? People do
crazy shit when they're brainwashed. Remember what happened with Barton? When Loki was in
his head he intentionally pissed off Banner, which is pretty damn stupid, then he tried to kill
Natasha, and I'm pretty sure the two of them are fucking so there you have that. Now let's get you
and the bionic man over here back to the tower so I can throw money at this until it's better. Now,
please, before I have to explain to a woman in a towel why Captain America is having a nervous
breakdown on her floor."

When they got back to the tower, they locked the still-unconscious Barnes back into the same room
as before, now devoid of everything but the bed. Steve wasn't happy with the set up but there
wasn't much he could do about it. He was vaguely aware of Maria telling Tony Pepper was on her
way back from Austria. He heard Tony objecting that Pepper didn't need to come; then, drained
and still borderline sleep deprived, Steve passed out on the couch.
Chapter 3

Steve was still asleep on the couch when Maria left for the airport around noon. By the time Maria got back from the airport with Pepper, he was no longer on the couch. On a hunch, Maria went to Barnes's room. She cracked the door open and was met with the sounds of sobbing and tortured screams. She threw the door open, hand going for her gun. Steve looked up at her from the floor. "He's asleep."

Barnes was in the bed, curled into a tight ball, his body shaking. He lashed out and hit the wall then curled up again, crying all the while.

"I can't wake him up."

"This cannot be good for your emotional health." Maria pulled the Captain to his feet. "There's nothing you can do for him right now. He's having night terrors. In some ways they're more like sleep walking than normal nightmares, when he wakes up he probably won't remember having had them. C'mon, help me get Pepper up to speed."

After Pepper was caught up, she stayed sitting at the kitchen island with Steve even after Maria left. She reached across the island and squeezed Steve's hand. "Are you okay?"

"People keep asking me that."

"Well, you're going through a lot right now. You've been going through a lot for at least a month."

He sighed. "Yeah, I'm not okay." He traced an old water ring on the countertop with his finger. "This whole thing is my fault. He fell—literally fell—back into Hydra's hands because I screwed up. I was in charge of taking Hydra out in the first place and that didn't work either."

"Steve, suped up as you are, you are only one man and, as I often have to remind Tony, one man can't be expected to do alone what reason says hundreds would be hard-pressed to do together. You did the best you could with Hydra, and it worked pretty damn well for an awfully long time. As for him ending up in Hydra's hands, I wasn't there, I don't know, but I highly doubt it's all your fault. Don't blame yourself so much. Everything I've ever heard about you tells me that all you ever do is your best. That's all anyone can ask of you."

He shrugged one shoulder. "That doesn't fix anything."

"Neither does you beating yourself up." She stood and opened the fridge. "Here, help me make lunch? I'm not much of a cook but I find trying can be good for stress."

Downstairs in the workshop, Tony, in all his flippant glory, was mostly unintentionally winding up an impatient Hawkeye. Clint smacked his hands on the surface of the work bench. "Stark, this is serious."

"I know it's serious, I'm taking it seriously." He turned away but kept talking.

"Look at me when you're talking to me!" Clint shouted.
Tony turned back around quickly. "I'm sorry, I am sorry. I forgot. Okay? I forgot. I suck at remembering people things. And I wander, especially when I'm working. And I am working, right now, on making hearing aids for you that are at least as good as what you're used to. This is not my usual field, I'm building upon designs I got online. It's been a day and a half. I'm working on it. I need maybe one more day. You've survived for a month, I think you can handle one more day. In the meantime," he held up a finger and picked a smart phone up off the bench and held it out, "I got all the data off of your old phone and transferred it to this one. Ought to be like nothing ever happened."

"Thanks," Clint said sharply, grabbed the phone, and made for the elevator. Once the doors had closed, he powered the phone up with a sigh. It lit up, vibrated, and probably chirped, not that Clint had any way to be sure. The lockscreen came up with his same old wallpaper: one arrow split clean in two by another, both of them sticking out of a tree. It wasn't a stock photo. He punched in his passcode. He had sixty-two unread texts, a hundred and twelve unopened emails, and twenty-seven missed calls. He frowned and stepped out of the elevator. Most of the emails were from listserves. Fourteen texts were from Natasha, all over a month old. Another seven were from Maria. The other forty one were from various panicking agents. He looked at his missed calls. One was from a number he didn't know. He stopped dead in the middle of the kitchen, causing Steve and Pepper to look up at him from their anti-stress cooking in concern. The other twenty-six calls were from Agent Coulson. He chucked the phone at Steve. "Call him back!"

"What?" Steve looked down at the phone he had easily caught. "Oh."

Anxious, Clint hovered around Steve as he hit the return call button and held the phone to his ear. The line picked up and Steve was treated to the muffled sounds of a room full of people being told to shut up before a tired, hopeful, and very familiar voice said, "Clint?"

"Steve Rogers, actually."

Clint was staring at Steve so hard Pepper thought the archer was going to explode. She put the lid on a pot.

"Steve?" The frown was audible in Coulson's voice. "Why do you have Clint's phone?"

"He threw it at me. He's here," Steve added hurriedly, "he just can't really use the phone right now because he can't hear."

"Where is 'here'?"

"The tower."

"Stark's?"

"Yessir."

"I'll be there in two hours."

The call ended abruptly. Steve looked at the phone then at Clint. "He says he'll be here in two hours."
A small, black quinjet landed on the tower's helipad. The back ramp lowered and Coulson, trailed by two slightly bewildered looking young brunets, disembarked. Clint broke away from the huddle he, Bruce, Maria, Pepper, and Tony had been in by the door, strode across the pad up to Coulson, smacked the older man across the face, then grabbed him by the tie and kissed him—hard. The jaws of everyone else on the roof dropped. Still standing in the ramp of the jet, Fitz, one of the two brunets, looked to the other in utter, dumbfounded confusion. "I thought he'd been seeing some cellist."

Simmons put a hand to her mouth then leaned into Fitz to answer him. "You play cello with a bow."

Clint pulled away, leaving Coulson stunned, then shoved him. "Don't you ever fake your death again, you sonofabitch!"

Coulson held his hands up placatingly. "I didn't fake it."

"You don't look very fucking dead."

"Well, not anymore." Coulson started signing as he spoke. "It's a long story, I—"

"It had better be a damn good story, Philip." Coulson started to sign something else but Clint grabbed his wrists. "Oh, no. You listen here. Three years. Three long fucking years I've thought—" He swallowed hard and let go of Coulson's wrists. "I thought you were dead. I went to your funeral, brought flowers to your grave every single time I had any excuse to be in the area! I have been grieving, Phil." He took a shaky breath. "And I didn't tell a soul about us because you asked me not to and you were dead and I was going to keep my word until I died out of respect for you. I oughta kill you myself right now!" His voice cracked, tears started falling, and he shoved Coulson again. "Why didn't you fucking tell me?! I wouldn't have leaked, you know that! Fucking hate you." He grabbed Coulson by the back of the neck and kissed him again, then stepped back and fumed for a moment before siezing Coulson's tie and yanking. "What the fuck is wrong with you?!"

Coulson took a deep breath. "Can we finish this in private?"

Clint hesitated, grabbed him by the arm, and dragged him inside. The group around the door parted to let them through. No one said a word. Maria let out a breath. "Barton is gonna kill me."

Pepper looked at her. "Why?"

"I knew Coulson was alive."

Approaching the group with Fitz by her side, Simmons gestured at where the two men had been standing. "Did you know about, well, all that?"

Maria shook her head. "Not a clue."

Tony put his hands in his pockets. "Well, there go my fantasies of Black Widow and Hawkeye breeding a race of super babies."

Everyone stared at Tony for a moment. He shrugged. Marria cleared her throat. "Anyway, Fitz, Simmons, you know who everyone here is; everyone, Leo Fitz and Jemma Simmons. Simmons, you're a medical doctor, we have someone we could really use for you to take a look at."

Simmons blinked. "Alright, uh, where are they?"

"Inside with the Captain." Maria opened the door.
As far as Clint could tell, the march from the helipad to the elevator was silent. He was in front and couldn't see Phil. His hand was clutched convulsively around Phil's arm, so the man couldn't sign even if he wanted to.

*Don't wake up. Don't wake up.* These were the only words Clint's mind knew. They were on repeat in his brain and Natasha wasn't even around to sweep some of his pieces together into a messy little pile when he did wake up. The nightmares had been better for a while already, so what was this even?

Maybe a delayed reaction to the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D.

Then they were at the elevator and the doors opened as they approached—either bless Jarvis or damn the A.I. Inside the elevator, he let his back fall against the far wall which jostled Phil because Clint still had his arm in some kind of too hard grip and *damn* Coulson's stumbling body sure felt solid like he might be real.

Phil pulled his arm away. He stared for a second then signed *what?* followed by *us*, seeming to stammer in ASL.

Clint felt a hum under his skin starting at the top of his head and slowly moving down and spreading, first over his shoulders, like he'd been drugged with something toxic. Shaking his head didn't clear it or even slow it down. The hum turned into a buzzing that was invading his arms, wanting to make his hands tremble, and that was just wrong. He was a marksman—an excellent marksman, the greatest marksman, he was Hawkeye—and *his hands did not tremble*. He would not accept this, even in a bad dream.

To give his hands something to do other than threaten to betray him, he shoved at Phil who somehow felt substantial and warm, and that set up a different kind of buzz in his hands, something electric, which caused his fingers to fly to Coulson's throat tugging on the knotted silk while his mouth pressed too hard against Phil's and the bruising pressure made him think maybe, just maybe, this wasn't a dream.

Maybe he was just losing his mind.

But twenty six calls. Twenty six. That was kind of specific for a hallucination.

The elevator doors opened just as a length of deep blue silk slid free into his hands and he stumbled back staring at it. In his peripheral vision, he saw Phil sign *where*—

He didn't catch the rest of it as he fled down the hall to his room—far, too far—where he shoved himself through the unlocked door then slammed it and leaned against it. The curtains were mostly closed. A sliver of light angling in between the panels of blackout fabric was the only illumination in the room. Clint held his right hand up. Sure enough he was clutching a tie.

He opened the door to find Phil standing there looking confused, which was probably the right way to look because Clint was confused.

Phil signed something polite, asking permission to come in. Wasn't that what vampires did in bad
movies, ask if they could come in, and they somehow had you if you were foolish enough to say yes? Wouldn't that explain so much, if Phil was undead?

He shook his head trying to clear it but the buzzing just got worse. He was even starting to hear it.

When Clint shook his head, Phil took a step back. And, no, that was entirely wrong in the midst of the rest of the wrongness, and just couldn't be tolerated.

Phil's eyes went wide as Clint flung the tie to the side somewhere into the dim recesses of his room and grabbed at Coulson's jacket. He pulled Phil into the room, slammed the door again then pushed Phil up against it.

The man felt real. Okay, this was the best hallucination Clint had ever had, so make the most of it. He crushed his mouth to Phil's in a kiss as he started unbuttoning his dress shirt.

This was *not* how Philip Coulson made lo—had sex—and this was not how Clint was with him. Which didn't matter because he couldn't really be there.

Clint had the shirt unbuttoned enough to brush his fingers through the chest hair that he'd missed so much. He felt Phil's chest spasm slightly but could not hear his breath hitch. Not being able to hear, combined with the buzzing that had spread until it was there under every inch of Clint's skin, magnified the sense of unreality.

Clint's fingers rubbed over scars and his brain tripped. Scars. Chest. Blood. No, don't let this dream turn in that direction.

He stepped back. The scars were less terrifying than they usually were in his nightmares but they were bad.

Phil's lips moved and he signed. *We need to talk.*

*No no no.* Clint knew he said the words even as he shook his head. He didn't know if he could stand to talk.

He reached forward and buttoned Phil's shirt back up. A pained expression took up residence on the older man's face then shifted into bewilderment as Clint stripped off his other clothes. Somewhere in there, Phil wrestled with him enough to get Clint's shirt off.

When Phil's clothes were gone except for his shirt, Clint jerked him forward and all but threw him down onto the neatly made bed. Phil leaned on his elbows and watched—looking alarmed and confused and *hopeful,* and that was just too much—while Clint efficiently stripped.

Clint dropped himself onto the mattress like he was continuing a fight. He was rough as he grabbed Phil's shoulder, fingers pressing in with bruising strength, mouth biting more than kissing at Phil's mouth.

Phil answered with...gentle hands. A hand on his back making a slow soothing slide from the top of Clint's spine to his waist. A hand on his face, cupping his jaw. That hand sliding away, smoothing over his shoulder and then his ribs, his hip.

Clint hated it, the gentleness, even as he craved it, so he shoved and he bit and he grabbed—God only knew what kind of sounds he was making but he knew he was making them—while Phil stroked and kissed softly and yielded and yielded and yielded.

Clint choked on it, the softness, and he couldn't stand that, so he latched onto his anger because
that was more tolerable than the need and the sadness and the caring that betrayed him over and over again. His anger was bright and hot and made him feel strong, so he just kept fighting Phil. The intersection of arousal and rage was something he could accept in a way that scars and grief were not.

He was pissed about the shirt because it covered up too much of Phil and blunted Clint's teeth as he bit Phil's shoulder and he wanted to hurt him, truly he did, even if he could never hurt Phil as much as Phil had hurt him, not even if he drew blood bite after bite after bite—which he couldn't because of the damned shirt.

When Clint realized that Phil's cheeks were damp and the wetness was tears, he was furious. How dare he when he was the one who'd hurt Clint like this and let the hurt go on for an eternity.

Clint pushed on Phil, pinned him to the bed before he found himself flipped onto his back, held down but not crushed by Phil's weight, and he wanted that—but, no, no he didn't. So he struggled while fingers stroked him firm but gentle and Clint could barely stand it.

*Fight back, damn it!*

He must have said that out loud because Phil's hand was on his chest, holding him down as the older man pushed away and that, that Clint understood.

Eyes flashing, Phil loomed above him. It didn't take lip reading skills to see that the word he must be spitting was a very firm no. And that, that Clint didn't understand. He hesitated, which gave Phil an opening to kiss him, deep and soft, for Phil's hand and fingers to re-engage.

Somewhere in there, with Clint pushing back and trying to resume fighting and Phil refusing to, somehow they had sex. The biological physicality of two masculine orgasms, the hot wetness of it, made the whole thing feel all too real. The buzzing under Clint's skin was gone, replaced by quiescent warmth.

Clint was left stunned from every possible angle. Needing to hide from everything, from himself, he turned his face to the wall. Phil put an arm around him. Clint shrugged the arm off but didn't move away from the solid warm weight at his back.

Clint rapidly lost consciousness. He knew he'd been drugged. He wondered what kind of hellhole he'd wake up in. Maybe a dungeon.

Clint woke up in a dimly lit room, in his own bed, with a sleeping Phil draped over him wearing only a shirt. All evidence indicated that the angry sex had really happened. Which maybe made sense because in Clint's dreams, making love with Phil had never been angry. The anger was a point in favor of this being real. The stickiness too.

For a moment, Clint trembled, but he couldn't let what was driving that wash over him because he'd drown with it. He stumbled from his bed naked, staggered into the nearest wall and then smacked the heel of his hand against the wall.

The bruising ache anchored him.

Maria knocked on the door to the room that was beginning to become Barnes', a moment passed,
and Steve stepped out, closing the door behind him. "Hey."

"Steve, this is Jemma Simmons, she's a biochemist come medic on Coulson's team. Simmons, Captain America."

Simmons bobbed in a kind of half curtsey. "It's an honor, really, sir, to meet you in person."

Steve nodded. "Good to meet you, too."

Maria nodded to the door. "Is he where Simmons can take a look at him? Because he could sure use a doctor, and here we have a S.H.I.E.L.D qualified doctor."

"Yeah, he's confused and irritable, doesn't know where or when he is, but he's not violent right now." He opened the door and let Simmons enter ahead of him.

Barnes looked up from where he was sitting on the floor with his back against the bed. Simmons smiled her best reassuring doctor smile and lowered herself to the carpet with the medical kit Maria had produced from some corner of the tower. "Hi, I'm Jemma." Barnes blinked at her. "I'm a doctor and I hear you've had a rough few days. Would you mind if I take a look just to make sure you're alright?"

He considered her for a moment then shrugged one shoulder. "Sure."

"Great."

Downstairs in the workshop, Pepper set a mug in front of Tony. "I am the CEO of one of the most innovative and successful companies on Earth, and I'm still serving coffee to scientists."

Tony just grinned at her, sipped the coffee, and resumed his tinkering. Bruce took two mugs from the tray Pepper was holding and handed one to Fitz. "Thank you, Pepper."

"Yes, thank you very much, ma'am." Fitz tapped his fingers on the mug, smiling anxiously, then went back to studiously examining every gadget and scrap of tech around him.

Pepper rolled her eyes, took her own mug, and set the tray down. "Other than Tony, everyone ends up toting coffee in this tower."

Bruce chuckled. "It's true."

Butterfingers wheeled up to Fitz seeming very much like a curious and friendly pet. Fitz patted the bot's boom arm, turned, set his coffee down, and leaned on the nearest work bench with a sigh. Tony glanced at him. "You okay, kid?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. It's just, I've seen a lot of agent/agent conflict since March and a lot of it ended badly so the, uh, argument from the roof is just—it's irrational, I know, but I'm a little worried about Coulson."

Tony let out a bark of laughter. "You're joking. That? That was just a lovers' spat, a pretty tame one, actually. Pepper's done me worse over much smaller lies."

Pepper sipped her coffee. "I've thrown shoes at him."
"Yes, she has, and I deserved it." Tony poked at a computer screen. "In my expert opinion, everybody's favorite G-man is either apologizing profusely or having his bones jumped."

Fitz made a face. "I...absolutely cannot imagine Coulson having sex and I don't particularly want to."

"I can't imagine him not in a suit so I'm with you on that one." Tony bent over his work.

Bruce and Pepper shared a look. Pepper dropped her face into one hand, not sure if she should laugh or hit Tony over the head.

"Excuse me," Jarvis said from the ceiling, distracting Pepper from her cognitive dissonance. "You may all want to return upstairs. Miss Simmons has things to discuss."

"So," Simmons said, perched on the arm of a couch, pulling off a pair of purple nitrile exam gloves, "what's good news and what's bad news is all rather relative so I'm not going to even try to divvy things up that way so sorry if things get confusing. Sergeant Barnes—that's what Jarvis calls him, so that's what I'm going to call him—doesn't have any serious physical injuries. Some scratches and bruises, bit of a strained muscle in his left shoulder which I suspect is at least partially due to the weight of his prosthetic."

"He's getting stuck in memories, which can be dangerous to all of us when he's living a memory of him being Hydra. When he's stuck in the nineteen-thirties, it's mostly just disorienting for him and, well, somewhat distressing for Captain Rogers." She fiddled with her sleeve. "When he isn't stuck in a memory, he is aware of what he's going through. I witnessed this myself just for a minute before he lapsed into some Soviet-era memory and tried to cause me severe bodily harm. He didn't seem to be sure quite where he was but he knew who, well, who Steve was and knew that Steve had brought him here. He knew that he didn't reliably know what was going on. That's actually a good sign.

"The question, of course, is: what can be done to help him? As has already been suggested by Agent Hill—" she ignored Maria's interjection that she wasn't an agent "—hiring a trained therapist would be a very good idea. What he's experiencing isn't purely psychological, though. There are physical and biochemical aspects to this. Making sure he stays well-fed is a good start. Other than that," she punctuated her sentence with a shrug, "I've read about medical trials using hyperbaric chambers with increased oxygen levels to treat stroke victims even years after the fact, and it helps them. It would probably be beneficial for Sergeant Barnes as well.

"PTSD has been connected to demethylation in the brain, and consuming foods or dietary supplements containing methyl donors has been proven to ease symptoms. Since I don't see him being readily willing to swallow pills right now, that would be best taken care of dietarily. And,
this sounds ridiculous even in my own head, but for reasons of brain chemistry, it would almost certainly be good for him to pet kittens or something, or have a good shag, but until he's more stable either one would be inadvisable as we wouldn't want him killing kittens or whoever he'd be shagging." She cleared her throat awkwardly. "So that's how things stand."

"Well," Tony said, "guess I'm buying a hyperbaric chamber."

"I actually know a good therapist in town," Pepper provided. "She specializes in couples' therapy for veterans and their partners. Sounds like that's as close to what Barnes needs as you're going to find."

Tony gave her a look. "Why do you know a couples' therapist?"

"Because, until I had the whole Winter Soldier thing explained to me, you were the most emotionally damaged thing I could think of without delving into fictional characters."

"I have no comeback for that one."

"Yeah, didn't think so." She reached out and patted his arm.

With Steve waiting for Barnes to wake up, Jemma and Tony sitting on one couch working on ordering a hyperbaric chamber off the internet, Maria on the phone with the suggested therapist, and Pepper and Bruce gone to get more coffee, Fitz was left to sit on the other couch, feeling distinctly useless. He'd started looking up methyl donors on his phone just to have something halfway prudent to do when Coulson walked in wearing jeans and a black t-shirt. Everyone, including the recently returned Bruce and Pepper, looked up. Tony made a sound through his nose. "So that's what you look like not in a suit."

Fitz focused on his phone, muttering under his breath, "That's not his shirt, that is not his shirt, I wish I could believe that was his shirt," and hoping no one could hear what he was saying.

Still on the phone, Maria shrugged one shoulder. Ignoring everyone else in the room, Coulson looked to Pepper. "Bring me up to speed?"

"Of course."

A few minutes later, Clint came in and plopped on the couch next to Tony, absently cracking his knuckles. Coulson pretended not to notice and continued his conversation with Pepper. Jemma let out a breath. "This isn't awkward at all..."

"Nope, not at all." Tony pointed at the screen between them. "That looks less claustrophobic."

Clint tilted his head to see the screen. "That doesn't look like hearing aids."

Tony turned to face Clint. "It's been three hours since I told you I needed another day and you are not my only project right now."

"It's been three hours and my reasons for being impatient have multiplied."

With a long suffering sigh, Coulson turned and signed something. Clint held up a backward peace sign, which caused a muscle in Coulson's jaw to twitch and made Jemma and Fitz both sit up
straighter. Jemma coughed uncomfortably. Tony looked between the four agents that didn't work for him. "I definitely just missed something."

Clint put his feet up on the table. "The zombie over there needs to not be telling me to lay off, and I'm going to assume these two are British because on this side of the pond we do this," he held up one middle finger, "on that side of the pond they do that," he did the backward peace sign again. "Both gestures come from archery, and I like this one better because it's how I shoot."

Steve appeared in the hallway and was paid absolutely no mind.

"I hope you know you're being very mature, Clinton." Coulson sounded exasperated.

"What was that?" Clint leaned forward mockingly, putting his feet back on the floor. "I can't hear you."

"Good thing you can read lips, then," Coulson retorted.

Tony got up. Bruce looked at him. "Where are you going?"

"To make popcorn. This is like Jerry Springer, but better because they're both trained killers."

"Tony, sit down," Pepper snapped. "Phil, Clint, no one doubts the validity of your dispute here, but there are serious things going on, so if you could please save the private matters for sometime other than now." Everything was quiet for a minute. "Thank you." She walked across the room to talk to Steve about maybe getting chewable children's vitamins for Barnes. It worked on Tony, she reasoned, ought to work on the sergeant.

Clint started flipping through apps on his phone. "Line between private and work gets blurry when you're sleeping with your handler and your job stops existing."

Coulson made a sound in his throat. Maria smacked her hand on the back of the couch and whistled through her fingers loud enough that Clint looked up and everyone else cringed or covered their ears. She signed as she spoke. "This is crazy. Clint, you're being crazy. Okay, he should have told you he was alive. I don't care if you're pissed. I'd be pissed, too. But it's your problem, not ours. There's a damn couples' therapist on her way here right now if you don't think you can act like the grown, professional men you are and work this out." She took a deep breath and folded her hands. "Pepper, Captain, if you're taking a field trip to the healthfood store, you should probably take Simmons with you."

Chapter End Notes

Hello people of the internet!
Many thanks to all of you reading, and especially to those of you commenting. I really appreciate it.
I've written ahead quite a few chapters so, college workload permitting, I'll be posting about daily for a while.
"Let me make it very clear why you're here right now." Maria crossed her arms and leaned casually on the desk. She had temporarily taken over one of the downstairs offices to brief the shrink. "Pepper recommended you, which counts for quite a bit. Also, because Stark has better resources than Google, I found your thesis on memory loss and recovery. *That* is why you're here."

Dr. Erin Mockta, a pretty but serious looking woman with distinctly Native American coloring, smiled thinly. "Glad my university work is still doing some good."

"Mhm. I'm sure you saw the news a month ago when three flying aircraft carriers crashed into the Potomac."

"I think everyone on Earth, and some people a little farther afield, saw that."

"An accurate assessment." One of Maria's eyebrows ticked upwards. "Well, the people behind that whole fiasco had a hit man known as the Winter Soldier. The Winter Soldier is James Buchanan—or Bucky—Barnes, Captain America's childhood friend. He's in our custody, and he's been through hell. We're talking brainwashing, memory wipes, indoctrination. He's been put in cryogenic stasis, quite probably against his will. He's killed a lot of people, but not of his own volition. To top it all off, he was in World War Two. He's a mess. We're working the physical healing. Piecing his mind back together is your job and Stark is paying you an awful lot for it."

Dr. Mockta nodded slowly. "I understand."

"I warn you, he can get quite violent. He's been fragmenting, getting stuck in memories similar to how Alzheimer's patients do. We've had to sedate him several times to keep him from hurting people."

"Don't sedate him. I can't work with him if he's out."

"Doctor, he has a metal arm and superhuman strength. When he gets aggressive—"

"Ms. Hill, most of my work is with veterans. I'm no stranger to hot tempers, aggression, or metal limbs. Superstrength is a new one but it was a matter of time in this crazy world. I am ready to wait for him to calm down, and if he's not going to calm down, I'll leave the room. Sedating him is unhelpful and may even be harmful."

Maria nodded once. "Yes, ma'am. There's another difficulty in that he isn't reliably speaking English. Depending on where he is in his own head, he's been lapsing into Russian, German, and occasionally French. Sometimes if you start using English, he'll switch, but you can't count on it."

"Can you translate?"

"Yes."

"Then I don't see a problem." Dr. Mockta smiled.
Steve frowned at a bottle of mango flavored vitamin gummies in his hand. "What is this?"

Jemma glanced at the bottle. "B-complex." She dropped a tub of amino acid powder into the handbasket she was holding. "It's good for the brain. He needs good for the brain. Nerves need vitamin B to heal."

Pepper walked up with another bottle of gummies. "I can't find just zinc, but these are C plus zinc."

"Good enough." Jemma took the bottle and started explaining before Steve had a chance to ask. "Zinc is a methyl donor. It helps reverse the demethylation connected to PTSD. Honestly, you and Stark and even Barton and Banner should really be taking zinc if you aren't. I've been sneaking it into Coulson's food since I joined his team. He doesn't like pills, most agents don't like pills. It can be problematic. Anybody see co-Q-10? Bottle might say ubiquinol, two names for the same thing."

Steve scanned the shelves and found the correct thing. "Here it is." He handed it over. "People didn't used to buy stuff like this. We just ate."

"Generally speaking, you ate better than we do now. Fast food is a detriment to the health of the human race." Jemma looked around the vitamin section of the little healthfood store. "He's going to need much higher doses than they make these gummies in, but we can just give him lots of gummies. I think we've got everything he needs that they make in a form where you don't have to swallow a pill, so I guess we're done."

"Unless, Steve?" Pepper asked. "Does he have a favorite food we could pick up? Like you, he seems to need to eat more than average and it would be good to get something he likes. Make life easier for everyone."

Steve shrugged. "He's always liked lasagna but there's the problem of forks being weaponizable."

Pepper shook her head. "This place sells ready to shove in the oven lasagna and we can buy plastic forks."

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Dr. Mockta let Maria close the door while she sat on the floor with Barnes. "Good afternoon, I'm Dr. Mockta."

He studied her and his eyes flicked momentarily to Maria before returning. "Are you going to ask me questions?"

"Some questions, yes."

"People keep asking me questions."

"Does that bother you?"

Barnes hesitated. "I don't like not knowing the answers."

"I'm here to help with that. Do you want me to help you?"

For a long moment, he considered her. "Yeah."
"I need to ask you some things so I can help, but then we can just talk, okay?"

"Okay."

Dr. Mockta folded open a notebook. "What's your name?"

"James."

The doctor's pen made a few loops across the page. "Well, James, what are you doing here?"

It took him a minute to answer. "Steve brought me here."

"Who's Steve?"

A slightly shorter pause this time. "My friend."

"Do you know what happened to you?"

The silence stretched out until Maria started to think they'd lost him again. Then Barnes took a breath. "Some of it. Not clearly."

"Okay."

He eyed her. "Do you want me to tell you about it?"

"Do you want to?"

"No."

"Then not right now."

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Standing in front of the refrigerator case of ready made meals, Steve frowned. "How many different kinds of lasagna are there?"

"I'm counting six here." Jemma picked up a family sized beef lasagna and put it in the cart they'd replaced the handbasket with. "I've had others, though. People get creative with lasagna." She paused and looked at Pepper. "We've got two super soldiers, one of whom is healing, and five other grown men on hand."

"Two of whom are geniuses whose brains guzzle calories like hummers guzzle gas, plus you and me and Maria." Pepper turned to gently shoo away a couple of starstruck looking college kids then returned to the conversation as though nothing had happened. "Yes, we're a tough group to keep fed." She grabbed two other lasagnas. "Get one of each. Steve, you like pizza?"

"Pizza's good. Tony ordered pizza the night I got here."

Pepper made a soft sound of amusement. "We can do better than delivery." She reached up to grab a stack of ready to bake pizzas. "Might want to talk Tony into hiring a cook again—last three quit because Tony's houses kept getting attacked—but in the meantime, we have two perfectly good ovens."
Steve helped her get a dozen different pizzas into the cart. "I think we need another cart."

When they finally got to checkout, the poor cashier was a little overwhelmed. Considering she was faced with Captain America and the CEO of Stark Industries and two shopping carts worth of gummy vitamins, lasagnas, pizzas, potato salad, meatloaf, barbecue and at least a dozen other ready made meals, she had every right to be. She took the credit card Pepper handed her without question. She glanced tentatively at Steve and slipped a smartphone out of her pocket. "Would it be okay if, I mean, could I—"

Steve shared a look first with Pepper, then with Simmons. "You can take a picture."

The girl made a high pitched sound of excitement and darted around the counter.

Maria watched Dr. Mockta watch Barnes stare out the window. It had been a while since he'd blinked and several minutes since he'd moved. The doctor, perched in the chair that used to go with the desk, had folded her hands in her lap and seemed content to wait. Maria was mildly impressed. When Barnes finally blinked himself back to awareness, Dr. Mockta clicked her pen open. "You back with us?"

He looked at her. Then the pillow from behind him went flying across the room.

It hit her in the face with a thump. She let it fall to the floor, holding up a staying hand to Maria, meeting her patient's gaze. "Feel better?"

He bared his teeth, chest heaving with agitated breath, and barked out a word in Russian. Maria bowed her head. "That was a curse word."

"I figured." Dr. Mockta leaned back in her chair without looking away from Barnes. "Do you want your pillow back?"

Barnes's eyes flickered momentarily to the pillow at her feet. There was a pause. "Nyet."

"Okay." She crossed her ankles. "Are you going to speak English?"

He actually smirked. "Nyet."

"That's fine, use whatever language you're comfortable with. Do you remember what we were talking about?"

It took him a while to answer. "...nyet."

"Baseball. We were talking about baseball."

He stared at her blankly.

She made a note. "Do you want to talk about something else?"

"Da..."

"Okay. What then?"
He studied her a minute. "Vy lyubite pivo?"

Maria suppressed a snicker and translated. "Do you like beer?"

Dr. Mockta grinned. "Yes, I do. Do you?"

With the tower’s current inhabitants arrayed around her on the common room sofas, Erin Mockta steepled her fingers together and let out a breath. "Let’s start with, that could have gone much worse. You’re down an office chair and may shortly be down a bedframe but the worst he directed at me was a pillow, so that’s good. You can’t keep him locked in that bedroom, though. He needs opportunities to work out his feelings in safe, non-harmful ways. Non-harmful doesn’t mean non-destructive, by the way. Breaking things can be quite therapeutic, especially for men since they tend to be more physical than women. It’s a good way to channel aggression." She folded her hands in her lap and looked at Tony. "I would highly suggest re-furnishing his room with soft things. Beanbag chairs, mattress on the floor, no bedframe. Create an environment where he can lash out safely, because he is going to lash out, he needs to. He needs to process what’s happened to him, what he’s done, and what his situation is now. It’s a lot to work through, and he can’t really work through it until he’s more together." She propped an elbow on the arm of the sofa. "He needs support. You all need to not treat him like a burden. I have other appointments." She stood. "But once he’s settled down, unlock that damn door. Captain, since he’s your friend, I expect you’ll be working with him the most. Feel free to call me." She made for the elevator. "I’ll see myself out."

After the doctor had left, Maria cleared her throat. "I think there’s more online shopping to do."

"On it." Jemma picked a tablet up off the coffee table.

With a nod and a sigh, Steve got to his feet.

Phil found a quiet room with a divan in it and managed to work undisturbed for almost two hours before Fitz found him to tell him that lasagna was about to be served in the kitchen. It was a little on the late side for dinner but it had been a crazy busy day.

Preferring not to show up in the kitchen by himself, Phil closed his laptop and followed Fitz. Phil felt like an interloper, someone who didn't quite belong in the earnest group of half-lost people that had gathered in the tower like some well-financed island of misfit toys. But Phil wasn't willing to walk away from Clint.

He was shocked by the entirety of events, from Clint hitting him and kissing him publicly and revealing their relationship all in one fell swoop, to being dragged to Clint's bed as though there was still some vestige of a relationship after all this time. That time had gone by differently for Phil than it had for Clint, and he still couldn't be sure about his memories of the archer, but the overall impression that broken mosaic had made was apparently correct.

Phil didn't know quite what he expected, or even if he'd hoped for something, when he'd rushed to the tower dragging Fitz and Simmons in his wake—a compromise position against bringing the
whole team—but it wasn't this. He'd wanted to see for himself that Clint was alive, that he was all right. And Clint was alive, but all right depended on what was meant. He was functional, clearly, and succeeded on his missions. But something vital was broken. Phil had broken it.

When they walked into the kitchen, Fitz went and sat next to Jemma. She had found her place in this assemblage immediately and was talking animatedly with Maria and Tony.

The lone stool that remained unoccupied was next to Clint. Wishing he knew whether Clint had saved that seat or others had engineered it, Phil sat. The lasagna, garlic bread, salad, water, and wine were all excellent. He barely tasted any of it.

Sitting next to Clint when he couldn't hear was odd. Clint politely focusing on the others at the table also meant he was effectively not speaking to Phil, because he wouldn't look at him to read lips. Clint wasn't heroically eating or joining the conversation either. For that matter, neither was Steve. At least Phil wasn't alone in being preoccupied.

It took Phil a moment to realize that Tony was speaking to him. “Let me know if I need to have an office set up for you.” The inventor's eyes were intense but kind as he spoke.

Phil blinked then nodded. “Thank you. I hope to know soon.”

Ten minutes later, Steve got up and put his dishes in one of the two high-tech drawer-style dishwashers. Clint got up and did the same. Phil wasn't sure what to do but then, eyes dark and uncertain, Clint looked up at him, and he knew it was his move. He got up and poured out the remains of his glass of wine, which was most of it, and then scraped his plates and loaded everything into the dishwasher.

“We're having cheesecake for dessert.” Pepper made sure Clint could see her speak.

Clint smiled. “Not tonight.”

The ginger-haired CEO nodded at Clint and then Phil. They walked out together. Behind them, Bruce said, “Hey, Steve, let me help you fix a plate for Barnes.”

Phil followed Clint down the stairs and up the hall. Clint stepped inside his room and left the door open. Phil waited until Clint looked at him. He managed to sign may I before Clint grabbed his shirt and hauled him in.

Clint paced. Phil sat in the desk chair.

The words of one of the few therapists he'd trusted went through his mind. Hate is not the opposite of love. They are both passion. Indifference is the opposite.

Clint was not indifferent. That much was clear. Phil wondered what the opposite of anger was. Maybe pleasure. Maybe relief. Either helped explain Clint's vacillating earlier, unable to settle on fighting or loving. Even at the time, Phil knew it was important that Clint was letting him see his agony. Phil had worked extra hard to find a path between Clint's pulling him in and pushing him away, between Clint's wrath and his desperate need for relief.

There were a thousand things Phil wanted to say including help me fill in the dark and jagged holes that remain from what was done to me. Is this a real memory? But Clint was already so upset that saying I didn't remember you for a long time was bound to go badly.

Phil had also never been around Clint without hearing aids for any long period of time. He wasn't so sure that he'd do well at trying to explain even with a combination of lipreading and ASL.
Probably best for some of it to wait. Clint had to be shocked too. Waiting for some of that to settle out was probably also a good idea.

But for now? Clint was still angry. Phil was upset. More than that, he was sorry but he didn't know what to do.

Words seemed ineffective for reasons far beyond the mechanical. Watching Clint as he stalked back and forth time after time, Phil was reminded of how physical and tactile Clint was. For now, all that seemed left to Phil was the communicating power of touch. It wouldn't solve anything just as it hadn't earlier in the day. Afterward, they had both still been frustrated and angry, but Phil had also felt connected. That had felt like coming home.

Phil stood. He stepped into Clint's path and caught him in his arms. Clint made a sound that couldn't decide if it wanted to be a moan or a snarl. He glared at Phil and then fell forward until his face was buried in Phil's neck.

Phil combed his fingers through Clint's hair and rubbed his back until he felt a little less tension in his shoulders. He leaned away until he could see Clint's face. “Whatever you want to tell me, I'll listen for as long as you need.”

Clint shook his head, “Think you've got more to tell.”

“Can we”—Phil hesitated—“get ready for bed?”

To his surprise, Clint nodded without pausing for thought. Phil had a suitcase on the quinjet but he wasn't willing to leave the room to get it just then. He made do with Clint's toiletries, a new toothbrush from a bathroom drawer, and Clint's pajama pants. Clint wound up in a matching pair of pajama pants, bare chested. Phil put a Tshirt on.

Clint was ready for bed first. When Phil came out of the bathroom, the archer was pacing again. Phil opened the rumpled bed and persuaded Clint to lay down. Leaving the light on, Phil crawled in beside him. He lightly stroked Clint's face and chest. For the first few touches, Clint hissed and flinched as though he was in pain. Phil was careful but also kept his touch firm enough to not tickle.

A switch seemed to flip. Clint exhaled and closed his eyes. Phil smoothed his hands over Clint for the next thirty minutes. He was willing to keep petting him all night.

Clint pulled Phil down until they were looking into each others eye. “I'm so mad.”

“I know,” Phil said.

Clint opened his mouth as if to say something else but pulled Phil into a kiss instead. “I hate you so much.”

“Okay.”

“I can't believe you're really—” Clint choked.

“I'm sorry.”

Clint pulled the Tshirt aside so he could brush his fingertips over the one purpling bite mark on Phil's left shoulder. “I—don't think I'm sorry.”

“I can accept that.”
Clint blinked up at Phil in evident surprise.

“I didn't enjoy it.” Phil quirked a half smile. “But I can accept it.” He curled one hand around Clint's shoulder. “If you'd really wanted to hurt me, I'd have needed medical attention.”

"Wanted to."

"Not really."

“I—” Clint turned his face to the side and closed his eyes.

“Tell me what you need,” Phil whispered into Clint's skin, knowing he couldn't hear it but he'd feel it. Clint turned his face back and opened his eyes. “Tell me what you need,” Phil repeated.

“I don't know.”

Phil ran his hand through Clint's hair. “We'll figure it out.”

“I hope so.”

Phil smiled at that. “We share the same hope then.”

Chapter End Notes

The character of Erin Mockta is being borrowed from my friend, Megan. Thank you, Megan, for letting her reality hop to my story.
Jemma looked up from her Cocoa Puffs at the sound of footsteps on the kitchen floor. Coulson came and sat across the island from her, frowning into a paper coffee cup with two neat, three pointed starburst holes punched through it, one directly across from the other. Jemma set her spoon down. "So, I guess Agent Barton's still mad at you..."

"Well, he didn't shoot me, just my coffee, so I'm going to take that as a good sign." He set the cup down with a sigh. "Honestly, I'm surprised he was even awake yet."

"Most everyone seems to be up already, actually. Miss Potts was just about to go downstairs to her office when I got here. Sergeant Barnes seems to have had a bit of a fit sometime before dawn and Steve's with him in—apparently there's a dojo in the building and Mr. Stark has piles of failed prototypes and out of date electronics, so Steve is supervising smashing things. Dr. Banner is up, too, he came through a few minutes ago to bring a pan of lasagna for Steve and Barnes."

Coulson blinked a couple times. "I feel like some part of that should strike me as odd."

"But it doesn't?" Jemma smiled.

"No, it doesn't." He got up to poke at the coffee machine. "Well this cost more than Clint's Keurig..."

"It will give you a fairly normal cup of coffee if you just press that round button on the right with the ring of blue around it. Took me ages to figure that out." She got up to help him. "What do you mean, Keurig?"

"Barton has apparently dropped by enough times during layovers that he has his own room here, and he has a Keurig."

Jemma paused. "Are you sharing his room?"

"Uh, yes."

She glanced at the purple argyle pants he was wearing. "Are those his pajamas?"

"Yes," he sighed, "they are."

She put a knuckle to her lips for a moment. "I'd say that's sweet, but he also put an arrow through your coffee, and that is decidedly not sweet."

"The phrase you're looking for is 'mixed signals.'" He took his new mug of coffee and sat back down.

She returned to her stool and took up her spoon. "Are you okay?"

He sipped his coffee. "I've been worse. Are you okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"It doesn't bother you, that I'm—"

"What? No, no, of course not! I mean it was a bit of a surprise, I'd never thought—then again, why would I have thought? You're my boss—or you were, I guess—it would be inappropriate. Not that I
think it's inappropriate that you're—its just, I mean," she took a breath. "I should stop talking."

"Yes, you probably should."

"I'm sorry, I said all of that wrong." She carded her fingers through her ponytail. "What I mean to say is that no, it doesn't bother me. You're my superior and, in all honesty, a bit of a father figure—I never gave any thought to the reality of you being in a relationship, beyond the occasional mention of your 'cellist.' Very clever cover, by the way."

He chuckled into his mug. "Clint's idea."

She reached across the island and put her hand over his. "I'm happy for you. And maybe a little bit envious."

"Thank you, Jemma. I appreciate that you, at least, don't mind."

"Fitz doesn't, either. I think he's just hit his limit of how much he can process right now. We've all been through a lot." She squeezed his hand. "Clint, too. I'm sure he just needs time to figure out how everything stands right now."

"You're good at this whole reassurance thing."

"I'm the chronically single friend, I have lots of experience with other people's boy troubles."

They grinned at each other.

Steve passed an already cracked tablet to Bucky and took another bite of lasagna. Bucky tossed the tablet into the air, and jumped to put his foot through it, making it shatter. It had taken about two tries to work out that the padded walls and floor of the dojo were bad for smashing things against, so Bucky had taken to more creative ways of destroying Tony's garbage. He stooped to examine the shrapnel with a feral grin that made Steve more than a little uncomfortable. At least it was a smile.

"Do you want any more to eat?" Steve held out a plastic plate of lasagna. Bucky looked up, made a quiet sound in his throat, and took the plate. Steve huffed out a breath that wasn't quite a sigh. He hadn't really expected an actual answer—Bucky had only spoken a few words since he'd woken around four, and none of what he had said was in English—but Steve was still holding out hope that they might have an actual conversation. He picked up some sort of foot-wide puck thing from the pile of not yet destroyed things. "Do you have any idea what this is?"

Bucky glanced up and shrugged, muttering in French through his pasta.

"Oh, we're speaking French now?" Steve was grateful for S.H.I.E.L.D. financed language lessons. "Je peux parler Français."

I can speak French.

"Hm." Bucky set his plate aside, picked up the puck thing and flung it at the wall. It bounced off and clattered to the floor. He retrieved it and tossed it into Steve's lap. "Toi, lance le."

You throw it.
Steve turned the puck over in his hands. According to a silkscreened logo on its top, it was a Roomba but Steve had no idea what that was supposed to mean. With a flick of his wrist he threw it at the wall like he would his shield. It bounced to the floor again.

Again, Bucky retrieved it and dropped it in Steve's lap. "À moi."

To me.

“Je ne lancerais pas ça sur toi,” Steve said with a roll of his eyes.

I'm not going to throw it at you.

Bucky raised an eyebrow at him in this look that was both questioning and knowing, and just for a moment—with no French or Russian or German hanging in the air, and Bucky turned so that Steve couldn't quite see the metal arm and the red star—things felt almost normal. The corner of Steve's mouth twitched up into the barest hint of a smile. He picked up the puck and slung it at Bucky, whose fist connected with the thing in mid air, cracking the plastic casing like an egg and sending mechanical odds and ends skittering across the matting. Bucky scooped up a wheel-shaped brush thing that had rolled against his foot. Steve watched him twirl it between his fingers. "Is this helping you at all?"

Bucky looked up, a stringy strand of hair falling in his face, and didn't say anything. For a long minute, he just frowned, then he lifted one shoulder in a shrug, kicked part of the Roomba unceremoniously out of his way, and went to pull something else out of the pile to destroy. Steve poked uninterestedly at his lasagna with his fork. The moment of near normalcy was gone as though it had never happened but, Steve hoped, it was a good sign.

A bitter, unseasonably cold April wind blew through New York, kicking up flower petals and discarded plastic bags and causing a young woman to pull her coat tighter around herself while her hair whipped around her face. She paused on the sidewalk to glance behind her at a group of four men. All four were wearing coats, one had a hood pulled forward, two had sunglasses on, two—including one of the ones with sunglasses—were wearing hats, and one had on gloves. All in all, they looked no different from any other clump of pedestrians. The man with the hood had a hand on the man with gloves' elbow. The man with sunglasses and a hat nodded subtly to the woman, who nodded back and pulled open the door to a staircase tucked between two shopfronts, and the five of them filed up the stairs to the concierge medical practice on the second floor. At the top of the stairs, Coulson pulled off his hat and sunglasses and pressed the buzzer on the back door. A moment passed, then the intercom chirped and a receptionist's voice came through. "How may I help you?"

Jemma pushed her hair back. "This is Jemma Simmons with patient, here to see Dr. Kelly."

There was a pause from the other end, probably while the receptionist went through an appointment list. "Yes, Mr. Stark called to let us know you're coming. Please come in."

Once inside, the group was led by a bottle-blond nurse to a large, cushy exam room where they collectively shed their coats and elected not to sit down. Barnes tapped his fingers on the back of the nearest chair, filling the room with a rhythmic metallic clinking. Steve put a hand on his wrist. "It's okay, Buck."
"You say that..." Barnes muttered back.

"We're just here to get a couple scans." Jemma smiled reassuringly. "Some pictures and we're done."

He looked at her, then shrugged. Just then there was a knock and the door opened, admitting an older man in a well tailored lab coat. "Hello, hello. I'm Dr. Kelly. One of you must be, I assume you are Jemma Simmons—" he gestured at Jemma and she nodded "—and one of you fellows is the patient."

Barnes lowered his head, hiding behind the fringe of his hair.

"This is my patient." Jemma indicated Barnes. "The other three are insurance."

"So, you're the attending physician?" Dr. Kelly tapped a stylus against the edge of the tablet he was carrying. "Mr. Stark's message was rather lacking detail so I'm afraid I don't know what's going on. Though I do notice that your 'insurance' includes Captain America. That, or hired muscle in this city is getting a lot prettier."

"I work with Stark." Steve crossed his arms. "He set up this appointment as a favor."

"James here is being treated for various neurological and psychological conditions," Jemma said. "We need scans to establish a baseline so we can monitor his progress throughout treatment. As you can see, he has a prosthetic, it doesn't come off so no MRI." She glanced at her patient. "He's also claustrophobic and both I and his attending psychologist agree that sedating him should be avoided."

Dr. Kelly frowned and nodded. "Metal and claustrophobia certainly do rule out MRI. Were you thinking PET scan, then?"

Jemma shook her head. "I doubt he'd sit still for the hour or so those take, especially not in the dark after having been stuck with needles to inject irradiated sugar. Our best option is going to be a CT scan without intravenous contrast."

The older doctor hummed and tapped a couple things onto his tablet. "Alright then. I'll go have someone get that ready."

As the door swung closed behind the exiting Dr. Kelly, Clint stuck his hands in his pockets. "I did not follow all of that, but it seemed too easy."

Phil shrugged, and signed as he spoke. "This place handles the likes of Stark, I'd bet they're used to not getting details."

"We'd have lied anyway." Jemma turned to her patient. "To get the scans we need, you're going to have to lay still on a table. The table moves slowly through a big ring that makes a lot of buzzing and clicking noises. It won't hurt though."

"I'll be fine." Barnes traced a fingernail between two plates of his left hand.

Jemma flicked her eyes toward Steve. "Of course you will."

A few minutes later, Dr. Kelly returned to fetch Barnes, Jemma, and Steve, leaving Clint and Phil in the exam room with the discarded coats. For a long minute, neither man said anything. Clint stared intently at a framed anatomical diagram on the wall. Phil waited patiently for the archer to look at him before asking, "Are we speaking again?"
"Nope."

"We're sharing a bed."

"I missed you. I'm also still mad at you." Clint pulled himself up to sit on the edge of the counter, fished his phone out of his pocket, and started playing some little match-three game.

Phil sighed and leaned against the wall. He didn't kid himself—without looking up, Clint was watching him.

He wanted to get Clint's attention, make him look directly, make him see the words that Phil had to say and that Clint needed to hear. *It isn't as simple as you think*, he wanted to say.

Clint didn't just have a wall between them, he had a fortress. The only time Phil could get inside those fortifications was when they touched. The results of that were mixed at best. He hadn't felt so cut off from Clint since that difficult mission years ago when Hawkeye had unexpectedly gotten close to a target. Really close. It seemed to Phil that Clint had fallen in love with Yegor Kuznetsov before killing him.

Phil straightened up so abruptly that Clint looked at him and frowned.

Phil hadn't read about Yegor in some report. That was a memory. Natasha had been there too. She could verify it for him. He wished Natasha would come in from the cold. He needed her. Clint did too.

It was dim in the room with the CT machine, lit vaguely blue.

"Just lay still." Jemma firmly pressed Barnes's hand to the table; he kept fiddling with the hem of his shirt and muttering anxiously in German. "This won't take long."

He turned his head to look around Jemma at Steve. "Kannst du bleiben?"

Jemma caught the Captain's eye and shook her head infinitesimally. Steve took a breath and reached out to put a hand on the sergeant's shoulder. "No, Buck, I can't stay. I'm sorry."

"We'll be in the next room." Jemma gently ushered Steve out of the room. She nodded to the radiology tech and leaned up to Steve. "Since it seems to be the question of the week, are you okay?"

Steve let out a huff of breath. "I'm exhausted. He keeps swinging between angry, ambivalent, and completely lost. All three are hard to be around."

"We're all doing everything we can to help him get better."

"I know. But he's not better yet."

She patted his arm. "He will be. I promise."

"People said the same thing about my mother before she died."

"Oh, Steve." Jemma put a hand over her eyes. "I'm sorry. Medicine has improved greatly even just
in the past couple of decades, though." She looked up at him. "He is going to get better."

Steve nodded. The tech mashed a key and gestured that they go back in to Barnes.

The common room of the tower was quiet, the occupants of one couch exchanging glances with the occupants of the couch opposite. Jemma and Erin were both nursing busted lips, Steve was watching a hand-shaped bruise on his arm fade, and Tony was holding an icepack to his forehead. Erin pressed the heel of her hand to her mouth and sighed when it came away spotted with blood. "So much for not sedating him."

"Yeah," Steve said, his slight Brooklyn accent asserting itself for a syllable. It had been a long day.

"Boo." Tony appeared in the doorway of the kitchen that morning, eyes gleaming like a child's on Christmas, which made Steve and Jemma—who were sitting at the island eating toaster waffles—quite nervous. "There's a truck outside that I'd bet has a barometric chamber in it," he sing-songed before prancing over to thieve one of Steve's waffles. "Just what the doctor ordered. Except, Simmons, are you even actually an MD? That seems like something that should have been made sure of by now, but, you know, we've really just all been assuming you know what you're doing."

"I," Jemma said around a bite of waffle, "have a Ph.D. in biochemistry, am a certified nurse practitioner, and have more applicable experience than anyone you're liable to find." She set her fork down and slid off her stool. "Let's go set up a pressure chamber."

Steve watched the two of them go, finished his waffles, and went to let Dr. Mockta in for her appointment with Bucky. She was waiting in the atrium near the private elevator that lead up to Tony's apartments when Steve came down. She stood, smiled, and stepped into the elevator with him. "Good morning, Captain."

"Good morning, Doctor."

"James up yet?"

"Yeah. He's been playing poker with Clint in the dojo since the sun came up."

Clint looked up from his cards at the flicker of movement produced by the dojo door opening and Barnes looked around as well. Erin waved a greeting to the two men. Clint stood and pressed his cards into her hands, "He bluffs really well," and strode from the room.

"Good morning, James," Erin said, chuckling at the hand of cards. "Do you like poker?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I play with Steve sometimes but he's such a horrible liar. If he ever tried to play with the other boys from school he'd lose the shirt off his back. It's too big for him anyway, all his clothes are."

Erin sat slowly. "Steve's a bad liar?"
"He's bad at anything that's bad. Always standing up for what's right, normally getting his ass kicked for it. You wanna play?"

"Sure, though I'm a bit rusty. What do you do when Steve's getting his ass kicked?"

Barnes gathered up the cards and shuffled them, apparently deciding starting a new game was for the best with a new opponent. "Rescue him. He's like a scrawny little dog that has no idea the boxer it's yappin' at could eat him. He's an idiot but he's my best friend."

"So, he's your idiot?"

"Yeah."

After spending an hour or so with her patient, Erin settled in with Jemma to go over the results from the previous day's CT scan.

"Luckily, he was pretty together most of yesterday, was lapsing in and out of primarily speaking German, but he wasn't fragmenting like he sometimes does. Here's hoping that's a sign his dietary changes are helping. He's getting a bowl full of gummies every day. Anyway." Jemma gestured toward the floor to ceiling window turned wall of CT images. "He could certainly be in worse shape."

"Of course he could be in worse shape." Erin frowned at a slightly shadowed spot on one of the scans. "He could have inoperable cancer. He doesn't. That doesn't mean he's healthy."

"Obviously."

"Other than his brain, how's he's doing?"

"Most any bumps and bruises heal within minutes. The only thing I can see that's lasting is muscle strain in his shoulder and back, which seems to be mild."

"That's good." Erin sighed. "I have other appointments. You said the hyperbaric chamber is here?"

"Yes. It ought to be set up and in working order by the end of the day. Given how long one needs to be in such a chamber for it to be effective, Barnes probably ought to sleep in it."

The other woman nodded. "I agree. Should I swing by again later tonight, see how that goes?"

"That would be great."

That evening, walking down the hall with Barnes, Steve explained in French, the preferred language of the past half hour, "Jemma says you need to spend a long time in the chamber—"

"All at once?" Barnes asked skeptically.

"No. Several hours at once though. So, it's set up in another of the bedrooms on the same hall as the one you've been in and you're going to need to sleep in it."

Barnes shrugged. "Alright."

Jemma stepped out of a room down the hall ahead of them. "Tony's still fussing, but everything's set up."

"Great." Steve put a hand on his friend's shoulder and they walked to the doorway. Barnes froze just inside the threshold. Steve looked at him. "Buck?"
He was staring past Tony, who was crouched on the floor near the end of the eight-foot long clear tube that was the chamber, and past Erin, who was watching whatever Tony was doing, at the chamber itself. Completely still, strands of unkempt hair falling in his face, he stared at it. Tony stood up slowly. Barnes shook his head slightly. "No."

Steve frowned, concerned by the word, the tone, and the sudden change in language which was rarely a good sign. "No what?"

He shook his head harder. "No, no, no..."

"James," Erin started gently, taking a step forward.

"No! I won't, not again, never again. I go in and I don't come out for years, I—" Barnes lashed out and made to try to smash the chamber. Tony moved to stop him, received an elbow to the head for his efforts, and found himself on the floor. In an instant, both women and Steve were reaching to restrain Barnes before he made another move on Tony. He easily ripped free of Erin's hold on his left arm, knocking her in the face as he did, and kicked Jemma's feet out from under her, making her fall. "I won't do it!"

Steve grabbed him around the middle and dragged him back a couple steps. Barnes's hands clamped around his forearms, trying to pry open his hold. Steve grimaced. "Bucky. Bucky, we're not going to freeze you, calm d—" He was interrupted by the back of Barnes's head smashing into his face.

Jemma scrambled to her feet and dashed out of the room, but quickly returned, syringe in hand, and managed to administer a dose of tranquilizer to the writhing soldier. He spat a few obscenities at her before he succumbed to the drug and went limp. Steve lowered him to the floor.

"Well," Jemma said, rather out of breath, "we've knocked him out anyway. Might as well keep him out, go ahead and put him in the chamber."

Steve and Tony deposited a more thoroughly drugged Barnes onto the chamber's cot, he was sealed in, Jemma pressurized it, and, Erin included, they went out to the common room and collapsed, men on one couch, women on another.

"So much for not sedating him," Erin said, examining a spot of blood on the heel of her hand that had come from her lip, which had split when Barnes had gotten her in the face with his metal hand. Jemma's lip had also busted when she fell, and Tony had an instant icepack pressed to what was sure to be an ugly bruise near his hairline.

"Yeah." Steve let out a breath. Bucky's metal hand had gripped a bruise into Steve's arm.

Quiet stretched between the four of them again. Bruce padded barefoot into the room, his head bent over a tablet. He stopped walking, took in the state of the couches' occupants, and blinked a couple times. "I'm just going to decide it was a very good thing I was in the workshop with Fitz instead of up here, and not ask."

"We failed to take some things into consideration with James's treatment." Erin pressed her hand to her mouth again and found the bleeding had stopped.

"I see..." Bruce said, drawing the words out.

Erin looked to Jemma. "One of us should have explained to him more fully, and we still have to once he wakes up. Due to his degree of aversion he will almost certainly need to be at least mildly sedated for these treatments, at least for a while." She pushed her dark hair off her forehead. "Also,
when I saw him this morning he thought he was in the thirties, was talking about boys from school and all of Steve's clothes being too big. It's really not good for him be stuck in memories like that; as much as he can he ought to be aware of where and when he actually is. That ought to improve as his physical healing progresses, but to help when he is stuck, and maybe get him unstuck, I suggest putting together a flipbook for him—a kind of photo book from oldest to newest. With it he can essentially walk through time from the memory he's in to the present. Start with any pictures there are from his childhood, then his time in the army. Pictures of you too, Steve, pre- and post-bulk up. Pictures of his life all the way up to now, though recent photos of himself could be stressers for him and maybe should be omitted."

"As far as I know, there's only two photos of him from before he joined the army," Steve said. "A family portrait and a class photo from fifth grade."

"I've got six." Bruce held up his tablet and shrugged. "Tony dowloaded the S.H.I.E.L.D. file dump. I did a keyword search for 'James Barnes.' There are probably more if you look harder."

"See, this is why the internet makes me nervous." Steve jabbed a finger at Tony and then scrubbed a hand through his hair.

"That's a database, actually, not the internet," Tony provided. He was shot several dark looks.

Erin stood. "I'm going home, microwaving some chili, and watching Netflix. Don't call me unless James has a breakdown. I'll see you all in two days."
Seated on the floor, leaning against the wall behind him, touching the tip of each finger on the left hand to the thumb over and over again, Barnes shrugged. "Ich vergesse." I forget.

Seated next to him, Steve sighed and replied, also in German, "That's probably because of the drugs this time." Steve held out a hand, wrist balanced on a knee. After a long moment, Buck fit his hand into Steve's, palm only a little rougher than it had been most of a century ago, still familiar. Steve squeezed lightly. "You still have to go in that thing but you can be asleep first and I swear you'll wake up the next day every time."

The sergeant nodded. "Okay."

Steve got to his feet. "You ought to shower." He got a blank stare and rephrased. "Du sollst dich duschen."

Down in the lab, Clint perched on the corner of a workbench, looming over Tony, who was micro-soldering. Tony shoved his work glasses up on his head, leaned on one elbow, and looked at Clint. "Three hours."

Clint scowled. "You've said that before and days passed. You're terrible at estimating time."

"Give me three hours. I'm working on it, okay? The hovering doesn't help."

"If I walk out that door, you will distract yourself with something shiny. You'll make a toaster sentient or something."

"I would not."

Bruce laughed from behind a microscope. "Yes you would."

Tony glared at him for a moment then faced Clint again. "I can't work with you looming over me. Go get G-Man to blow you or something."

Clint reached across the bench to cuff Tony's ear. "Phil is locked in my room with Maria, busy trying to rebuild the foundations of S.H.I.E.L.D. I'm also still not speaking to him."

Tony narrowed his eyes and flipped his glasses back down. "No. Hovering."

Which a frustrated sigh, Clint slid off the bench to the floor, pulled his phone out of his pocket, and called up a game. Tony resumed soldering. Bruce chuckled and shook his head. All the Avengers were children in one way or another it seemed. A few minutes passed before Jarvis interrupted the non-conversation. "Sir, I've just received a message for you." The A.I sounded vaguely confused. "It seems to have been sent from a Nintendo Game Boy."

Tony, who was the only person who usually didn't try to look at Jarvis, actually stopped and looked at the ceiling. "What?"

"I think you'd best read it for yourself, Sir." Jarvis pulled the text of the message up on the nearest
Hey Ned,

I hear Steph's caught up with her BFF Jill and they're crashing at your place. He said she said, y'know? I totes gotta see Jill, will pop by soon as Mom lets me out of the house.
—Naptheli Renner

Tony frowned at the message, utterly baffled. Bruce got up from his own work to frown at the message as well, then leaned over to nudge Clint, who was completely unaware that anything had happened. The archer looked up. Bruce gestured at the screen. "Does this mean anything to you?"

Clint got to his feet, frowned at the message, then made a face like someone who had just eaten sushi for the first time. "It's from Natasha."

Bruce looked at him. "You sure?"

"Oh yeah." The archer grinned and poked at the signature line. "One time when we were in Alaska a barista misheard Natalie as Naptheli. We joked about it for a week. Renner is the last name of my go-to alias. Only she'd put those together."

Tony flapped a hand at the screen. "What the hell does it mean then?"

"Look at me when talking to me or finish the damn hearing aids already."

"Gyah, sorry." Tony faced Clint before repeating. "What does it mean?"

"Well, Ned is probably a reference to Ned Stark from Game of Thrones, so that's you, Tony. Steph, female form of Steve. Jill is Barnes then, I guess. So that's 'Hey Stark, I hear Steve found Barnes and they're at the tower.' 'He said she said' is basically short for it's a long story how she found out. She wants to see—probably interrogate—Barnes. She'll be here as soon as she gets out of Russia."

"Russia?" Tony and Bruce asked as one.

Clint grinned and poked at the screen. "Mom."

News of the message spread quickly through the tower. Coulson demanded Tony trace it. Tony abandoned Clint's hearing aids again in order to try before announcing that he couldn't even figure out how Natasha had managed to send a message using a Game Boy.

"There must be some way you can—" Coulson began before Tony cut him off.

"There probably is, but I don't know what it is and it'll take a while to figure out and longer to implement. I have other projects and I don't see that this warrants the effort."

"Doesn't warrant the effort!" Coulson exclaimed.

"Look," Clint, whom Jarvis had helpfully been subtitling the conversation for, inserted, "this is Natasha we’re talking about. She's in Russia. She's basically home, and I think we all know we won't find her if she doesn't want to be found. That's what Tony means by it not warranting it. She says she's coming here, so he can ask how the hell she texted with a Game Boy when she gets here
and then he'll know for future reference. In the meantime it would be really fucking nice if he could finish my hearing aids, there is no reason this should be taking as long as it has.” He glared at the two of them until Coulson left the room and Tony returned to his work.

Upstairs, Steve was sitting on the carpet in the perimeter hallway that ran around the outside edge of the floor with the common room and guest bedrooms. His sketchbook was in his lap but he wasn't drawing, he was staring out at the city and the overcast sky. He heard footsteps behind him and looked around. Bucky padded barefoot down the hall toward him, left arm hanging limply at his side. Steve had noticed that, sometimes, it seemed like Buck's brain forgot the arm was there. With a heavy sigh, he sat down next to Steve and leaned against the glass, metal shoulder hitting the window with a soft tick. "I don't remember anything since early this morning until about twenty minutes ago."

Steve closed his sketchbook. "You seem okay right now."

"Yeah." Bucky shoved his hair out of his face. "Think I prefer being out to lunch."

"Don't say that."

"When I know what's going on, I know how crazy I am—"

"You're not crazy, Buck—"

"I spend most of my time thinking I'm somewhere or somewhen I'm not, my memory's shot, don't even always know my own name, I—" He slammed his prosthetic fist against the window. The glass shuddered but held.

"You aren't crazy. Listen to me." Steve snapped his fingers next to Bucky's face a couple times to get him to look away from his own metal hand. "You are not crazy. You're sick and hurt. Yeah, you're pretty delusional a lot of the time right now, there's a lot wrong with your memory, and right now I'm honestly expecting you to lose your grip on reality any second—and I'm sure you are too—but you're getting better. Everybody's gonna help you, we are helping you. We can help you remember and—"

"What if I don't want to remember?" Bucky looked darkly through the fringe of his hair that refused to stay out of his face

Steve sighed, understanding the unspoken the things I've done at the end of that sentence. "Do you remember Natasha? She was with me back in spring when I was your assignment." Bucky frowned a little. Steve flipped through his sketchbook and held up a portrait he'd done of her. "Red hair, not very tall."

"With the little electric things that look like nickels?"

"That's her." Steve nodded. "She's done a lot of bad things too. She's coming here. I'm not sure when, but you can talk to her. If anyone knows how to live with the kinds of things you're having to live with, it's her."

"Didn't I shoot her?" Bucky asked, his tone clearly conveying his skepticism that Natasha would want to help him.

"I'm pretty sure she met her best friend by getting shot by him."
Dr. Mockta watched quietly as Steve slowly rotated his mug of coffee in his hands. She sipped her own. Barnes would no longer talk to anyone this morning. He had barricaded himself into an office, pushed the desk in front of the door, and was making a fleet of paper airplanes. Steve propped his elbow on the island counter and dropped his face into that hand. Eyes hidden behind his palm he said, "He told me he doesn't want to remember."

"Well, of course not," Erin said gently, putting her mug down. "It hurts. Facing the truth is one of the hardest things anyone ever has to do in their lifetime. For a lot of people it seems easier to them to keep living the lies or keep living the half truths. Especially for someone like him, there's no way to make it nice or pretty, he's been through hell over and over. He's a mess. But he's actually doing incredibly well, all things considered."

Steve looked up at her dubiously.

"I work with soldiers, Steve. It is the unfortunate nature of war that it breaks people. I've known men—and women—who have survived one really horrible thing but because of that thing they never really come home because in their minds they're always still over there. It's too much for some people. Some people commit suicide. Some shut down completely, become recluses or there is, in my opinion, such a thing as a stress induced coma—the medical sciences disagree on whether that's a real thing, but I swear I've seen it happen." She fiddled with her mug. "Honestly, it's a miracle and a half that he's functional after everything he's been through, that he has moments of lucidity at all. What he's survived is more than enough to throw someone into dissociative fits. The loss of a limb alone can do that. Add in the brainwashing and whatever they did to his memory..." She shook her head. "Honestly, it's a miracle and a half that he's functional after everything he's been through, that he has moments of lucidity at all. What he's survived is more than enough to throw someone into dissociative fits. The loss of a limb alone can do that. Add in the brainwashing and whatever they did to his memory..."

Steve frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Have you ever felt like if you let yourself start to cry, you'd never stop again?"

He thought of losing his mother, watching Bucky fall, and the first couple weeks after he woke up in this century. He nodded. "Yeah."

"Did you cry?"

"Yeah."

"Did it stop?"

Steve snorted. "Apparently."

"There you go. Consciously or not, he doesn't believe it'll stop, so he just doesn't start. He's not to a point yet where he can really face what he needs to." She sighed. "He'll get there, with help from you and everyone else, and once he gets there, he's gotta get through it. He needs to have a meltdown, or several. It's not gonna be fun for him or you or me or anybody, but he'll come out the
other side stronger for what he's survived. In the meantime, if some days he just needs to make paper planes, that's okay."

Jemma had followed Fitz down to the workshop as an escape from the emotional turmoil of upstairs. The two of them and Bruce weren't even bothering to pretend to be doing anything other than watching Tony finally present Clint with his new hearing aids. The archer stuck the tiny conical gadgets into his ears where they disappeared almost entirely, shut his eyes, and grinned. "You have no idea how much sound there is in a quiet room until you can't hear it."

"So, they're good?" Tony asked cautiously.

"Fantastic." Clint hopped halfway up onto the workbench to lean across and kiss Tony's forehead. Jemma stifled a laugh behind her hand. Clint looked at her, then at Tony. "These are better than my old ones."

"That's why they took a while!" Tony crossed his arms. He clearly wanted to come off as defensive but was obviously just proud.

Clint rolled his eyes and got down off the bench. "Thank you, Tony. Now everybody keep Coulson away from me."

Bruce frowned. "Why?"

"Because," Clint said soberly, "in three years, I've only heard his voice in a couple crappy cellphone videos, and if he talks to me I'm going to cry. And I really don't feel like it right now."

For a long moment no one said anything. Fitz poked at a package of aerogel. "That's actually sort of sweet."

Clint blinked, then laughed, making everybody jump. "You're Scottish!"

"Yeah...?" Fitz looked confused.

"For some reason I expected Estuary from you."

Jemma put the heel of her hand to her forehead. "He's never actually heard you talk before, Fitz. Me either, until right now."

"And you're from up north." Clint cracked his knuckles. "God, I love accents."

"Uh, d'you want me to tell you about features or...?" Tony asked.

"Bluetooth, Jarvis can talk into my head, will work as comms?" Clint guessed.

"Also waterproof, more heat and cold resistant than you are, and they self adjust to ambient sound level."

"I would tell you you're a genius but your ego doesn't need that." Clint clapped Tony on the shoulder and downright pranced out of the room.

Tony gestured after him. "The guy's been hounding me for more than a week, then he just kind of
sashays away as soon as he gets them."

"Sounds like the kind of thing you'd do." Bruce shrugged then wandered back to his own work, patting Butterfingers as he passed.

Maria appeared in the entrance to the room. "Judging by Barton nearly bowling me over while he skipped up the stairs, I'm guessing you finished your project for him."

"I sure did."

"Good, because you have a new one." She crossed her arms. "Dr. Mockta wants you to make Barnes a punching bag that won't immediately fall apart."

After leaving Tony's workshop in the wake of Clint decoding Natasha's message, Phil retreated to the room with the divan. He liked the blue and taupe piece of furniture with its coordinating pillows, and he liked the chairs and bookcases in the room. One wall was all window and had an awe inspiring view. He'd spent the day working and even had lunch in the makeshift office space. The room was so big and well-appointed that applying the term “makeshift” seemed apt but unfair. To his surprise, Melinda May was all in favor of his reconnecting with the Avengers and even exhorted him to get some rest.

“Maybe take a day off.” She'd scowled. “Even take a few days off.”

Phil had laughed. She gave him a cold, level look.

He worked and tried to find hope and meaning in where he was and what he knew. The presence of the Winter Soldier seemed almost incidental—the most broken toy in the bedraggled toy box. He gathered from reports that Natasha hadn't been so different once but there'd been more resources for her because S.H.I.E.L.D. had been intact. By the time he'd met Natasha, she just seemed a warrior, no more scarred and scuffed than expected. Of course, he'd probably seemed the same, his brokenness hidden below the surface, the rumors about him and Lydia true and entirely wrong at the same time. Whispers had dogged him about why a Division Chief in Europe would refuse a promotion and take a downgrade to come Stateside.

Natasha had never cared about any of that, smiled at him and called him boss. Clint and Natasha had been a team even then. His memories of Natasha were broken but bright, like something seen through a clear but crackled window, and Clint's side of the window was smudged.

If only the memories of Lydia were less clear. And Celeste. And Lyall. Why must the memory of all that pain seem so sharp? The memories of his own family were muddled, like a chalk drawing with an eraser dragged through it.

Between fits of rumination, he answered emails, read reports, and reviewed communiques.

He was IM-ing with Skye when Pepper walked in. She smiled at his relaxed pose on the divan. “Jarvis says you like this room.”

Phil glanced up at her and then looked around the room. “I suppose I do.”
“I'll have a desk moved in for you tomorrow,” she said. “Something that goes with the bookcases.”
He blinked. “Thank you.”

“Dinner's almost ready.”

He pulled his laptop closer. “I'll be along.”

She went to the door then paused and looked at him over her shoulder. “Tony finished Clint's hearing aids a few hours ago.”

Phil's head came up.

“Wondered if you knew,” she said.

“No. I didn't.”

She nodded before she left. Not sure what this meant for him, he stared out the window.

“Director Coulson,” Jarvis said. “Forgive me for intruding.”

Phil startled then looked up, a useless but apparently natural reaction to the A.I. “Not at all, Jarvis.”

“I thought you might like to know that Agent Barton is in the dojo.”

“I—” Phil frowned. “Did Tony ask you to tell me this?”

“No, Director. Based on the known variables, I calculated that you needed this information.”

The hair stood up on the back of Phil's neck. “That's creepy.”

“Some do react in that manner. I observe that, over time, that reaction diminishes.”

Phil tapped his fingers against his laptop.

“Did I miscalculate?” Jarvis said. “Do you not need this information? I do learn.”

“I need the information,” Phil said absently. “I'm just not sure what to do with it.”

A schematic of the residential floors of the tower came up on the window.

“You are here,” Jarvis said. “The dojo is here. This is the most direct route to the most convenient limited access elevator which you must take down three floors.” The schematic on the window lit up to illustrate Jarvis's words. The position of Clint's room was also helpfully lit up and labeled.

“Um.” Phil felt outmaneuvered. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” Phil would've sworn he heard a smirk in the A.I.'s voice.

Phil made a detour by Clint's room to drop off his laptop, coat, tie, and shoulder holster. When he got to the door of the dojo, he paused to remove his shoes. He stepped through the door and deposited them on the shoe rack just inside the entryway.

The dojo was large and exceptionally long. The section of the dojo he'd stepped into gleamed with light and a wooden floor. The far end was covered in mats and padding that ran up the walls to the ceiling. The padded end was littered in semi-organized stacks of discarded electronics, a section of which looked recently cleared.
Clint had targets set up at the farthest end of the cleared section. He stood barefoot on the wooden floor, bow drawn. He concentrated only on his target but Phil was certain the archer knew he was there. Out of respect, he waited until Clint released the arrow before he spoke.

“Clint,” he said as the archer turned toward him.

Clint gave him a hard look.

“Pepper said Tony finished your hearing aids,” Phil said.

“Yeah. I, um, I've been”—Clint clutched his bow to his chest—“was avoid—” He took a deep breath.

“I could read to you,” Phil blurted.

“R-read?”

“Please let me.” His stomach clenched around the words he didn't speak as they clattered through his brain. Please don't tell me you're not speaking to me, don't tell me to go away.

“You sound the same.” Clint fingered his bow. “I wasn't sure I really remembered.” Slowly, he nodded. He began breaking the bow down.

“I'll”—Phil gestured—“I'll find Tony's library and—”

“I'll download something,” Clint said. “Get my arrows and targets.”

By the time the archery equipment was organized and ready to be put away, Clint had what he wanted on his phone. He handed it to Phil.

“Edgar Allan Poe's Complete Poetical Works.” Phil read the title aloud.

Clint fidgeted. “From Project Gutenberg.”

“Great idea.” Phil took Clint's hand and led him to an extended clear space in the padded portion of the dojo. He sat where he could lean against the padded wall then drew Clint down so that Clint was lying on the floor mat with his head in Phil's lap.

Phil found the poem he wanted. “Hear the sledges with the bells—Silver bells! What a world of merriment their melody foretells!”

He stroked Clint's hair as he read and Clint watched his face. Clint eventually closed his eyes and simply listened as Phil read the rhythmic words for the better part of an hour.

Just as Phil started to get hoarse, Clint touched his cheek. “That was beautiful. You have a soothing voice.”

Phil grinned crookedly. “Even over comms?”

“Especially over comms.”

Clint pulled Phil down until they were lying side by side. He brushed his fingers over Phil's lips and on down to his throat. He paused with his fingers on Phil's vocal chords. “Say something,” he whispered.

“I don't know what to say.”
“Keep talking to me.”

“I—” Words tumbled through Phil’s mind and got stuck—words of feelings held too tight, secrets held too long, fears held too close. Maybe words that were true, adjacent to the ones that made him panic, maybe those words could slip through the holes in the net that held so much in.

“I can’t believe you’re here with me,” Phil said. “I can hardly believe you were ever with me at all.”

Clint’s eyebrows went up.

“You’re incredible.” Phil stroked his fingers over Clint’s face then down his chest. “You’re like something out of a Greek myth, and I’m just a guy.”

“No—” Clint bit his lip, apparently to keep the rest of his words in.

“I don’t know how to tell you the things I want to say, the things I think about, how I feel. That I—” Phil took a breath. “How much I care.”

Clint’s hands joined Phil’s in the languid caressing of the other. Clint traced Phil’s jaw as Phil rubbed Clint’s shoulder. Clint smoothed his hand over Phil’s ribs and hip.

“I try—” Phil exhaled. “I try to communicate in other ways,” he murmured, “because I don’t remember—don’t remember words ever working that well.” He slid his hand down Clint’s spine from the neck to the small of the back.

Clint caught his breath.

“Lately,” Phil said, “the words especially don’t work. What I say seems wrong. What I don’t say—”

Clint interrupted with a kiss, soft and full of tongue and unexpressed promises. “I thought I’d cry,” he said, “when I heard your voice again. I still might.”

“Let me hold you if you do.”

Clint pushed himself up to look down at Phil. “Maybe.”

Phil nodded and framed Clint’s face with his hands. Clint curled forward then kissed him with a sigh.

Talking and touching became having sex on the padded floor of the dojo.

For the first time since their fragile resumption of relations, Clint didn’t start fighting at some point. Not that he didn’t want to have sex—he clearly did—but he was so angry and threatened he wound up defending himself from the very things he wanted. Phil had tried backing away when Clint became combative but the younger man desperately reeled him back in every time.

As always, Phil’s shirt stayed on and remained buttoned. That was a line that Clint could not cross even as he seemed to resent the shirt and had damaged more than one. One night, when he’d yanked until the buttons popped off and the shirt fell open, everything had come to a full stop. Clint had flung himself off the bed and wouldn’t return until Phil put a Tshirt on.

Phil wasn’t sure how to feel about this. Offended maybe, or hurt. But a willingness to do anything to keep this between him and Clint—whatever it was and no matter how distorted—meant that he was more than happy to throw away his pride, trample his dignity, and set his feelings aside—anything it took to get one more day, one more night, one more kiss. It wasn’t bliss but it was so
much better than the emptiness he'd felt for so long, even before he'd remembered enough to know what it was, that he was willing to be foolish.

What they did—full body contact and then some—required so much trust. They weren't prepared for that and Phil didn't expect it. That hadn't been on the table at all in the past several nights as they made their reacquaintance, but as their passionate interaction swept through to its panting culmination without ever becoming contentious, he began to hope. Maybe soon. Because this time there was an afterglow instead of an aftermath.

A warm moment like this, where they were intertwined and peaceful, should be the perfect time to whisper difficult truths, to say heartfelt words even if they stopped a little short, like, “I don't know what I'd do without you.” Of course, when Phil had said that one night, Clint had snapped, “You managed for three years.”

Saying these things—or much of anything, really—seemed impossible when their interactions were tense. So it seemed there was never a good time to talk. Maybe it was okay to just wait Clint out. This between them this evening had gone unexpectedly well.

Phil held Clint close, stroked his back from shoulder to waist, basked in the sure-to-be-fleeting peace. It was easier to pretend that things were as good as they felt right at that moment than to risk disrupting the glow by reaching toward the sharp instruments of healing.

“Don't wake me up,” Clint murmured into Phil's shoulder.

Phil hesitated then tightened his arms around the archer. “Close your eyes and keep dreaming.”

“I want to dream with my eyes open.”

“I hope that we can.”
Chapter 8

Two weeks after Natasha's note came through, Steve wandered into the common room after settling Bucky into the pressure chamber for the on night of his now every-other-day treatment schedule to find Coulson leaning against the wall, watching Clint who had fallen asleep on one of the couches.

"Is he still mad at you?"

Coulson sighed tiredly and stuck his hands in the pockets of his sweats. "Not sure that 'mad' is quite the word. I can hardly blame him though. He's having to undo three years worth of grieving."

"Mm." Steve looked at the floor. "Not sure you ever really undo grieving."

"How's Barnes doing?"

Steve shrugged. "Erin keeps saying he's going to break down and cry at some point and that'll help but it's just not happening."

"From what I've seen he seems to be more lucid more often. Not that I've spent much time with him, been busy with what's left of S.H.I.E.L.D."

"How's that going?"

Coulson pushed off from the wall and headed to the stairs, Steve following behind him. "It's a mess. Untangling Hydra from the good stuff is much easier said than done. Last week when I was away, I was with my team trying to clean house and round up what good agents we've got left alive." They got to the kitchen. "I need Natasha."

"I know." Steve watched Coulson pour himself a bowl of cereal. "Buck needs her too."

Coulson paused. "Red in their ledgers."

"Right."

"Here's hoping she gets here soon."

The next morning, Steve and Clint tossed a ball back and forth in the gym while Barnes tested Tony's latest attempt at a Winter Soldier-proof punching bag. This prototype was doing better than the last five. Suddenly, Barnes stopped pummeling the bag and clutched at his left upper arm, a pained breath hissing through his teeth.

"Buck?" Steve stopped tossing the ball and stepped toward his friend. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." Barnes's voice was tight and the knuckles of his right hand had gone white with how hard he was gripping the metal of his arm.
Steve stood next to him, concerned and rather helpless. "I thought you couldn't feel pain in that arm."

"I can't," Bucky spat. He kicked viciously at the punching bag and sank to his knees gritting his teeth. "Not if it's real."

Not knowing what else to do, Steve knelt beside him, put an arm around him, and put his own hand over Bucky's.

Watching quietly, Clint set down the ball he'd been left with. It occurred to him vaguely that he should probably feel like he was intruding, but he was a spy and the thought was fleeting. Eventually, Barnes relaxed as the phantom pain subsided. He twisted to rub at his left shoulder blade. Steve took over the rubbing. "Does that happen a lot?"

"No."

"Acupuncture's supposed to help," Clint offered. He received a gray-eyed glare in response.

"I don't like needles."

"You can't feel acupuncture needles."

"I do not like needles."

"Okay. No acupuncture." Clint held his hands up in surrender and strode casually from the gym. He'd made it to the common room when he ran into Tony. Behind the billionaire was Coulson, in one of his usual suits, looking unusually severe.

Tony brandished a tablet at Clint. "You. Natasha sent something else—from an actual computer this time I think—and she's still using whatever kind of code it is the last one was in. Nobody but you seems to be able to follow it."

"Lemme see." Clint held out a hand for the tablet.

Behind the three of them, the elevator dinged. The doors opened and out stepped Natasha with all her usual grace, despite being in a pair of very tall heels and having a bulging backpack slung across her shoulders. "Stark, you really need to improve your security."

The men stared at her. Tony blinked a couple times then found his voice. "What the hell happened to your hair?"

She tucked a single, tight, honey-blond curl behind one ear. "Russian fashion happened."

"Please tell me you're going to fix it."

"It'll be red again within the week. You." She strode up to Clint, grabbed his face and kissed him.

When she allowed him to pull away, he looked slightly sheepishly at Coulson. "You know she does that, right?"

Coulson sighed. "Yes. I'm resigned to the fact that there's probably some dictionary somewhere with a picture of the two of you next to the entry for 'romantic friendship.'"

One of Natasha's eyebrows arched. "Damn right there is." She stepped in front of Coulson, considered him for a moment, then, in one fluid flash of motion, punched him in the jaw, grabbed
the front of his shirt, yanked him to her, and kissed him.

He jerked away from her, rubbing at what was probably going to be a bruise. "What the hell was that?!"

She jabbed a finger at him. "You deserved that punch, you got kissed because I'm damn glad you're not dead, and you need to brace yourself because as soon as I can get you on your own I am going to bitch you the hell out." She pivoted toward Tony. "Where's Barnes?"

"Uh." Tony looked to Clint for help.

"Gym. With Steve."

When Natasha walked into the gym, still balanced on eight inches of heel but no longer burdened with her backpack, Barnes was pacing and ranting at length in vaguely German-accented Russian. Natasha stopped walking and crossed her arms. "Russian, seriously?"

Steve snapped to look around at her, seeming strained. "Wha—? Oh, hi, uh, yeah. He starts speaking different languages when he dissociates. He was fine just a minute ago..."

Natasha shook her head and strode authoritatively toward Barnes. "You are not doing this right now. I just got back from Russia and I did not just spend ten hours on a plane to listen to you ramble. I do not care how fried your brain is, the line between sanity and insanity is made up of choices, I would know, and I'm making this one for you. We're speaking English now, am I understood?"

Barnes had frozen in mid-step. His brow furrowed, his eyes narrowed, and he frowned. Steve held his breath. Finally, slowly, Barnes said, "I'd guess you're Natasha, but she has red hair."

"It's called hair dye. And bleach." Natasha rolled her eyes. "I am so sick of people." With no explanation, she walked over to the punching bag, kneed it, and kicked when it swung back toward her. The heel of her shoe caught the seam and tore the bag open, spilling sand all over the floor. She surveyed the mess and nodded, satisfied. "So, Barnes, what are you doing here?"

He gestured vaguely at the punching bag. "I was doing that, but now you broke it, so..." He shrugged.

"Natasha, he's not really—"

She shot Steve a look that quickly shut him up. "I don't mean here in this room. What are you doing here at Stark Tower in New York?"

Barnes opened his mouth, shut it, shook his head, and shrugged. "I'm from New York."

Natasha frowned. Steve walked over to her, his back to Bucky, and said quietly, "He's not all there right now, Natasha."

She met his eyes, "I've seen worse," and stepped around him. "I know you're from New York but it's been a long time since you've been here. Why are you here now?"

"I don't know, why are you here?"
"I'm working." She crossed her arms. "I work for S.H.I.E.L.D, who do you work for?"

Barnes said nothing.

"Hydra?"

"No." He shook his head, more to clear it than to disagree, his hair whipping his face. "Not anymore. I don't know."

"What did they do to you?"

"That's enough, Natasha!" Steve hadn't meant to shout. He took a breath. "I don't know what you're trying at, but this is unnecessary."

She pirouetted around to glare at him. "I should think you'd want to know if you've got a Trojan horse living with you."

"He's not well, Natasha."

"And therefore might not even be consciously aware that he's a mole, Captain." She turned away from him. "What did they do to you, Barnes?"

"I don't know." The sergeant had gone white.

"Yes you do."

"He's just starting to get better. Forcing him to talk about—"

"I don't care." Natasha cut Steve off.

He straightened up to his full height. "You, of all people Agent Romanoff, ought to have sympathy for the hell he's been through."

Natasha stiffened. "I can eat ice cream with him later, after I'm convinced he's not a threat. Barnes—"

"We've already made that determination. Me, Stark, Hill, Barton, Coulson."

"He shot me!" She jabbed a finger at the increasingly panicked-looking brunet.

"So have most of your friends!" Steve tossed his hands in frustration. Bucky looked more than ready to bolt.

"Those were very different circumstances." Natasha very nearly growled.

"Wasn't Clint on assignment to assassinate you when you met?"

"I'm sorry." Bucky's voice was thin. Both Steve and Natasha looked at him. He shrugged listlessly. "I'm sorry I shot you. I—" He shook his head. "I should go." He made for the door.

Natasha caught him by the arm—the soft one. He made to sweep her legs out from under her. She dodged and knocked him onto his ass then straightened up and dusted her hands. "Okay, that was too easy. You are sick."

Barnes stayed on the floor stunned. Steve quickly went to him, knocking Natasha out of the way as he did. "Buck? Bucky?"

"What is wrong with you?" Steve snarled at Natasha, pulling Bucky to him while the brunet continued babbling in German and became decreasingly coherent.

"He's your Achilles heel, Steve." Natasha crouched. "Everybody has one and for most people it's a person. If Hydra wants to get to you, they know the best way to do it is through him." She gestured at Barnes. "Let you find him, broken, sick. They know you'll try to help him. You bring him here where he has access to some of the most powerful—and volatile—people in the country, possibly on Earth. He could be programmed, like a computer virus—or, no, bad example, nevermind—programmed, and not know it. We could be set straight back to where we were in March in a heartbeat."

"You think no one's already thought of that?"

At that exact moment, Pepper stepped into the doorway. Mouth open, having been about to speak, she stood and surveyed the scene before her: Natasha Romanoff—blond haired, in high-waisted jeans and platform heels, looking like she was going to go clubbing or something—crouched over a severely pissed Captain America, against whom the Winter Soldier was leaning, curled into the fetal position, pronouncing in German. "Well... I guess you and I will be catching up over something stronger than coffee, Tasha."

"I guess so." Natasha stood slowly.

"Wanna tell me why Steve's best guy is curled up on the floor?" Pepper frowned and crossed her arms.

"Natasha has lost her mind, that's why." Scowling, Steve cradled Buck's head protectively. Metallic fingers came up to cling to his wrist.

Natasha shot a cold look at the Captain. "I am unconvinced that Barnes is not a threat. I was interrogating him with the aim of ascertaining what kind and level of threat he is."

Pepper put her hands together as though she were praying and put the tips of her fingers to her lips. "Steve, why don't you take Bucky to his room, let him, you know, have his episode. Tasha, you, me, upstairs, bar."

Steve scooped Bucky up like a small child and walked out of the gym. Pepper looked at Natasha. "For a fantastic actress and psychological profiler, you sometimes suck at people. C'mon, let's have daiquiris I'm not allergic to."

Steve lowered Bucky onto the cushion covered, floor bound mattress that now served as his bed and gently detached Bucky's hold around his neck. Bucky curled around a pillow and muttered into it, many sentences ending in "nicht"—not. Steve petted his hair. "It's okay, Buck, you're okay. You're gonna be okay."

Bucky curled tighter around the pillow, buried his face in it, and whimpered. Steve sighed exhaustedly and sank into the cushions. He rubbed at Bucky's back, fingers following the line of
always too-tense muscles in his left shoulder, until Bucky fell fitfully to sleep. Steve leaned his head back against the wall.

"I wasn't being insensitive." Natasha waved a bendy straw at Pepper and Tony as she sipped her mango daiquiri. "You, Stark, are not known for being mindful. I got in here way too easily. Once I was in, Jarvis recognized me, let me up to the private floors. But I had way too little trouble getting in in the first place. You need better security. You could have a sleeper in your building and even if he's not a sleeper, there's a good chance Hydra is going to come looking for him."

Tony waved a hand dismissively. "I've got three of your S.H.I.E.L.D. buddies here already and they don't see a problem."

"Honestly, Tony," Pepper stirred her own mango daiquiri, "Phil and Clint have been pretty distracted by each other, Phil and Maria have been working on cleaning up HydraGate." She shrugged. "I can see how they might have not completely thought through how much of a danger Barnes might be."

"Thank you," Natasha said with a flick of her straw for emphasis. "Exactly."

Pepper raised an eyebrow. "That said, Tasha, you might have been gentler."

"Wait." Natasha put one hand flat against the bar top. "Are you all Hydra plants?"

Pepper blinked at her. Tony raised a finger. "Now just—"

Natasha spoke right over him. "Or did the destruction of S.H.I.E.L.D. make you all lose your minds? What happened to the fierce group of heroes that I work with? You're all idiots but you're brilliant idiots, and generally good at your jobs. And you"—she gestured—"you look like Pepper Potts but you sure as hell aren't the same kick ass bitch I know as my friend."

Tony jumped up. "Did you just come here to insult every-damn-body?"

"Why no." Natasha settled back in her stool with scathing innocence. "I came here to rejoin the best of what's left of S.H.I.E.L.D, the heart of what remains of that noble organization. I came looking for the tough legion that risks everything to save the world time and again, in the face of daunting—no, impossible—odds. The people I admire most in all the world. My life. Instead, I find a lost little tribe that's latched on to a convenient distraction, because he's even more screwed up than they are." She raised her flattened hand and slammed it down on the counter.

Tony's mouth opened with the formulation of a comeback. Pepper put a hand on his arm. "She's right. We've all suffered a devastating loss. The destruction of S.H.I.E.L.D. was like a death in the family for all of us in one way or another I think."

"Huh." Tony sipped his whiskey contemplatively. "And we're still stuck at the denial stage of grief."

Pepper made a wry face. "It's hard to tell, but it seems that she's at least made it to the anger stage."

Natasha grinned. "Also, I don't do gentle when faced with hostiles."

"Yeah," Pepper said dryly. "That's what makes it hard to tell whether your anger is grief related. You're so even tempered: mad all the time."

Natasha gave her an appraising look. "It seems that you are that kick ass bitch I know as my friend after all."
Pepper chuckled. Tony sat back down and muttered, "Glad that's cleared up."

Natasha raised her glass in salute and then downed half her drink.

Tony swirled his whiskey. "Don't know how you do that without getting brainfreeze."

"Maybe it's because I'm Russian. Who cares? I'm going to want another one."

Steve walked into the room, jaw set. "I hope you're done catching up."

Natasha sighed. "Steve—"

"Don't start." Steve stalked over to the bar and sat. "You didn't have to do that."

"Someone has to make sure the tower is secure." She twirled a curl around her finger and glanced down. "What d'you call him?—your best guy—"

Barely restrained anger rising, Steve cut her off. "He was babbling until he fell asleep—fell asleep because he was overwhelmed. It's the worst he's been in days."

Natasha jabbed a finger at him. "Did you recover from your ordeal by meditating and taking up basket weaving? No, you reacquired your spine, mildly traumatized some junior agents in the process."

"You could have backed down."

Tony surreptitiously set a bottle of beer in front of Steve. Pepper quirked an eyebrow at him. He shrugged and lifted a hand in the Captain's general direction.

"Steve, you know as well as I do that recovery from shock is one tough battle." Natasha grimaced. "This mollycoddling that you're doing is nice and all, but it's not enough by itself. And he could be a threat. I'm not just making that up for the hell of it."

"I told him you were coming, that you'd understand, that you could talk to him and help him."

Steve yanked the top off his beer—it wasn't a twist off. "He remembers you from March, he already felt bad about shooting you. I told him that's how you met your best friend. Then you get here and you stress him out and shove that in his face. Where have you even been the last two months?"

"Disappearing, just like I said I would." She stared him down for a moment. "I've been working as a lounge singer in Leningrad—" Tony opened his mouth and she cut him off "—yes, I know it's St. Petersburg, it was Leningrad when I was growing up—under my real name because that way everyone would assume I was just some up and comer taking advantage of all the hubbub on the internet." She downed the rest of her drink, still seemingly immune to brainfreeze. "You want me to have some kind of 'kumbaya, I know how it hurts, I'm a monster too' thing with your buddy, fine, whatever, I can do that. But that interaction isn't going to be all sweetness and light and, bam, instant miracle. And I'm not convinced it's safe for him to be here."

"So go convince yourself." Steve took an irritable swig of beer. "Call his therapist or something, talk to Coulson."

"I have plans to bitch Coulson out, actually."

Tony snorted. "I want to see that."
Natasha glared at him. "That will be happening in private and Jarvis is going to respect that and not let you eavesdrop, right?"

"Of course, Miss Romanoff," the A.I. responded quickly.

"Tasha," Pepper said, "I'm with Steve on the 'convince yourself' front. Ask Maria if you're on bad terms with Phil. Tell Tony what to do to improve security, talk to Barnes's therapist. But we've all been trying to help him get better, none of us want him getting worse."

The bottle blond snorted. "As much as we've all been through, does anyone harbor the illusion that recovery is some smooth road paved with tea and sympathy?" She looked around, particularly noting the glow through Tony's nerd-joke T-shirt. "I admire the guts it took to put together that one reckless chance and do that to yourself. Where are Bucky's guts? Who's seeing to that—encouraging him to get up off the mat?"

"So," Steve said bitterly, "you want me to believe you did all that for Bucky's own good."


Steve looked askance at her and sipped his beer. She returned the look. "If it were physical combat, and he were hurt would you be all 'poor, Bucky' because he was bleeding, or would you toss him a damn weapon?"

Steve shifted in his seat. He didn't say a word, but she seemed to have gotten through to him.

"Being ordered can be helpful to soldiers. I did not intend to cause him a fit, but it isn't a bad thing that I did." Natasha sighed. "But fine, I'll talk to the shrink." She pushed off from the bar. "He's not some weakling. With all that he's done, it's amazing that he's willing to claim his own name. Do you know how long it took me to get to that point? Hell, it's not hard to make the argument that I'm not there. I didn't grow up 'Natasha.'" She walked away, heels clicking on the stone floor.

Pepper looked at Tony, who was gaping after Natasha, then she looked at Steve. Tony shook his head and leaned on the bar. "You okay, Stars and Stripes?"

Steve tipped back his beer again. "No, I'm not. No matter how many times you all ask me that, the answer is going to be 'no' until Buck's better."

Pepper put a well-manicured hand on Steve's shoulder. "We know."

Coulson followed Natasha into what had become his office. "I hear you disregarded everyone else's opinion of Barnes, stressed him into a fit, and managed to piss off Cap."

"I sure did. I've been on the phone with his shrink. Still think he could be a sleeper but apparently I just have to be ready to kick his ass if he gets activated." She kicked the door shut and crossed her arms. "You are a right bastard, you know that?"

"This is about not contacting Clint, isn't it?" Coulson ran a hand over his jaw. It was still sore from her punch from earlier but didn't seem to be bruising as badly as he'd feared.

"You know it is. Do you have any idea what he went through? Do you, Coulson?" Her foot tapped
impatiently on the floor.

"I know he had a month of mandatory leave and psych re-evals because of having been under Loki's control."

"Uhhuh, it was six months leave, actually." She took a step forward. "He was shattered, Phil. S.H.I.E.L.D. moved him in with me because Fury assumed I knew what was really going on with him, everything he wouldn't tell the shrinks, which means I got to deal with his grieving."

"I'm sorry, I didn't re—"

"Shut up." She ran her fingers through her hair and let out a breath. "He made a couple half hearted suicide attempts. I know he didn't mean them because, if he had, he'd be dead. He didn't actually want to kill himself, he was just looking for something he had control over; he was doing the same kind of silent cries for help you get from troubled teenagers. I managed to keep that out of his records because I knew getting back on duty would do him good, give him something useful to do." She pulled out her phone and held it out to him. He took it. A picture was on it of Clint in a tanktop and boxers, slumped on a plain kitchen table, his face hidden in his arms, white gauze bandages wrapped neatly around his elbows. Clint looked gray and worn. Coulson's throat tightened. Natasha took her phone back. "He doesn't know I took that picture and I'm not sure why I kept it on here, but you can see he was a mess. For a while he wasn't convinced he was dead, thought life without you was his particular flavor of hell."

Coulson pulled out a chair and sat heavily. "I didn't know about that."

"Of course you didn't." She crouched in front of him, hands on his knee in a blend of threatening and comforting particular to her. "You know as well as I do that Clint has all the pride of a wild wolf. He doesn't tell anyone when he's hurting. He'd rather hide and lick his wounds than let himself get dragged to medical no matter how banged up he is. He does the same thing with emotional pain. Did you really think he'd tell you how bad he was?"

Coulson sighed. "No."

"Yeah, I didn't think you were that stupid." She stood, but kept her hands on his knee so she was leaned over, her face inches from his. "We had sex." He flinched and she tightened her fingers on his leg. "Uh-uh, you were dead, you get zero say on what or who anybody does when you're dead. That said, you know he and I do not have that kind of relationship. I am not at all above using sex as a tool, and that's exactly what happened. I used it to convince him he was still alive, that he could still feel something. Of course, he thinks it was his idea, I'm good like that. And odds are, he's not going to tell you any of that for a long damn time, if ever."

"So why are you telling me?"

She stood up and tipped her head to the side, one curl bouncing against her cheekbone. "You love him, he loves you, you deserve the truth just as much as he does. Also, you need to know how badly you fucked up."

He ran a hand over his face. "I know."

"No you don't." She pulled out another chair for herself and sat in it backwards, her arms propped on the backrest. "Why didn't you tell him?"

"Well, at first, I couldn't. I was dead and then I was in recovery."

"You had three years." Natasha sounded distinctly unimpressed.
“It's a long, sord—” He scrubbed his hands over his face. "I had orders."

"You should have disobeyed them."

"I know, I—" He shook his head. "I didn't know—" He looked at her. “I remembered you.” He looked away. “Didn't think it would go on for so long,—then the longer it went on the harder it got to—I didn't know how to tell him—anything. Then when S.H.I.E.L.D. fell, I thought he was dead, and...

"Do you know what it tells him that you didn't bother to contact him? Even if he doesn't consciously realize it's what he's getting from it?"

He shook his head.

"It tells him you don't care."

Coulson came up out of his chair. "That's not—"

"It doesn't matter if it's true, that's the message you've sent. You need to talk to him."

"We are talking."

She rolled her eyes. "You need to talk to him about what's happened and clear up what you fucked up. You know what I got out of fifteen seconds of seeing you two in a room together: neither of you really trusts the other right now. You need to fix that."

"Why are you so good with people?" Phil sighed, not sure if he was joking.

"It makes it easier to manipulate and kill them when necessary. It helps that I don't have a Y chromosome."

"Of course..."
Chapter 9

Having just given a rundown of all the needed security improvements she could think of, Natasha kicked her shoes off. "My feet hurt, and I'm ravenous. I need American food. I've been deprived."

Tony snorted. "I'm on that. I know exactly how you feel. Burger King is the answer."

Not quite an hour later, with the setting sun gilding the cityscape in copper, making the view from the tower kitchen look like it was made of new pennies, Natasha waved her last french fry. "Ten hour flight, crazy supersoldiers, I'm out y'all." She wadded up her hamburger wrapper, chucked it in the trash, and strode away, stretching as she went.

Pepper glanced after Natasha while removing lasagna number two of three from the oven then asked the room at large, "Am I hearing things or did she just say 'y'all'?"

Jemma held up her hands as if to say, "Don't ask me, I'm still processing actually meeting her." She had stammered her way through being introduced to Natasha shortly before the Burger King takeout had arrived, then rather awkwardly watched her eat as though it were the most incredible thing Jemma had ever seen.

Coulson nodded. "She just said 'y'all.'"

Clint made a face, mocking either Natasha or Coulson—probably Coulson—gestured a bit rudely, then yelped in surprise and dug one hearing aid out of his ear to frown at it. "It beeped. Nothing else in here beeped, right? Nobody else heard that?"

Pepper, Coulson, and Jemma all shook their heads. Jemma said, "Just you."

Fitz walked in, arms crossed. "As designated 'new guy' in the lab, I've been sent to fetch dinner for the science bros. I'm not sure that the privilege of sharing a workspace with them is worth the price of being their gopher."

Pepper's forehead wrinkled. "The science bros?"

Fitz shrugged. "If you Google Tony Stark, you get a hodgepodge including pictures of him half-naked at parties. If you Google Bruce Banner, you get physics journals and news coverage from a few years ago when he sort of broke Harlem. If you Google Tony Stark and Bruce Banner you get Tumblr postings about the science bros. The internet loves them together."

"Huh." Pepper shook her head in bemusement. "Well, lasagna number one is meat sauce prima vera, lasagna number two is vegetarian egg plant—that one was bought mostly for Bruce—and lasagna number three is still in the oven, it's meat lovers, and intended for the supersoldiers but I think they could spare a slice."

"Tony and I can make do with prima vera." Fitz came around the island to make plates for himself and the "science bros." As he awkwardly tried to figure out how to carry three plates without immediately dropping one, Clint deftly grabbed one of the lasagna laden dishes.

"I'll help you," the archer said. "I've gotta talk to Tony anyway, may as well be now."

They swooped out of the kitchen one after the other and headed to the workshop. Once there, Fitz handed the generous helping of vegetarian eggplant lasagna to Bruce while Clint played keep away with Tony's supper.
“Hey.” Tony made an unsuccessful grab toward his plate. "Why'd you bother carrying that down here if you aren't going to give it to me?"

"I'll give it to you," Clint said, "after you tell me why this thing beeped." He held out one of the minuscule hearing aids.

Tony grinned. "Toldja."

"You didn't tell me why it beeped."

"I told you you needed to let me explain the features to you."

Clint rolled his eyes. Tony said, "I'll tell you, after you admit you were wrong."

"Wrong?" Clint raised an eyebrow.

Tony crossed his arms. "For not listening to me."

Clint snorted. "You may have been right that the hearing aids you designed have even more features than I realized."

"May have been?" Tony asked wheedlingly.

"Okay." Clint huffed. "You were right."

"Haha!" Tony crowed as he took the hearing aid from Clint's fingers. "Good to see you acknowledge it. But you know," he grumbled, "you could have been more appreciative."

Clint's expression turned sober as he set the plate of lasagna down on Tony's bench and pushed it toward the rich son of a bitch. "Appreciative? I'm grateful, Tony. I didn't take the S.H.I.E.L.D. hearing aids for granted, exactly, but I got used to having them. With what we do for a living, the things we face, I knew I'd be ineffective without them. Until I got these. Now I don't feel benched anymore."

"Huh," Tony said. "That was actually a nicer admission than you saying you were wrong." Clint shoved his shoulder and Tony chortled. "How many beeps?"

Clint frowned. "Just one."

"Okay," Tony said, clearly prepared to launch into technobabble. "They're gesture activated—"

"Tony," Clint cut in with the air of one talking to a small stubborn child, "I speak sign language and talk with my hands even when I'm not signing."

"Oh..." Tony frowned. "Right. I might not have thought that through as well as I should have." He pretended to not hear Bruce snicker around a mouthful of eggplant.

Clint nodded. "Make me a smartwatch control thing?"

"I can do that." Tony ran a hand over his workbench, calling up a new wireframe file. "Anyway, I took into account what you do for a living and pimped your hearing aids accordingly, they can store info—messages, reminders, browser cookies—they can remember stuff for you. You've basically got smartphones in your ears. I could probably make games for them if I really wanted to but they wouldn't have visuals and so would be better suited to blind peeps."

With an amused snort, Clint said, "Maybe Stark Industries can start producing a line of gadgets for
"I'm honestly surprised you haven't done that yet."

"Me too." Tony took a bite of lasagna then chewed thoughtfully on one prong of his fork.

Clint noticed that Fitz had abandoned the last few bites of his lasagna and realized he hadn't actually had dinner yet himself. Reaching over to pick the abandoned fork up and eat the remains of the pasta, Clint eyed a set of blueprints and a model that Fitz had in front of him.

"What is that?" Clint tilted his head. "It looks like—"

"—a miniaturized crossbow," Fitz finished for him.

"Cool!"

"I was listening to Tony talk to himself so much about making your hearing aids accommodate your job that I thought I might take a stab at adapting some weapons. You know, I sometimes do weapons design for Coulson's team. Non lethal knock out guns—we call them icers—all me. Well, me and Jemma."

"Impressive," Clint said. "No, I didn't know that. So, you've become another science bro."

Fitz's face flamed red. "Not really."

"Sure you have. You're the little bro." Tony gestured toward the assortment of designs in front of Fitz. "For spy type missions, I suggested that the darts dissolve or something. I've been working on some bioplastic ones, but they have to be filled with an activator or they don't degrade fast enough. So they're kind of fussy. Also, if the tube of activator in the shaft doesn't break on impact, that can be a problem."

"I suggested that frozen darts could be made," Bruce said modestly. "They're brittle and you have to have a refrigerated case for them, but the case can make more of them. You just need to refill it with water."

Fitz picked up a slender, round cornered metallic box that looked like an old-fashioned high end cigarette case. "Here's the prototype of the refrigerated case."

"So," Clint mused, "as long as I have access to water, I'd have an endless supply of ice bolts."

"Not endless, exactly," Bruce said. "And it does take twenty minutes to turbofreeze a new set."

Clint took the metallic case from Fitz. "Could I refill chambers as I used individual darts?"

Fitz nodded. "It takes about an hour to freeze another dart doing it that way. But you can keep ejecting the remaining darts while waiting for the refilled chambers to completely set. When it's set to turbofreeze, you can't eject any darts until it's finished."

Clint fiddled with a knob. "That is awesome."
Jemma balanced the pan of meat lovers lasagna, napkins, serving spoon, paper plates, and plastic forks on her hip as she cautiously opened the door to the gym. No one doubted that Steve and Bucky would finish the whole pan, and probably everyone else's leftovers. Feeding a pair of supersoldiers was like having teenagers, but worse.

The two no doubt hungry men were sitting on the floor near the remains of Bucky's punching bag, going through the flip book. Steve pointed to a page. "See, this is you when we were in the military."

Bucky nodded thoughtfully, thumb ghosting over the page.

Jemma set the lasagna and other items down as quietly as she could before slipping her phone out of her pocket. She snapped a photograph of the two men engrossed in studying the photos in the flip book.

Bucky looked up. His eyes went up and to the side as if he was searching for something in his memory. "You're Dr. Simmons," he said.

"Yes." She smiled. "You can call me Jemma."

"Can I see the picture you just took?"

She hesitated but, seeing that he was having a good moment of lucidity—if not chronological acuity—she knelt beside him. She showed him and Steve the photos she'd been taking of Bucky almost daily. Bucky in the kitchen, eating sandwiches with Steve. Bucky and Steve in the gym. Bucky and Steve playing Parqueesi with a pajama-clad Clint. Rare was the photo of Bucky that didn't also show Steve. There were a few. Like the one where the screen was half filled by a paper airplane that was thrown at Jemma, but the bottom half showed a scowling Bucky.

"I don't like that one," Bucky said, pushing his hair out of his face and reaching to pull the lasagna closer. "And I prefer the ones that are taken mostly from my right side."

"Oh?" It amused Jemma to think the sergeant might be showing a bit of vanity. "Why is that?"

"I like the pictures better when they don't show my left arm."

"Oh," she said more soberly. "I can understand that."

"Can those pictures be printed and put in the flip book? The book doesn't have many pictures."

Jemma considered him. "Maybe. Let's talk to Dr. Mockta when she comes to see you day after tomorrow."

"And I want more pictures of Steve in the book."

Steve raised his eyebrows. "The book is about you. You don't need more pictures of me in it."

"Yes, I do."

"Why?" Steve leaned back on one hand.

Bucky worked his jaw. He looked down then put his right hand flat on the floor before curling his fingers up. "Because you're my friend." The words were barely more than whisper. He scooped a bunch of lasagna onto a plate and started eating.
Clint came back into the kitchen with the dirty plates from downstairs. Only Phil was still in the kitchen. Ignoring him, Clint made himself a plate and hopped up onto the counter to eat.

"Can we talk?"

"Can we not?" Clint took a bite of his lasagna prima vera.

"Please, we need to talk."

"We have talked, Phil. You say you're sorry, I say I'm still upset, you say you know, then we yell at each other or fuck or both and two, three days later we do it all over again. I'm sick of it. Nothing changes and nothing gets fixed."

"I'm sorry."

Clint set his plate aside and crossed his arms. "And I'm still upset."

Phil tried to think of something, anything to say other than that he knew, couldn't, and sighed. He scrubbed a hand over his face and through his hair, which was thinner than Clint remembered it being three years ago. The archer picked his plate up again and finished eating. He was about to leave when Phil finally said, "I do want to fix this, I just don't know how."

Clint lingered in the doorway, tempted to pretend he hadn't heard. He traced the line of a faint scar on his inner elbow. "I'm not sure you can."

"I'm fairly sure I can't, but maybe we—"

"There stopped being a 'we' when I buried you. I'm going to bed." Clint slipped quietly out of the room.

Natasha woke sometime after midnight, rolled out of bed in just her panties, and pulled a housecoat on. She tied the belt but didn't bother with the fussy little ties that seemed to be on the inside of every woman's housecoat. If the damn thing fell open, she wasn't overly concerned. Clint, Coulson, Maria, and Steve had all seen her in varying degrees of nudity and if any of the others saw, she didn't care—she wasn't entire sure Tony would even notice, he had as much experience with topless blonds as most people had with cats.

She wandered to the kitchen and found the lights still on, Coulson slumped on the island, still dressed. It was nowhere near the strangest state she'd ever seen him sleep in. She opened the fridge, glared at the contents, then removed a bowl of eggplant lasagna and stuffed it unceremoniously in the microwave. When she turned back around, Coulson had propped his chin up on his forearms. "What time is it?" he asked groggily.

"Twelve-twenty-something."

He yawned.
"Have you been in here since I went to bed?"

"Maybe."

Natasha crossed her arms. "Phil."

"Okay, yes. I have been here since you went to bed."

The microwave beeped and Natasha retrieved her lasagna. "Mhm."

"I've missed you," Phil said. "For so many reasons."

She arched an eyebrow at him, grabbed a fork, and continued eating.

"There are things that I don't—" He clenched one hand into a fist. "Some things are murky."

"You don't quite seem yourself," she said carefully.

He met her eyes. "Apparently brain death affects things. Including memory."

"Hmm," she said, noncommittal.

"I hope—" She saw it in his face when he switched from Phil to Agent Coulson before he continued speaking. "Recently, I hunted for a report," he said. "I can't find it. Think maybe I have a detail wrong, maybe the name."

"If it was in the S.H.I.E.L.D. database"—Natasha shrugged—"it should be on the internet."

"I want you to assess that. It's my impression that a lot of stuff you dumped is somehow not out there."

"Must just be hard to find. But sure, I'll poke around online." She poured herself some juice. "What report?"

"Hmm?"

"The one you were looking for."

"Oh. The incident with Yegor Kuznetsov."

Both of Natasha's eyebrows quirked upward. "There is definitely a report." She got her face under control. "I wrote most of it because Clint was, well, a mess, and you were unusually reticent. Took me months to figure out why."

Phil's face shuttered.

"I'll look for it specifically," Natasha said. "Send it to you when I find it."

"Mm—thank you." He drummed his fingers on the island counter top. "I tried to talk to him."

"And?" was all she said though she wondered if that had anything to do with his sudden interest in Yegor.

"He doesn't want to talk."

"For Christ's sake, Coulson." She rolled her eyes. "Isn't Barnes' shrink a couples' therapist? You're a couple. Go get theraped."
"I don't—"

"I doubt it could make anything worse." She wolfed down some pasta. "How's S.H.I.E.L.D, mister Director man?"

Coulson sighed. "Still regrouping. I'm worried Hydra is regrouping faster than we are. You and Steve dealt them a heavy blow but they tore us apart."

"We are not going to let them beat us." She set her bowl down and went back to the fridge to rummage for something else to drink. "After what happened in March, just once I'd really like to buy into the idea that the good guys win."

"Except that calls into question who the good guys are."

Natasha slammed the fridge closed, jug of milk in hand. "S.H.I.E.L.D. is the good guys. Trust me." She poured herself a glass. "It's not infallible, but it's good."

Coulson yawned. "I hope you're right."

"I am right." She put the milk away. "And boss?" She let herself soften as she watched his face. "I missed you too."

He nodded and smiled, then looked down at his fidgeting fingers.

"Now go to bed, Phil. You can't bureaucratically save the world on no sleep."

Chapter 10

The next morning found most of the tower's occupants clustered around a spontaneous and very serious game of multilingual Scrabble—Stark vs. Barton vs. Rogers vs. Barnes. Natasha, Bruce, Jemma, and Fitz were watching. Tony played three letters and settled smugly back in his chair. Bruce walked around the table to read the board. "That is not a word in English, Spanish, French, German, or Russian."

"Sure it is." Tony crossed his arms.

Natasha came around to stand next to Bruce. "No it's not."

"I think it might be a word in Welsh," Fitz offered. "I think."

"Welsh is not one of the languages we're allowing." Steve gave Tony a dark look. Clint and Bucky gave Tony the exact same dark look.

"It's worth thirty two points!"

Natasha took Tony's tiles up and put them back on his stand. "Try again."

Tony huffed, frowned at his letters and the board for a while, then played an actual word for twelve points. Bucky drummed his fingers on the table and pushed his hair out of his face. "Did we agree on what standards of anglicization we're using for Russian?"

Steve quirked an eyebrow interestedly. "Why?"

"Because I don't have any H's."

Natasha leaned around to look at Barnes's letters. "Given that I've seen my last name spelled three different ways on official S.H.I.E.L.D. documents, I don't think it matters much."

Steve watched Bucky's hair fall in his eyes as the sergeant played his word. "You could use a hair cut."

Barnes irritably shoved his hair out of his face again. "I don't mind it being long but it won't stay out of my eyes."

"I could braid it back for you," Clint offered with a shrug, getting up. "C'mere, away from the table so we can't creep on each other's letters."

The sergeant got up and let Clint plait his hair back into a french braid. Watching, Tony fingered his beard. "Barton, where did you learn how to braid?"

"Undercover assignment."

"What?" Tony smirked. "Were you a stylist or something?"

"Yup. Mob wives say the damnedest things when their hair's in curlers."

"Thank you," Bucky said.

Natasha twined a finger through one blond curl. "So I did not know about that one, and you're helping me redye my hair, birdie."
"You can do it yourself!" Clint protested. "You do it yourself all the time."

"I want help." Natasha quirked one eyebrow in that way that threatened death should one argue.

Clint rolled his eyes and tied the braid off with a convenient random rubber band. "I will help you dye your hair. Steve, play your turn."

Steve laid his tiles out. "Lackey, double word, triple letter on the E. Thirty four points."

When the game ended, Tony's strategy of stringing together random letters had paid off—he came in second, behind Barnes, who seemed very pleased. He was actually smiling. As the other players and spectators dispersed, Natasha shared a look with Steve then tapped Barnes on the shoulder. "Cap thinks we ought to talk."

He hesitated.

She tossed her hair. "I promise not to interrogate you."

Bucky glanced at Steve then nodded. "Okay."

Lunch time came and went with Natasha and Barnes still locked in one of the guestrooms. Steve had elected to take his anxiety over the conversation out on standard punching bags in the gym. Clint ducked into the room and shut the door behind him. He eyed the pile of punching bag remains growing on top of the one Natasha had ruined the day before. "How many of those have you destroyed?"

"Dunno." Steve's breathing was heavy but even. He pummeled the bag a few more blows until it ripped from its chains and fell to the floor. He stood over it a moment, kicked it once, then dragged it to the pile.

"You seem stressed."

"You seem like you're hiding."

"I am hiding," Clint picked up some handballs and started juggling absentely. "From the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D."

Steve went over to the storage closet that Tony kept conveniently stocked with punching bags. "From the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D, from Agent Coulson, or from Phil?"

"Yes." Clint switched to juggling upside down, bouncing the balls off the floor. "You seem stressed."

"I'm worried about Bucky." Steve hung the new bag, unwrapped his hands, and started re-wrapping them.

"I'm generally worried about anyone alone in a room with Nat. Does wrapping your hands actually do anything? I mean you're basically Superman."

Steve snorted. "I'll still hurt my hands if I don't wrap them, they just heal before I even leave the gym. Besides, doesn't feel right to box without wrapping. What d'you think they're talking about?"

"Hell if I know. Nat's got plenty of deep dark secrets that aren't actually secrets at all." Clint switched back to upright juggling. "I feel you on the 'doesn't feel right' thing though. Sort of a ritual."
"Exactly." Steve placed his re-wrapped knuckles against the vinyl of the bag, took a breath, and resumed kinesthetically venting his feelings.

"Steve, don't mean to be insensitive but," Clint bounced one of his juggling balls off the floor by the Captain's foot, "honestly, Nat's not gonna kill your buddy—she could, but she won't—if she were going to she probably would have yesterday. Short of physically harming him, I don't thing there's much anybody can do that would put him in any worse shape than he's already in. I mean he's majorly screwed up, Cap." Steve stopped and looked at him. Clint shrugged. "Different brand of Russian induced mindfuckery might be good for him. Isn't that why you thought they ought to talk? It was your idea."

"I know." Steve sluged the bag particularly viciously, there was a cracking sound, he cursed and shook out his hand.

Clint stopped juggling. "Did you just break your hand?"

"Yes." Steve dropped to the floor, yanking the wrappings off his right hand again.

"Okay, I do not want to watch you set that." Clint dropped what he'd been juggling and walked toward the corner of the room, removing his hearing aids as he did. "Or hear it." He didn't look back around until a ball bounced off the back of his head.

"—bother you."

Clint finished replacing his aids. "Didn't catch that, I wasn't hearing."

"I'm surprised things like this bother you." Steve indicated his right hand, which he was cradling against his torso.

"I've got an issue with bones." Clint cringed. "Don't mind blood, but bones..." He shuddered. "How long is that going to take to heal?"

"Half an hour?" Steve shrugged then sighed heavily.

"So that's half an hour you can't spend venting your frustrations by traumatizing inanimate objects." Clint sat next to the Captain. "I respect the traumatizing of inanimate objects, I shoot things."

"I know."

"Everyone knows." Clint rolled his neck. "Guess you can't really draw, either, right now."

Steve shook his head. "That's not really a stress thing, anyway."

"So what is a stress thing? Other than boxing?"

"What are you trying at, Barton?"

"I'm trying to help. It's impressive you haven't snapped, I'd rather not have two crazy supersoldiers around. Now, what is a stress thing?"

Steve sighed. "I eat."

Clint laughed. "Seriously? Captain America stress eats? That is so...humanizing."

"Gee, thanks."
"Sorry, sorry. It's just, you were scrawny and now you're sort of made of muscle and I don't think anyone would ever peg you as a stress eater. It's funny 'cause it's unexpected. So, hungry?"

"Always."

"Wanna eat?"

"Kinda feel sick."

"That a no?"

"Yeah, that's a no."

"Okay." Clint chewed his lip for a minute. "Where'd you learn to box? Army?"

Steve shook his head. "I took lessons when I was little."

"In this case does little mean 'as a kid' or does little mean 'before big'?"

"Well, both, technically—it was when I was a kid which was before I got big." Steve poked at his swollen right hand and grimaced. "My dad signed me up for them. I was useless at it."

"I doubt you were that bad."

"Oh, I was that bad. Barely fifty pounds and asthmatic."

"How old were you?"

"Nearly ten. My father died the next year. Market crashed the year after that."

"Damn." Clint frowned. "That didn't quite go how I thought it would."

"Yeah." Steve huffed. "Where'd you learn to juggle?"

"I was in the circus."

Steve nodded. "I am unsurprised."

Once Steve's hand had healed—a process Clint was both fascinated and disturbed to watch—the two men sparred together for a while before Maria came to drag Clint to something S.H.I.E.L.D. related and Steve retreated to his own room to draw—to think. It was late afternoon, bleeding into evening, when his door was thrown open.

There in the doorway—Natasha behind him, one of her hands on the door, the other hovering guardingly near his shoulder—pale and trembling, eyes wide but focused on nothing, wringing his hands together so hard his knuckles were starting to bruise, was Bucky. His slate eyes flicked to the Captain then to the floor. He took a ragged breath. "Steve?"
Chapter 11

Steve jumped up. The sketchbook slid from his hand to the seat of his chair. His favorite charcoal pencil clattered to the floor as he gaped at Bucky and then Natasha.

"You wanted me to help him," she said. He gestured toward Bucky, a silent but clear message of stunned disbelief. She gave Bucky a gentle shove, making him take an unsteady step into the room. "Ultimately, this will help him." She shut the door, leaving the two men alone.

The click of the door shutting made Bucky jump.

"Hey, hey, it's just the door." Mentally shaking himself, Steve reached out to put a hand on his friend's elbow. "Buck?"

Bucky's eyes snapped to Steve's. He took a shaky breath, shook his head, took another breath as though about to say something, but stayed silent. He leaned heavily against Steve, who scrambled to wrap an arm around him and hold him up. Bucky clutched at Steve and seemed to be struggling to breathe. Feeling dampness against his shoulder, Steve realized Bucky was crying.

Steve dragged Bucky further into the room, then sank to the floor with him and leaned against the side of the neatly made bed. Bucky took a strangled breath and let one sob escape from deep within his chest before shoving away from Steve and dropping face first onto the rug with his forehead in the crook of his right arm.

Steve watched helplessly as Bucky cried—his entire frame shaking with how hard he was sobbing—cried, then started to scream. Steve had heard men scream from the pain of having a limb torn from their bodies by an artillery shell, or their bellies ripped open with their innards falling out. Their screams, and all the blood and death that came with them, hadn't made Steve feel as sick as Bucky's did now. He heard all their screams and others within Bucky's. He reached up, pulled a pillow off his bed, and handed it to Bucky, who took it and curled around it, burying his face. It didn't muffle much.

Minutes slipped by while Bucky fell to pieces on the floor. It felt like hours but Steve knew it couldn't have been more than half of one. Eventually, Bucky rolled over and sat up, still curled around the pillow, still shaking, and still crying, but not as hard. He shifted to lean against the bed next to Steve, then slumped over to lean on Steve instead. Steve put an arm around his shoulders. He snuffled and wiped his nose on the pillow. He took a breath, it caught in his throat and he took another before saying in a hoarse whisper, "So many people."

"I know." Steve gave Bucky a squeeze he hoped was comforting. "Not your fault."

"Yes it is," Bucky snapped, then wiped his face on the pillow again and threw it across the room. "I gave up, I—" He pulled his knees up and rested his forehead on them. "Can't believe you're alive."

Steve frowned, thrown off, and petted Bucky's hair, which had come out of its braid sometime during his talk with Natasha. "What d'you mean?"

"When they, when Hydra—" He leaned back, looked to the ceiling, and scrubbed the back of his right hand across his eyes. "I didn't wanna work for them. They made me. They'd brainwash me but that'd fade after a while and I—I swore I'd get out, go back, find you. They'd put me under and—" He sucked in a sharp breath then punched the bedframe with the harsh ringing of metal striking
metal. "I wake up and the war's over. I wake up and there's a new one, but there's not one, just could be one, but they're all talking like there is one. Wake up and there actually is a new one. Wake up and realize, it's been a quarter of a century and you've gotta be dead. Had nothing left to go back to so I gave up."

"Oh, Buck..." Steve pulled him into a hug. "When I woke up, seventy years had passed, all at once." He took a breath, rubbing his knuckles against the chronically overworked muscles of Bucky's back. "My whole world was gone. I'd already lost my parents and you and I was standing in the middle of Times Square, and it's so different, and I didn't know how long it had been but I knew everybody I'd known was gone. Found out later Peggy's still alive but I know what you mean about having nothing left."

"Peggy's alive?" Bucky looked up. He sounded almost hopeful.

"Yeah." Steve smiled sadly. "She's really old though."

"You ever make a pass at that?"

"Made a date, but I missed it. Got frozen."

Bucky shivered involuntarily and moved to lean against the bed again. "Hate cold."

"Me too." Steve pulled the cover off the bed to put around Bucky's shoulders. It wasn't cold in the room but the thought of ice overruled reality. "When I realized you were you, back in D.C, I couldn't believe it. You were dead, I saw you die. I let you fall."

"Not your fault."

"Feels like my fault."

"Hydra's fault." Bucky worked his jaw. "Everything is Hydra's fault." He turned away. Things were quiet for a minute. "That's when this happened." He held up his left hand and flexed the fingers. "When I fell. I dunno how, I don't remember. Just remember being dragged through the snow at the bottom of that damn ravine and I could see, past my elbow, just gone. Didn't even feel it, it didn't hurt, it was just gone." He closed his fist and punched the bedframe in the dent he'd already made. "Still can't feel it," he ground out through his teeth as he landed another punch. "Know when I'm touching something" —punch— "but can't feel it." Punch. The frame started to buckle and the mattress went off level. "This should fucking hurt!" One more punch and the end of the bed collapsed. "It doesn't hurt!" He turned back to Steve. "And I can't snap with this hand anymore which is stupid but it really fucking bothers me."

"I don't think that's stupid." The statement felt horribly inadequate but it was the best Steve could think of.

The room was still, silent but for Bucky's harsh breathing. He closed his eyes and let himself flop flat on the floor. The doorknob turned, the door opened a crack, then the rest of the way. Natasha pushed a rolling cart laden with food into the room, "Missed two meals," and left again before Steve could even get out a thank you.

At the sight of the food cart, Bucky perked up like a puppy at the sound of kibble hitting a food dish. Steve grinned to himself.

"That smells good," Bucky said, then paused. "And I'm parched."

Three pitchers were on the cart, neatly labeled in Jemma's handwriting. Steve turned the nearest
pitcher so he could read what it said. "This one is acai blueberry black currant tea mixed with high antioxidant superfruits juice. I have no idea what that means. This," he turned another pitcher, "is cherry blueberry juice mixed with white tea, and this is strawberry lemonade."

He handed Bucky a large plastic mug with a handle on it. About a third of the contents of one pitcher fit into the mug. Bucky poured himself some of the cherry blueberry concoction while Steve went for the strawberry lemonade.

The cart held a welcome assortment of food including glazed carrots, broccoli casserole, cream of mushroom chicken with vegetables over something a little like rice that was not rice, several pizzas, and strawberry shortcake lavishly covered in fresh berries and whipped cream. Natasha had provided oval paper platters rather than ordinary paper plates, and each one held about twice as much as even a large paper plate would. Bucky loaded his up with a little—rather, a lot—of everything except the strawberry shortcake, finished downing his first mug of drink, promptly refilled it, and then settled himself on the floor with his back against the damaged bed. Steve was a little more restrained in filling a platter for himself and settled onto the floor next to Bucky.

"I never thought about some of the things we have in common," Steve said, poking at a carrot with a fork before eating it. "For one thing, we've both had time stolen. It seems we have a lot to talk about."

"We do," Bucky said between bites. He swallowed. "When I was resisting Hydra much as I could, I used to play whole conversations with you in my head, things I was going to say when I saw you again."

Steve nodded. "When I thought you were dead, all kinds of things I should have said to you played in my head—things I was sure it was too late to ever say."

Bucky went silent for several minutes, staring at his food. Thinking he'd lost Bucky to time or delusion, Steve tensed, readying himself to deal with some unwelcome change—an-attack.

"I hope sometime I can tell you what I can't tell you now." Bucky's words were soft.

Steve relaxed. "You can tell me."

Bucky's face was haunted when he looked at Steve. "I can't." He closed his eyes, which emphasized the shadows under them.

"Why not?"

"I don't remember some things." Bucky chewed thoughtfully for a moment. "And, I want you to keep helping me—I need your help—and I'm afraid of what I'll say."

"Aw, Buck. You can tell me you blame me for your suffering. Hell, I blame myself."

Bucky grinned crookedly. "It's not that." His expression sobered. "Although for a long time, I did wait for you, hoping that you'd realize I was captured, and that you'd come get me even as I failed time after time to escape. Hoping—" He sighed.

Steve felt like he'd been stabbed in the heart. "I'm so sorry, Buck. I would've come if I'd known. You know I would. I'd have moved Heaven and Earth to find you."

Bucky set his empty paper platter on the floor and leaned his head back on the stable but slanted mattress. "That's what you just did, isn't it? A couple of months ago? I—" Bucky put his hands over
his face. "I can't."

Steve put a hand on Bucky's shoulder. "It's all right."

Bucky let his hands slide down and folded his arms. "I can't anymore. Not today. I can't deal with another damn thing."

Steve patted him. "I know what you mean. After I was first thawed out and trying to readjust, I sometimes just felt all emptied out. I had nothing more to give some days."

Bucky gave him a wan smile. Steve wished he could figure out something, anything, to make Bucky all better, to go back and save him from the tortures, and was starting to choke up when Bucky leaned so he could look around Steve. He eyed the remains of the feast on the rolling cart. "Speaking of feeling empty," he said, "I need seconds. And half of that strawberry shortcake."

Steve chuckled. They both got up and got seconds, filling almost half their platters with cake.

Bucky held up his fork before digging into his next round of food. "So tell me again why the Yankees didn't make it to the World Series in 1946."

"According to Phil, it didn't help that Joe McCarthy resigned."

"Yeah, I can't believe that." Bucky yawned. "Which one is Phil?"

"Thinning hair, crow's feet, wears a suit."

"Frowns a lot?"

"Yeah, he's been frowning a lot."

The two anachronisms continued eating and bantering lightly about baseball, with Bucky saying less and less and yawning more. Halfway through his second pizza, Bucky was falling asleep on his food. Steve nudged him. He shook himself awake and took another bite of pizza followed by a bite of cake. Steve patted his shoulder. "Sleep after you've eaten, okay?"

"Mkay."

Sometime later, with Bucky sound asleep on the floor and Steve trying to figure out what to do with him, there was a soft knock at the door followed by the appearance of Jemma's head peeking in. "Hi. I thought maybe I ought to check on you. Agent Romanoff said she'd brought supper..."

"Yeah, she did." Steve gestured at the man curled up on the rug. "He's asleep."

Jemma stepped into the room. "I can see that."

"Really asleep." Steve ran a hand through his hair. "I dropped a pitcher and—" He shrugged and shook his head.

Jemma frowned and nodded. "Agent Romanoff mentioned that he was, well, processing. Things like that can be exhausting." She crossed her arms and shook her head. "It's his treatment night."

"I know." He looked at her. "I guess he's skipping a night?"

"I guess." She shrugged. "Or, if you can pick him up without waking him..."

"Are you suggesting we put him in the chamber without sedating him?"
"Well, yes."

"Last time we tried that it didn't go well."

Jemma gestured at Bucky where he lay on the floor. "He's already asleep."

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Natasha leaned against the doorjamb and watched Steve spread blankets out on the floor next to the chamber in which Barnes was snoozing away. "You're adorable."

Steve shot her a dark look. "If he wakes up in there, I don't want him to be alone."

"Like I said, adorable. Also possibly jinxing him."

"I don't believe in jinxes."

"Neither do I."

"Good night, Natasha," he said pointedly. She rolled her eyes, stepped away, and shut the door, cutting off the light spilling in from the hall and leaving the room in darkness. Steve sighed and lay on the blankets. Slowly, he fell asleep.

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Some fourteen hours later, Bucky bolted awake out of a dream. He put his hands down to swing his legs out of bed, but when he moved, his feet hit a surface. Was there a rail? He frowned. He didn't think he was in his childhood bunkbed. Why would he be? He was a grown man. A soldier. He reached out to feel the rail and his hand thumped into glass.

His heart leaped into his throat. For a second, he couldn't breathe. Where was he? Where? He got to his knees. The glass chamber was too small for him to stand in. Why wasn't it cold? He pounded his right hand against the glass wall. The room outside the chamber was dark. No crowd of masked, armed guards. He took a breath and slammed a fist into the glass.
All his senses on alert, Steve sat upright in the dark. Too dark. This wasn't his room. He didn't see the sliver of light at the bottom of the blackout curtains, or the blue-green readout of his clock, but he did see a faint glow from some kind of control panel.

He was sure he'd been awakened by some noise.

Wham!

Steve jumped up. That was the noise. It had to be—

Wham!

"Bucky!" he called as he lunged toward the control panel.

There was a moment of silence then Bucky's voice coming over the loudspeaker connected to the microphone in the chamber, hopeful and disbelieving. "Steve?"

"I'll have you outta there in a minute." Steve assessed the dials and monitors. More than twelve hours had passed, so the decompression cycle was already completed. Wow, had they both slept fourteen hours? Bucky being out so long didn't surprise him, but he must've been more exhausted than he realized.

Bucky whispered urgently, "Be careful. The guards are everywhere."

Steve paused. "Guards?" He found the dimmer switch for the light inside the chamber and turned the light on, dialing it so it was faint.

"Turn that off!" Thump, tink. Bucky put both hands against the thick glass. "You don't want Hydra to see you. I have to get out before they come back." He began pounding on the transparent wall that held him in.

"Ssh, Bucky, stop!" Steve hissed. "You don't want Hydra to hear you."

Bucky flinched away from the glass and cowered against one of the two metal surfaces in the chamber. Steve's heart caught in his throat. He swallowed. "Just give me a second," he said thickly. "I'll get you out of there." Bucky stared up at him and then nodded.

Steve found the right set of switches and pressed them. With a hiss, the metal door at the far end of the chamber opened. He went to meet Bucky as the sergeant scrambled down the cot inside the large but confining glass tube. Bucky launched himself off the end of the bed and through the open door, right into Steve who—in his surprise—barely managed to catch his friend.

Bucky threw his good arm around Steve's neck and buried his face in the captain's shoulder. "Thank God," he breathed, long hair brushing against Steve's neck. Leaning away, he grabbed Steve's arm and assessed the room. "No windows," he muttered. "Only one door."

He dragged Steve to the door, opened it a crack, and peeked out. "Damnit! Everything's brightly lit and I don't recognize this part of the compound. They must have moved me the last time I tried to escape."

Steve stepped around to the door. "I remember how I got in."
Bucky nodded and crouched low so Steve did too. Cautiously he opened the door and stepped out with Bucky following him. He crept down the hall with his heart pounding. It felt just like one of their many missions together with the Howling Commandos. He could only imagine how this must feel to Bucky in whose mind it was real.

Just as they went around a corner and turned into the next hallway, a door opened and Phil Coulson in all his suited glory stepped out carrying a rolled up newspaper. A shard of ice whizzed through the door and tore into the paper, going almost all the way through it. Phil looked at the paper sourly and turned to chuck it back into the room. "I have the authority to revoke your right to arms, you know."

He slammed the door shut behind him. Bucky had frozen in his tracks. Steve put a hand on the sergeant's shoulder. "He's with us, Buck. Right, Colonel Coulson?" Steve said with a meaningful look to the Director.

Coulson paused, taking in the situation, blinked once, then nodded. "Right, Captain."

"The Colonel can take us somewhere secure."

Barnes frowned skeptically and addressed Coulson. "Unless you've got a way out of the compound, sir, I don't think that's possible."

"Sure it is." Coulson slid a handgun out from under his coat and nodded toward the door he'd just slammed. "My men have secured the upper floors. Got my best soldier through there. He's a bit of a clown but he's good at what he does. Never seen him miss a shot."

Bucky nodded, "Alright." He and Steve followed as Coulson stealthily lead the way toward the stairs. "How've you got the upper floors secured?"

"Came in through the roof," Coulson responded naturally.

"Fewer guards than at ground level," Bucky said, mostly to himself. "Smart."

Eventually, they made it to the thankfully empty kitchen.

"You'll be safe here," Coulson said. "I'll get reinforcements." Still leading with his gun, he left.

Bucky leaned against the counter. "Was it your mission," he said tentatively, "to rescue me?"

"Yes it was. I volunteered for it."

"Thank you," Bucky said quietly. He ran his thumbnail along a groove in the metal of his left hand. "I knew you'd come." He nodded. "Knew I had to stay alive so I'd be around when you got here."

Unsure what to say, Steve just nodded. Coulson returned a moment later with Jemma in tow, the flip book under her arm. Bucky narrowed his eyes at her. She held up a hand. "Medic."

He snorted and shook his head. "British nurses. It's always the British nurses."

Steve smothered a chuckle and waved off curious looks from both Jemma and Phil. Jemma half shrugged and set the flip book on the counter. "Sergeant, would you mind if I just made sure nothing's amiss?"

"Yeah, sure."

Jemma nodded, shot Steve a look, and put her fingers to Barnes' wrist to take his pulse. She had
just given a "nothing's wrong" shrug when Clint walked in, fiddling with his mini crossbow. He glanced up from the mini bow, rolled his eyes, and walked around the island to start rooting through the fridge. Buck eyed Clint and the mini bow. "That your best guy, Colonel Coulson?"

Before Bucky got an answer, Clint turned and slammed the fridge shut. "Hang on, Colonel Coulson?"

"Battlefield promotion." Phil gave Clint a look.

Clint returned a questioning look to Phil, who nodded toward Barnes. Clint glanced at Bucky, then back to Phil, then to Bucky again, before tossing his hands up. "You've got to be kidding me."

He signed something short and returned to the fridge. Phil shook his head. Clint grabbed a plate of cold pizza and started eating. Steve and Bucky's stomachs growled almost simultaneously. Bucky gave Steve a concerned look. "I dunno that we should be eating, or even standing here. We need to get out of the compound—"

"We've taken the compound," Coulson said easily, fingers twitching subtly. "Right, Barton?"

"Absolutely." Clint rolled his eyes and took another bite of pizza. "Wouldn't have come upstairs unless the compound was ours." He pulled open a drawer full of fancy canned sodas and picked one out. "Go ahead and eat. And actually, haven't you been in a tube, don't you need to piss?"

"Uh." Bucky held up one metal finger. Steve clapped him on the shoulder and steered him out of the kitchen to the bathroom down the hall.

Clint gestured after the soldiers with his soda can. "Should we really be playing along with this?"

Jemma sighed. "I don't know, but it's better than Barnes freaking out."

"I can say from experience that breaking someone from a delusion can be problematic." Coulson went to poke at the coffee machine. "I ran into them in the hallway, Steve gave me a 'please just go with this' look. I didn't have much choice."

Clint snorted. "What? Just couldn't say no to Cap's baby blues? Also, is my Keurig not good enough for you anymore or something?"

"You're out of everything but blueberry muffin flavored Dunkin' Doughnuts K-cups. And you know very well it's not like that."

"Blueberry muffins are good!" Clint pulled himself up onto the counter. "And no, no, I get it, massive hero crush plus he turns out to be a fucking golden haired, sapphire eyed Adonis—"

"Clint!"

"Whoa, whoa!" Jemma smacked both her hands flat on the counter. "So, this is making me extremely uncomfortable, I feel like I'm in a room with an armed atomic bomb." She took a breath. "The Captain is very attractive but, obviously, none of us are getting with him for various reasons, so who cares about his 'sapphire' eyes? Also, are you kidding me with those descriptions, Barton? Have you been reading sappy poetry? It really sounds like you've been reading sappy poetry, either that or sappy fanfiction. And it sounds like you're envious of Steve, which I personally think is inappropriate for several reasons. Don't you have blue eyes anyway?"

Clint frowned. After a moment he said. "No."
Jemma frowned too. "I thought you did."

Both men shook their heads. Clint shrugged. "They're sort of green, -ish."

"Depends on the lighting." Coulson shrugged.

Jemma curled her fingers into her hair. "You are both so sappy. But sort of hateful. It's all very disconcerting to be around, you do know that, don't you?"

An awkward silence stretched through the room. Steve and Bucky returned. Clint slid sodas to them without a word.

Bucky examined the can. "Well, it is sealed."

"I'm sure it's perfectly safe." Steve popped his can open and took a swig.

Bucky watched Steve, eyed his can suspiciously, then popped it open and cautiously took a sip. Phil poured himself a cup of coffee while Jemma rummaged in the fridge and pantry. She set a fruit and cheese tray and a box of bagels in front of Steve and Bucky. Steve retrieved two tubs of fancy cream cheese and paper platters, then he and Bucky dug in.

Phil took a sip of coffee. "I have a debriefing to get to." On his way out of the kitchen door, he almost ran smack into Erin Mockta.

Jemma strode across the kitchen. "Dr. Mockta, I'm glad you're here. A lot has happened."

"Yes," Steve said. "I—"

"He got me out of the cryo tube," Bucky said. "Helped me escape from Hydra while Colonel Coulson's team secured the compound."

Erin raised an eyebrow. Phil gestured with his coffee cup. "I'm sure Sergeant Barnes would benefit from a medical evaluation."

"I'm sure he would," Erin said. "Jemma why don't you escort James to his room. James, take your breakfast with you, and get some orange juice instead of that soda. Steve, why don't you quickly tell me about this escape."

Bucky saluted Dr. Mockta, accepted the bottle of orange juice that Clint handed him, picked up his paper platter, then followed Jemma from the room. Clint slipped out after them.

Erin gave Steve an expectant look. He took a breath. "Not sure where to start," he said. "Natasha got back, and she's really something else, which isn't always a good thing; they talked and Bucky wound up hard asleep so Jemma and I put him in the barometric chamber without him being sedated."

"I can tell I'm going to need coffee for this." Erin sighed and grabbed a mug. "Why don't you untangle that sentence for me."

Dr. Erin Mockta opened the door of Bucky's room and motioned to Steve who was waiting patiently down the hall. "He had a great session," she said as Steve walked in. She turned to Bucky
where he was lounging on his mattress on the floor. "You moved through your memories into the present pretty quickly, you've made huge progress since I last saw you, and you escaped from Hydra." She smiled. "Or, at least from the pressure chamber."

"It feels like I was rescued from Hydra." He looked up at Steve. "Guess I was, just not this morning."

Steve frowned. "I wish I'd helped you escape a long time ago."

"If you had," Bucky said, flexing the fingers of his left hand "I wouldn't be alive now."

Steve's eyebrows shot up. "I guess that's true."

"Sometimes there's a little sweet with the bitter," Erin said with half a shrug. "Like you winding up in the hyperbaric chamber last night without sedatives affecting your system. That seems to have greatly magnified how much it helped you heal, especially your brain."

Bucky shrugged. "Healing fast is one of the few good things about being a human lab rat." He hesitated. "There was also Natasha, and Steve...and it really feels like I was rescued from Hydra."

"It's common for us to recreate situations and try to fix them." Erin held out her hands like a scale. "This can be negative, like when a child of alcoholics marries an alcoholic." She lowered one hand. "Or it can be positive, like someone who had a sickly mother feeling compelled to become a doctor." She raised the other. "Role playing can be a powerful recovery technique. If it doesn't trigger anything negative, it's fine for you to deliberately engage in some role playing."

Bucky snorted. "Like playing cowboys when we were little."

"Something like that." Erin held a hand out to Bucky and pulled him to his feet after he took it. "Let's do some more desensitization work with the pressure chamber. It would be ideal if you could sleep in it without being sedated. You come too, Captain."

As the trio walked down the hall to the bedroom with the pressure chamber in it, Bucky trailed his fingers along the wall. "This isn't what I was seeing when we came down this hall this morning."

"I know," Erin and Steve said in unison.

They went into the room with the technological glass and metal chamber in it. Steve flipped the lights on. Bucky hung back while Erin walked over to the big glass tube and put a hand on it. "Come on, James," she said. "Get more used to it."

He sucked in a breath and took a step back. "I can't."

Steve pushed on Bucky's shoulder. "Come on. When we were kids, we'd have been trying to figure out ways to sneak into this thing." Bucky gave him a look and Steve amended, "All right, you would have been scheming to sneak in and you would have talked me into it."

Bucky grinned. "That's about right."

"So you were the adventurer," Erin said with a grin. "Get Steve into trouble much?"

"Only as much as I kept him from getting his ass kicked." Slowly, Bucky reached out with his right hand until his fingers made contact with the cool glass. He ran his hand along the length of the tube and then fingered the control panel.
"The cryo chamber," Erin said, "was used to harm you. This barometric chamber is used to help you. Intent matters. A cut from a violently wielded knife is very different from an incision made with a scalpel wielded by a skilled surgeon."

"Both hurt," Bucky said.

Erin chuckled. "Oh, thanks, for twisting up the meaning of my metaphor."

"You don't have to get in there." Bucky waved in exasperation. "Nobody else faces that."

"Oh come on, Buck. I'll get in there." Steve climbed up on the hospital style bed and crawled into the glass tube and settled at the other end. "Heck, we could play cards in here."

Bucky rolled his eyes.

"That might be a good idea," Erin said. "You could play electronic games together using two little hand held game systems."

"Maybe." Bucky allowed Erin to coax him up onto the hospital bed. He crawled partway into the glass tube. It was rather crowded with both big men inside.

"This kind of reminds me of the play forts we used to make at your house." Steve reached up to press his palm to the glass above him. "We'd push furniture together and drape blankets over it, but our favorite spot was being scrunched up under the coffee table."

"Yeah it was. And I was a lot more scrunched up than you, punk." Bucky reached behind Steve and grabbed his pillow. He shoved it into the blond man's shoulder and face. Steve deflected it and pushed it right into Bucky's face unbalancing him. Bucky half fell over and hung off the end of the bed. He allowed himself to tip off the bed and stood up laughing.

Steve scrambled out of the tube. "Nowadays, I'd beat you in a pillow fight, jerk."

"I'd like to see you try."

Erin grabbed the pillow. "Children!" she admonished but she was smiling. She tossed the pillow back onto the bed. "So, tomorrow night, you'll try settling down in the chamber without a sedative."

Bucky stared at the glass tube and shoved his hair out of his face. "I'll try."

"Good. We can help you sleep using supplements like melatonin and GABA, and you'll practice those self hypnosis calming techniques we've been working on."

Bucky nodded. "And I want Steve to stay in the room with me."

"Understood." Erin looked around the spartan room. "I'll ask Tony to move another bed in here and do something to make this room more cheerful."

"I also want a lever or button or something in there with me so I can escape the chamber."

Erin nodded thoughtfully. "When the chamber's pressurized, you can't be released immediately. For one thing, you'd get the bends. So no panic button, exactly, but I'd think some kind of control device could be worked out."

"Thank you."
"And," Steve said, "we were wondering about adding more, newer pictures to the flip book."

"Hm." Erin shrugged and addressed Bucky. "Do recent pictures of you bother you?"

He shook his head. "Not as long as they're from my right."

"Fair enough. What about pictures from March?"

"I haven't seen anything from March."

"Okay then." Erin put a hand on her hip. "More pictures sound good. Steve, maybe find one from March where the news cameras don't make him look like a rabid raccoon?"

Both men snickered despite themselves. Steve nodded. "I can do that."

"Good deal." Erin checked her watch. "I'll see you boys Wednesday."

The two soldiers bid her farewell and she let herself out into the hallway to leave. She was almost to the elevator when Coulson caught up to her. "Doctor, can I talk to you?"

She turned to look over her shoulder. "Sure."

"I mean, in a professional capacity."

She paused, her eyebrows raising and mouth falling slightly open. "Oh." She crossed her arms. "You and the cranky blond one, right? Uh, Clint. You and Clint."

Coulson nodded, eyes on the carpet. "Me and Clint."

"I have other patients after Sergeant Barnes, but I can come back this afternoon."

"Thank you."
Chapter 13

Natasha closed her eyes and cracked her knuckles. "This is so much better than doing it myself."

Clint rolled his eyes. "If you were a cat, you'd be purring right now, wouldn't you?"

She grinned and made a low rumbling noise in her chest.

"That was not a purr, that was a growl." Clint tugged a little harder than necessary as he worked the henna-based dye into her hair.

She cracked one eye open and arched the brow above it. "It's a purr if I say it is."

"Whatever." He pulled her hair up into a pile on top of her head, wrapped it in cling wrap—works way better than a shower cap—snapped his gloves off, tossed them in the trash, and flopped back on the tile floor of the spacious bathroom. Perched on the edge of the tub, Natasha poked him in the stomach with her foot. He grabbed her ankle and she kicked him.

Their roughhousing was interrupted by someone clearing their throat from the doorway. Both spies looked around to find Phil, arms crossed, one shoulder against the doorjamb. "We have a date, Clint."

The archer rolled over and sat up. "We do?" he asked dubiously.

"With Dr. Mockta."

"What the fuck, Phil?" Clint got to his feet. "You can't just decide we're going to a shrink without asking me."

"As Director, actually, I can. I could mandate you attend counseling. I don't want to do that, though, I don't want to order you to do anything when it comes to us. That said, my conviction to get you and me in a room with a shrink is stronger than my conviction to not pull rank."

Clint gaped at him. "You do know that by threatening to order me, you've given me no choice anyway. Might as well've just ordered me. Natasha can you believe this bull?"

"Yup." Natasha stretched. "I'm with Phil on this one—therapy, you two need it, and you avoid shrinks like the plague."

"Seriously? Whose side are you on?"

"Mine, balvan." She snorted. It was always more fun to insult people in Russian when they understood what they were being called. "As his employee, your coworker, and a friend, it is definitely in my best interests that you both get your shit worked out."

Clint groaned.

"Also," Phil fished a smartwatch out of his pocket and tossed it to Clint, who caught it easily, "Tony asked me to give that to you."

"Yeah, thanks," Clint muttered as he strapped the watch on.

"No problem. Dr. Mockta will be here this afternoon." Phil exited.
Clint rolled his eyes and grumbled something. Natasha flicked his ear. "Just get it over with. What's that?" She indicated the watch.

"Control for all the fancy things the hearing aids Tony made me can do." He swiped through a menu on the little screen. "He made them gesture controlled at first but I talk with my hands—"

"Literally."

"Yes, literally, so that needed to be changed. Therefore, smartwatch. Hey, I think I can tap wireless communications with these things."

Natasha made a vaguely impressed sound. "That's convenient."

Clint had perched himself dejectedly on the corner of Phil's desk with one foot tucked up under himself like some high school wannabe gangster. Neither Erin nor Phil had elected to comment on that.

"In short," Phil was saying, wrapping up a long-winded explanation of everything from his death to that morning, "I guess I underestimated the degree to which Clint would be affected—Figured he could deal with the loss of his handler but didn't know—consider that I was leaving him as a grieving, well, boyfriend." The delivery was a little too breezy and Erin wondered what he was not saying.

"I think common-law widower might be more accurate," Clint spat, speaking for the first time since having been herded into the office.

"We're not married."

"That's why I said common-law."

"We've never even lived together." Phil sounded exasperated.

"Not officially."

"Not ever. Unlike you and Natasha, I might point out."

"We were on assignment together and we jumped over a fucking broom. And you're wearing my socks."

"Because someone keeps hiding my clothes." Phil shot him a look. "Any idea who it might be?"

"I blame Jarvis."

"Agent Barton," the A.I. interjected, "I would prefer to be left out of your pseudo-marital spat and, as you well know, I have no physical form and could not possibly be responsible for so much of Director Coulson's wardrobe ending up in the air vent above your bed."

The corner of Erin's mouth twitched. "Thank you for clearing that up, Jarvis. I trust no one but you is listening to our session."

"Your privacy is being maintained."
"Thank you, Jarvis." Erin intertwined her fingers.

"Yeah, fine, I've been hiding your clothes." Clint rolled his shoulders.

"And shooting at me."

"No, I've been shooting at things you're holding, if I were shooting at you I'd have hit you. And you know that."

"Clint, can you tell me why you've been hiding Phil's clothes and shooting at him by proxy?" Erin asked.

"I don't know, I just feel like it," Clint huffed out exasperatedly. He grabbed a pen from off the desk and started twirling it between his fingers.

"It seems to me that you're angry."

"Yes, I'm angry!" He threw the pen with a quick flick of his wrist and it stuck point first in the drywall. "My boyfriend or whatever the hell he is to me—the whole 'let's not label this' thing works great until you have to talk about it—he let me think he was dead for three fucking years. I went to his funeral. His actual funeral, not the service S.H.I.E.L.D. held that every damn agent went to. The one with his family." He hopped down off the desk and stalked over to snatch the pen out of the wall. "You tell people you're an only child, you tell people your parents are dead, but that's all bullshit, Phil, all cover. I was there, me and Natasha. Closed casket service, we think because Loki fucked you up worse than the damn undertaker could make pretty, we don't know the damn casket is fucking empty. And I'm there watching your mother fall apart because she thinks she's burying her baby, and your sisters are all hugging their kids and leaning on their husbands, crying for their brother. And I can't even tell them who the fuck I am, and they don't even know who the fuck you really were—they think you're some CIA grunt when you're actually one of the most powerful men on the planet! And I can't tell them how much good you've done and what you died for. Then I find out that all of that was for nothing, it was all a sham. So yes, I'm angry. I'm angry for being put through that. And I'm angry on your family's behalf because they still don't know the truth to be angry for themselves."

Erin clicked her pen once then started calmly writing in the notebook open in her lap. Clint pulled himself back up onto the desk and threw the pen at the wall again. It stuck. He followed it with several other pens, pencils, and a letter opener. Phil sat in silence, staring at his clasped hands between his knees. The vintage Sputnik-like starburst wall clock ticked on. Erin clicked her pen closed. "You haven't told your family outside of S.H.I.E.L.D. that you're alive?"

"No." Phil sighed. "I can't."

"Right, just like you couldn't tell me." Clint pulled open a desk drawer in search of more projectiles. Despite the surface appearance of control, the behavior came across to Erin as frantic. "Nat dumped the entire database, remember? It's all out there, all the files and shit, your family just doesn't know to be Googling. If they knew to try, they'd find the truth. But they think you're dead, so..." He shrugged and snapped a rubber band at the wall. It caught on one of the pens and hung there.

"And given how well you finding out went, I definitely can't tell them."

Clint pinged Phil in the shoulder with a rubber band.

"Hey," Erin chided. "Do not be aiming things at him—or me, for that matter."
"It's just a rubber band." Clint flicked another one at the wall.

"The lethality of the projectile isn't the point, though having gone to public school with a bunch of sheltered boys from the rez I can vouch for the fact that rubber bands can really hurt." Erin added something short to her notes. "The point is, while it can be acceptable to take out your anger and frustration on inanimate objects like the wall, though Tony might not appreciate the damage, attacking Phil—even with just a rubber band—is not helpful to either of you at all in the long run."

"Throwing stuff at people is normal behavior for me," Clint defended.

"The issue here is the malice. There are more constructive ways to express your feelings."

Clint crossed his arms and watched his feet as he swung them.

"It's all right. I"—Phil sighed—"might deserve it."

The archer made a noise that came out as a wounded sounding choke. He turned away as much as he could.

Phil turned his chair toward him. "I never know what to say except I'm sorry."

This time Clint's snort sounded derisive.

"I don't know how it was for you." Phil combed his fingers through his hair. "And I don't know how to tell you what it was like for me. I couldn't fall apart." He paused a moment too long. Erin had the impression that he was mentally composing something to substitute in place of the unvarnished truth. He finally finished with, "Too much and too many people count on me."

"I should be able to count on you too. And I don't mean professionally."

"You should. And I thought about you. I typed out texts to you that I didn't send. What if I made a mistake because of my..." Coulson faltered. "Because of my...feelings... for you, what if I sent a text to you that further damaged S.H.I.E.L.D?"

Clint jumped up off the desk. "What about the damage to me?"

Phil looked up at him and waved a hand in Erin's general direction. "That's why we're here."

"Not that damage." Clint gestured in exasperation. "As horrible as that is, it pales beside what Loki did to me. Mind taken over and all that." He tapped on his forehead and paced back and forth as he spoke. "I didn't have any choice in anything, not even control over my own body. I was horrified by what was happening—by what I was forced to do—but I couldn't stop it. I shot my colleagues and friends, people died by my hand and all I could do was watch." He paused with his back to Phil, staring at a bookcase, and was quiet a long moment. "It's kind of a mental rape."

Phil blanched. He stood up and put a hand on Clint's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"Stop it." Clint shook him off. "Stop saying things that mean nothing." He turned to look at Phil. "You've got to stop freezing me out."

"I don't mean to."

"But you do it. You froze me out for three years."

It was Phil's turn to make a wounded sound. "I did die, Clint. And being resurrected is torture in and of itself. It took me a long time to recover. It wasn't wake up a week later and just shake it off
like a flesh wound. I went through the motions, barely aware of how much time passed. Then I was
desperately busy, trying to make us—all of us—ready to deal with a world where everyone knows
that impossible things happen. More weeks passed as I—” He stopped abruptly, took a deep breath,
then said, “I hoped you—were all right and that, maybe, I'd hear about you from someone else.”

Coulson leaned forward and looked into Clint's face. "I figured you were occupied by secret
missions and then swamped by the aftermath of S.H.E.I.L.D.'s coming out. Then I thought, this
can't go on much longer. In a week or two, I can check on Clint. In a week or two, I can contact
Clint. Then another week went by and another and before I knew it most of a year had passed. I
knew from reports that you were okay, going on assignment and coming home safe, but—” He
exhaled. “It was like a wall had been built, and it kept getting bigger and bigger and I didn't know
how to get around it. Then when S.H.I.E.L.D. fell and it seemed like the end of the world, all I
could think about was calling you—to hear your voice one more time. So I called. And called. But
you didn't answer. Weeks passed, and I thought"—he choked then took a breath—"I was too late.
When I got that call from Steve, I broke speed records getting here, but—" He fell silent and shook
his head.

Again, the ticking of the Sputnik clock and the scritch of Erin's pen became the only sounds in the
room.

"Fuck you," Clint breathed venomlessly. He went to retrieve the office supplies from the wall, then
dumped them on the desk. "Even when he's being a dickwad he's a noble dickwad. Makes it hard to
be pissed without feeling like an ass. It gets old fast." He flung the letter opener at the wall then
looked to Erin. "Seriously don't know why I put up with it."

Erin shrugged. "At a guess, because you love him." He snorted and looked away. She tapped her
pen against the page. "The wall you described, Phil, is an emotional block. You've both built up
emotional blocks and neither of you knows how to take them down. You've both voiced a lot and a
lot of progress has been made." Erin's watch chirped and she touched it to silence it. "We want to
build on this, so I'm going to give you some assignments to work on. When we meet again next
week, I'll have some books for you to read."

Clint frowned. "What is this, high school?"

"You never went to high school." Phil shook his head. He sounded tired.

"That's why I have to ask."

"It's a little like high school, but not really." Erin finished up a note. Clint grimaced. "Assignment
number one: it would be helpful to both of you to have a way to express and record your feelings.
There are plenty of ways to do this, journalling is probably the most straightforward, but doing
artwork, drawing and painting and such is also good. I've had one patient take up coded knitting
like women did during the French revolution. I want to see the first of what you've done next week
—entries in a dream journal, paintings, poetry, whatever it is,"

"Okay," Coulson said while Clint nodded longsufferingly and threw more office supplies at the
wall.

"Second, I want both of you to visit Phil's grave. For you, Clint, it's a symbol of a lot of the
suffering you've been through, and you, Phil, don't seem to quite grasp the reality or weight of that.
At the same time, it's also a symbol of your death which is at the root of a lot of your suffering. I
think it's important you both go there together. You are to share your travel plans with me next
week, especially the date when you're going."
Both men nodded reluctantly.

"And Phil, you have got to talk to the rest of your family. That's another emotional block you've built and it's a pretty straightforward one to take down. That doesn't mean it's easy to take down, but it's less complicated than some of the others. I do understand that the fact that a lot of what both of you do is classified makes all of this pretty convoluted. But for this stuff, as much as possible, you need to let yourself not be Director Coulson and just be Phil. Now, it might be for the best that you tell your non-S.H.I.E.L.D. family a bit of a comforting lie as to why you've let them think you dead for three years. With the file dump and everything being online, I don't know how feasible that is and I'm sure anything you do tell them will have to include a large kernel of truth, but all the best white lies do."

"Are you really telling me to lie to my family?"

"No, I'm telling you to not let it seem like you don't care. Besides, like anyone who's ever worked black ops, I know you've lied to them before."

Phil looked down. "Yes, I have."

"And finally"—Erin leaned forward—"no sex for a month."

"I'm sorry?" Coulson's head snapped up.

"Yeah, what was that?" Clint flicked a fingernail against his watch, like someone smacking an old radio.

Erin straightened and repeated, "No. Sex," accompanied by a mix of actual sign language and a rude gesture. "Comprende?"

Clint scoffed. "You have got to be joking."

"Not at all." The doctor shrugged. "Aside from everything else both wonderful and terrible that it is or can be, sex is a form of communication—the only one the two of you have been particularly making use of. Clearly, it's either just not working, or it's not enough. Therefore, no sex, you have to find another way to communicate. Talk, sign, write each other coded letters, spar, whatever works."

The archer groaned in despair and flopped back flat on the desktop. Coulson ground the heel of his hand into his forehead. Erin resisted the urge to smirk. "C'mon, men, you survived three years, a month won't kill you."

She gathered her things and headed for the door. A couple steps down the hall she heard the distinct thwack of the letter opener impaling the wall again, followed by Clint's voice drifting through the open door, "Just as I was starting to think this might not be a horrible idea, she pulls that."

Erin grinned to herself. On her way out, she ran into a slightly frazzled Jemma. Erin paused. "Are you alright?"

"I, yes," Jemma sighed. "Just, I've been down in the workshop most of the day, and Barnes mentioned something about Tony being like his father, Howard Stark, and Tony isn't fond of Howard so he didn't take kindly to that, and why must smart men all also one way or another be completely insane? Do you have time for coffee? I really just need to talk to someone with ovaries and Pepper is working and Natasha scares me and I don't know where Maria is."
Erin nodded sympathetically. "I have time for coffee."

Sitting at the kitchen island with a steaming mug in her hands, Jemma sighed heavily at the end of a bit of a rant about men being impossible. Erin gestured with her own mug. "And that is why I'm very glad I don't date men."

"I think it's a large part of why I rarely date at all even though I would date men." Jemma frowned and stared into the dark brown abyss of her coffee for a moment. "How are Coulson and Agent Barton?"

"In my professional opinion, they're a mess. Salvageable, but a mess."

"If I might," Jarvis intruded politely, "while I do respect the privacy expected of people when behind closed doors, it is the nature of my design and purpose that I be aware of everything that goes on within the Tower, thus I couldn't help but observe your handling of them today. I hope it isn't too bold of me to say that I rather like your style, Doctor."

Erin shared a look with Jemma. "Not too bold at all, thank you. You're quite the charmer, Jarvis."

"I may have picked up a few tendencies from Sir over the years."

The two women chuckled into their mugs. Jemma set hers down. "But I suppose you really can't tell me any more, doctor patient confidentiality and all."

"No, I really can't." Erin smiled gently. "But I can tell you what their homework is."

"Yeah?"

Erin detailed the assignments she'd given the men.

"Do you really expect them to go a month without sex?" Jemma queried. "I ask only out of interest as a medical professional."

"Of course not." Erin laughed. "They are going to break that rule. But when they do, it's a new dynamic. They break my rule, they're both on the same side, rebelling against me, instead of them being against each other like it has been."

"So, you've played them."

"The stereotype that shrinks play mind games exists for a reason."
"I can't believe she told you," Clint groused to Jemma. He flicked a twenty-five cent bouncy ball at the window and caught it as it rebounded.

"All she told me was that the two of you are a mess which, frankly, everyone knows, and what she's assigned you for homework, which the two of you are complaining to everyone about anyway."

Clint tossed the bouncy ball again. It landed in Jemma's wine glass with a plink. She frowned. Coulson reached across from the far corner of the sofa he was sharing with the biochemist, retrieved the ball, and threw it back to Clint. "Not at people."

"I was told not at you."

"The implication was not at people."

From his seat on the floor, Fitz picked out the bottle of unpronounceable six hundred dollar white wine from among the various other varieties of booze on the coffee table and handed it up to Jemma. Bruce and Bucky had gone to bed, and Pepper and Maria had cited other responsibilities, but everyone else had answered Tony's call of, "It's been a weird Monday, let's drink expensive things."

So they'd wound up with Jemma and Coulson on one couch with Fitz at their feet, Steve and Natasha on the other couch with Clint balanced comfortably on the back between them, and Tony sprawled on the carpet on his stomach playing chess with Jarvis on a tablet.

Clint rolled his eyes, sipped his hard lemonade—which was actually humanly affordable, much to Tony's frustration—and bounced his ball off the window again. "I don't wanna go to your damn grave."

Coulson sighed and swirled the scotch in his glass. "I don't want to either."

"Then I say we just don't go."

Natasha yanked Clint's drink out of his hand, downed the rest of it herself, and gave the empty bottle back. "Both of you are pitiful. Just get it over with, then get on with fixing the rest of your mess."

"Where is it?" Fitz asked curiously.

"Uh, near D.C." Coulson said. "Technically Virginia I think."

"Maryland." Clint grabbed Natasha's glass of Goldwasser. "It's in Maryland. Your mother insisted, dunno why."

"Oh."

For a minute, no one said anything other than Tony trash talking his A.I. between swigs of thirty-three-thousand dollar Japanese whiskey.

Steve leaned into the corner of the couch, tapping one finger against his half empty glass of beer—which was completely unremarkable other than the fact it was made from barley grown in space.
Steve didn't understand why anyone had bothered to make space beer in the first place. "Do I remember correctly that around nineteen seventy everyone left unaccounted for from World War Two was listed K.I.A?"

"Yeah, I don't know the details exactly, but yes." Coulson looked up. "Why?"

"That means me and Buck have graves somewhere."

"They're in Arlington," Tony provided with about as much effort and interest as he'd give the answer to an algebra problem. He cursed as Jarvis put him in check. "Both of you in section three, Howling Commandos Memorial, list all you guys' awards and crap, and proudly proclaim to anyone who actually knows what the umpteen different kinds of crosses they use mean that you're Catholic and Barnes is Presbyterian."

Everyone in the room gaped at Tony. He looked around at them and shrugged. "My old man had a massive man crush on the Captain, remember? Seriously, it would have been less weird if it were actually a romantic thing. He was obsessed. I got dragged to Arlington more July Fourths than I care to recount."

Steve rubbed his temple. "And you've never mentioned this because...?"

"Didn't seem important." Tony refilled his glass and frowned at his game.

"Of course it didn't." Steve shook his head.

"Anyone else think," Coulson said musingly, "that Barnes knows something useful about Hydra?"

Tony looked up. "Wow, change of subject."

"We were just talking about failing to mention important things," Coulson challenged. He set his glass down. "But we know from this morning that he has a map of at least one Hydra compound in his head. It makes me wonder what else he's got in there."

"I could interrogate him," Natasha offered casually.

"No." Steve gave her a hard look.

Coulson held up a hand to the Captain and addressed the Russian. "Not yet, at least. That would likely be counter productive."

"True." Natasha curled up, arms crossed on top of her knees. "He might not even know he knows anything."

"In a way," Coulson said, "you've already interrogated him."

"Nah." She waved her hand. "I didn't get anything useful out of him when I questioned him in the gym."

"Not then. When you had that long talk with him."

"Hmm." She tapped her fingers against her knee. "He did tell me about some people he killed and some places he'd been in different eras."

Steve bristled. "That's not yours to tell."

She shrugged. "I may be certified in first aid, but I'm no doctor. I don't have any patient-
confidentiality issues."

"Apparently Mockta doesn't think she does either," Clint grumbled under his breath.

Coulson addressed Natasha. "I want a report on my desk tomorrow."

"Yes sir."

Fitz perked up. "You could cross reference items from Natasha's report with other Hydra information in our database. See if Skye can pull anything up to do with it, too."

"Who's Skye?" Clint fully expected to be ignored again.

"Member of my team, smart, pretty, morally ambiguous. And great idea, Fitz." Coulson became more animated. "I didn't know Barnes was going to be here when I came and didn't give him much thought once I was here. At first, he was too damaged to provide any help but now he's like a present dropped in our laps. Thank you, Steve."

Steve gave Coulson a startled look. "Uh, what?"

"You went after him when nobody else would and insisted that he be helped. Now that he's improving, we have access to a cooperative former Hydra operative."

Tony sat up. "How do you know he's cooperative?"

"He trusts Steve," Coulson picked his glass up and took a drink. "And he spent the morning escaping from Hydra."

"He told me that he tried to escape many times," Steve said. "And that he didn't want to work for Hydra."

"He told me the same thing," Natasha said.

"Excellent." Coulson drained his glass. "We need to check the Hydra chatter specifically looking for anything about Barnes. Are they looking for him? Do they know where he is? Or that he's with Steve? Tony, I'll need Maria's help for a few days."

"Hey." Tony said. "Maria's on my payroll and she does excellent work. I can't spare her services."

Coulson scowled and opened his mouth to speak. Jemma beat him to it. "She can always quit," she said.

Tony crossed his arms. "She wouldn't."

"She might," Natasha said.

"Fine," Tony grumbled. "She can work half days for you."

Coulson nodded. "Thank you, Tony."

"This could help us finally make more progress against Hydra," Jemma said.

"This is a chink," Coulson agreed, "that could become a breakthrough."

Clint frowned. "I wish you'd get as excited about other things as you get about bureaucratic pursuits."
"Clint, I came here because of you." Coulson's words were soft but pained. He looked at Jemma and back to the archer. "We should go talk, not subject everyone to our issues."

"Stay." Tony held up a hand. "I want to hear this."

"Tony!" Natasha said sharply.

"What?" he said.

She rolled her eyes. "Stop being an ass."

Coulson had walked around the sofa. He motioned to Clint who hesitated but then nodded. They left together.

"And things were just starting to get interesting," Tony lamented.

Natasha stood and stretched. "I better get to bed. I have a long report to write tomorrow."

The next morning, mind buzzing with the details that she wanted to put in her report about Barnes, Natasha finished dressing, picked up the notes she'd already made and then headed to the kitchen. In the common room she stopped in her tracks. Clint was sprawled, fully dressed, face down on one of the sofas, right arm dangling to the floor.

"Did you and Phil have another fight?" She was certain he wasn't deeply asleep.

He groaned, turned over, and put his hands over his face. "Might've been easier if we had." He sat up, stretched, ran a hand through his spiky bedhead, and cussed tiredly. "I can't do it, Nat. Can't have him finally saying things he should have told me weeks if not years ago, and then just...sleep."

She sat next to him and lay the sheaf of papers containing her notes next to her. "You're emotional and physical and you react."

He nodded. "That woman is evil."

"Woman?"

"Mockta."

"As in, Mrs. Potiphar evil?"

He shook his head. "Nurse Ratchet evil."

Natasha grinned. Clint elbowed her. "Don't you dare laugh. I'm suffering here."

She patted his shoulder. "I've seen you truly suffer, moy brat, and this is not it."

He made a face. "Thanks for the understanding and support."

"You're just frustrated. I remember a time when you would have given your left arm to have Phil there frustrating you."
His hand went to his inner elbow and he sucked in a breath. "I could hardly believe it," he muttered, "when I saw the calls from him. I was shocked when I saw him and—" He exhaled heavily and scrubbed his hand through his hair again.

"Hurt?"

He nodded. "And furious."

"Well, sure. But weren't you also relieved?"

He leaned against her. "I sometimes still can't believe he's alive," he whispered, eyes closed. "I'm afraid I'll wake up and this will all be a dream and I'll be back to the nightmare of reality."

"Have you told him that?"

He shifted to look at her. "No. I guess Phil isn't the only one who should've said things weeks ago."

Natasha flipped through the papers that contained her notes and found a blank page. She handed it to him.

He stared at it. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Don't you have a homework assignment to express and record your feelings, and another one about communicating?"

"Uh, yeah."

"So make notes for a journal or write Phil a letter or something."

"Writing isn't really my thing. I was thinking of trying painting or embroidery or something." He wiggled his fingers restlessly.

"Writing involves working with your hands too. Hell, try calligraphy." She stood up. "Come on. Let's go to the kitchen. I'll make you some coffee."

"And bagels." He got up and followed her.

"You deal with those."

"You never were very domestic."

"I'm a trained killer." She arched an eyebrow at him as she pushed open the door to the stairwell.

"Like being an assassin somehow negates the ability to cook."

"Lucky for both of us, you're a good cook."

"Only because one of my first damn assignments out of the academy was at a fucking cooking school."

"Undercover chef." She snorted. "Sounds like a new reality show."

"I would watch that."

"I know you would."

When they got to the kitchen they found it already occupied: Steve and Bucky, Tony and Pepper,
Jemma and Fitz arrayed around a platter of bagels and a bowl of fruit, paying no attention to the TV someone had bothered to turn on.

"So, no, I actually, I have no idea why we call it football," Tony was saying to Fitz around a mouthful of bagel.

Pepper pushed a mug of coffee toward her boyfriend. "Nothing more than another excuse to be different than Europe. Personally, I prefer soccer. Morning, Tasha, Clint."

Natasha and Clint said their good mornings as they poured coffee for themselves. Clint located a cutting board, examined several serious looking knives, then made for the fruit bowl.

Jemma said, "Y'know, James, Coulson was saying last night that you might know some helpful information."

Steve scowled but Bucky just exhaled and said. "I still sometimes don't know my own name. I'd like to be helpful, but I don't see how I can be."

Steve and Tony both eyed Bucky thoughtfully. Jemma took a sip of coffee before speaking. "You seemed to know your way around a Hydra installation yesterday."

Bucky nodded slowly. "I could probably draw maps, at least partial maps, of several Hydra compounds. I don't know where all of them are or if they still exist."

"That would be a great start," Jemma said.

"I can help with that," Steve said. "We can use one of my new sketchbooks."

Bucky touched Steve's arm. "One of the bigger ones. I need large sheets of paper." Bucky glanced at Natasha. "I don't want to be questioned by her though."

Natasha rolled her eyes.

Bucky turned back to Jemma. "But I will talk to the Colonel—uh, what is he really?"

"Director." Jemma smiled. "Director Coulson. I'm sure he'll appreciate you talking to him."

Clint wielded a chef's knife with stunning speed and accuracy, creating apple slice bunnies, chrysanthemum oranges, plum slices arranged in a star shape in a bowl and the shape filled in with raspberries, and a basket from a cantaloupe.

"Hey,"Steve said. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

Clint pushed the plum and raspberry star toward Steve. "Undercover chef."

"New reality show," Natasha said.

"Awesome." Fitz accepted an apple slice bunny. "What channel is it on?"

"Most likely Food Network," Tony said.

"How d'you know that?" Pepper said.

Tony shrugged. "I get bored when you aren't here."

"Aw, that's sweet," Jemma said.
Pepper grinned and patted Tony's arm.

Steve pushed his bowl of artfully arranged plum slices and raspberries toward Bucky. "You should try this." He looked at his friend. "Hey, Buck?"

Vacant gray eyes staring off into the distance, Bucky didn't move.

Tony snapped his fingers several times in front of Bucky. "Earth to Major Tom."

Pepper grabbed Tony's arm. "No more coffee for you."

"Fine." Tony sat on a stool and slumped against the island. "I'll just sit here and mindlessly watch the morning news."

Steve put his hand on Bucky's shoulder. "Hey, buddy. Time to come back." He shot a look at Natasha. "Don't try anything."

Natasha twirled a knife between her fingers. "I'm just putting cream cheese on a bagel."

Jemma patted Bucky's hand. "You don't need to worry about talking to Coulson. The Director can be a great listener."

"Yep," Clint muttered. "Not so good with the talking part though."

For several minutes, people ate and drank coffee while Steve hovered in concern near Bucky. Jemma clapsed Steve's arm and steered him toward the refrigerator. "You need to eat more. And take vitamins."

"I need to stay near him."

"We're just going across the kitchen."

Steve was jumpy but cooperated with Jemma while she picked out a quiche to heat for him. "James might like it too." She put the deli made quiche in the microwave.

"Can I have more orange juice?" Bucky said.

Steve rushed over to him. "Are you all right?"

Bucky looked puzzled. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Tony whooped suddenly and jumped up off the stool. "All right! That breaking scaffolding isn't far from here. Jarvis, get a suit ready." He strode toward the door.

"Yessir," the A.I. responded.

Pepper stopped Tony. "Where are you going?"

"To save some people!" The billionaire gestured at the news on TV. "It's been a little dull around here lately. Cap, you should come too. Do you good."

Steve looked from Tony to Bucky and back.

Bucky sighed. "I wish I could leave the house."

A look of revelation came over Pepper's face. "You can." She went over to Bucky. "You're doing
so much better, I think it's time for an outing. I have theater tickets for night after tomorrow."
Bucky considered her. "A play? What kind?"

Tony pushed Steve's shoulder. "Come on, Cap. Those people need us and there isn't much time."

Steve looked at Bucky calmly talking with Pepper before he nodded and followed Tony out.
Pepper pointed at the large flat screen television hanging on the kitchen wall. "They're already there!"

A tired looking local reporter gravely intoned, "Tensions are mounting here as it's looking more and more like the rescue efforts won't be in place quickly enough—"

The red figure of Iron Man was clearly visible behind her and growing larger as he flew closer.

Bucky pointed at the flash of crimson. "Is that Stark?"

"Yup," FitzSimmons said together, eyes glued to the screen.

The camera abruptly moved away from the reporter and to a blue figure sprinting toward the scene.

The reporter's voice, excited now, narrated the scene. "New hope springs out of the blue as Captain America and Iron Man arrive unexpectedly."

Tony zoomed up toward the tilted scaffolding. Shield up, Steve watched from below. Rescue workers continued scrambling to get a landing zone in place.

"What's Cap gonna do?" Clint asked of no one in particular. "Just order firemen around? He can't get up there any better than the first responders can."

Natasha shrugged and stoically sipped-coffee.

The screen on the television split, showing Steve and the rescue workers on the ground, as well as Tony assessing the situation on the scaffolding. The camera helpfully zoomed in on the frayed cable before moving back to Iron Man gingerly removing one terrified-looking man from the precarious perch.

As Tony streaked down toward safety, the television screen remained split, showing Iron Man on one side and a continuing to fray cable on the other interspersed with shots of an older grim-looking man clinging desperately to an ever shakier scaffolding.

Tony yelled, "Hey, Old Glory, catch!" When he was still about a story up, Tony tossed the young man he was carrying at Steve, made a fast inflight U-turn, and shot back up the side of the building, a red streak that the camera could barely follow. Pepper rubbed her temple. "Somebody help me remember to have a word with Tony about throwing people."

Bucky looked at her. "Is that a recurring issue?"

She sighed. "Yes."

Steve easily caught the small man Tony had thrown to him. He set him down carefully, then put an arm around his shoulders, obviously saying reassuring things to the now safe window washer.

"That's not the kind of thing that should be a recurring issue," Bucky said.

"No, no, it's not."
The unflinching eye of the camera showed the cable fray apart, the last steel strand snapping. A scream rent the air. The local reporter went from saying, "Iron Man streaks toward the other man in a valiant attempt—" to audibly gasping.

Tony snatched the older window washer out of the air just as he slid off the end of the scaffolding, rags and squeegees tumbling into emptiness. Majestically, Iron Man, in no hurry, flew toward the ground and landed beside Steve.

The window washers embraced each other, embraced Captain America, then thumped on Iron Man's armor, before the paramedics led them away.

A horde of reporters, microphones outstretched, descended on Steve and Tony.

Concluding that the kitchen would be occupied and noisy for some time to come, Clint and Natasha gathered up their coffee, fruit, and bagels, and retreated to the seldom used breakfast nook. Natasha located a community laptop, rejoined Clint, slid the pocket door closed, and set herself up comfortably on the small casual dining table. Pretty much any one of the high end laptops in the tower was suitable as long as it was only protected by the generic team password—currently "StarkRules!PepperRunsDaWorld!" She opened her password protected space on the Jarvis intranet, started a new report, and began typing madly. Intermittently, she checked her notes and made new ones. Clint paced, wrote, wadded up paper and threw it against the wall.

Three hours later, Clint threw his eleventh wadded up paper ball against the wall. Natasha said, "Bring me those last two. I haven't read them yet."

"This is useless," Clint muttered as he retrieved the last two paper wads and handed them to her.

She unwadded them. One was mostly doodles. The other said:

Dear Phil,

Phil,

Phil you arrogant sonofabitch—

Dear Phil,

I used to dream about you, about talking with you, and then I’d wake up and you were still dead. I guess I can't believe you're alive—afraid I'll wake up and you'll still be dead, my waking nightmare for so long it's still my first thought every morning.

You accuse me, you hypocritical bastard, of mixed messages. But what about the granddaddy of mixed messages that you gave me? Being in an exclusive relationship with me for years and then nothing—death—for three years and there wasn't even anybody else unless I count S.H.I.E.L.D, so for you it's almost like there was still a relationship but for me there was a pain-filled void.

For a long time, I would have given anything—fucking anything—for one more day with you, to hear your voice again, and somehow I got that day and I don't know what to do with it because it's all poisoned. It's just so much easier to show my hurt and anger than to
A long scraggly line extended diagonally from the last shaky words to the end of the page.

Natasha smoothed that one out. "This one's perfect. Sign it 'Love, Clint' and give it to Phil."

"Fuck that, I'm gonna try coded knitting.'

"You'll just end up throwing the needles at the wall."

"Well." Clint smirked in spite of himself. "More likely into the wall."

"That's what I meant." She folded his note in half.

The pocket door slid open and Phil strode in. "There you are." He waved his left hand. "I've been looking all over for you. If Jarvis hadn't told me to check here, I'd never have found you. Clint, you're the best lipreader anywhere. I need you to analyze some video we've obtained that doesn't have audio."

Natasha handed Phil a folded, somewhat crinkled piece of paper. When Clint realized what she was doing, he tried to intercept it. Reflexively, Phil kept the paper away from Clint, half turned away and unfolded it.

"No. no, no, no, nnnnnn—Natasha!" Clint's face turned red. "You—pest!"

"I love you like a brother," she chirped.

Clint threw his hands up. "I'm not too fond of you right now."

"I need a couple more hours on this report." She went to the laptop. "Almost out of juice, need to find a power pad." She closed the laptop, gathered her papers up, then pointed to the paper wads on the floor. "Somewhere over there is a very nice drawing of your car."

White faced, Phil nodded absently. Still clutching the crumpled note, he crossed his arms.

Laptop and papers clasped to her chest, Natasha paused on her way out. "Phil, you're doing that thing where you turn in, to yourself, instead of to Clint." She turned away.

"You're leaving?" Clint all but shouted.

She slid the pocket door closed and was gone.

With an effort, Phil unfolded his arms. Clint snatched at the crinkled paper and Phil let him have the offending note. "Clint." He caught the younger man's elbow. "I'm not good at this."

Clint set his face, determined not to scowl. "Oh, I know. When we were dancing around each other for months, you kept finding reasons to tell me you aren't relationship material."

"Not that. It's kind of late for that— as you've been pointing out. I just, my job, it feels more natural to me to not say things. Maybe I was attracted to this kind of job because that really is just natural to me, to not let on."

Clint lost his internal battle and scowled. "I'm tired of hearing about Director Coulson."
"That's not—" Phil took the crumpled note back and reread it. Only then did Clint realize that Phil was blinking back tears. "I was always fascinated that you're so expressive, maybe because I'm just...not." He shrugged. "Even at that, there's so much I didn't—don't—" He let out a heavy sigh.

Clint turned partially away.

The older man waved the maltreated sheet of paper. "I only went through something like this for a month, fearing you were dead."

Clint yanked his arm away. "Not the same."

"No, but it helps me understand how you must feel. Then it makes me feel helpless because I don't know how to give you what you need. I don't even know what that is."

Clint jerked around and gestured with one hand. "Try!"

Phil folded his arms around Clint and engulfed him in the same kind of yearning kiss he'd given the younger man the first time he'd ever let his guard down enough to allow a moment of honest affection between them. Clint was always unbalanced by glimpses of the passion that lurked beneath Phil's cool, tightly controlled exterior. It was enticing that Phil shared those moments only with him and eternally maddening that those moments remained rare.

Clint put his arms around Phil who then leaned against the wall. The archer felt like he was going to be dragged down by some invisible weight—the responsibility on Phil's shoulders that perpetually overshadowed their personal relationship—yet somehow they stayed upright.

"I don't know what to do," Phil murmured into his ear.

"Respect my feelings."

"What does that mean? I've been trying to."

"I—" Clint rested his forehead on his lover's shoulder. "I think that's a long conversation."

Phil nodded. "I owe you that."

Clint pulled away far enough to look at Phil. "Right after work. At five."

"More like seven."

Clint raised an eyebrow. "Barnes' situation did not become urgent overnight. He's been here more than a month already."

"All right. Six."

"Five thirty."

"Clint, if I promise five thirty I'll be lying to you."

"I'm coming to get you at five thirty."

Phil grinned. "Fine. Right now, can we just have lunch together?"

Clint thought it over. "The deli across the street? Read the paper together?"

Phil nodded.
Clint went to the opposite wall and rummaged through the wads of paper. He picked one up and smoothed it out before handing it to Phil.

"That is a nice drawing of my car. What else is over there?"

Clint steered Phil out of the room. "I'm starving."

"You've been right next to the kitchen all morning."

"I worked up an appetite doing all this recording and communicating."

"Right."

---

Tony flipped his visor up. "I can't believe they kept us so long," he groused. "It's past lunch time."

"The reporters did spend a while talking with you and Steve," Pepper said, "and the two fellows you rescued."

"That didn't even take an hour." Tony gestured. "They made us file a police report—that took forever!"

Steve shrugged. "A police report was needed for a lot of reasons, including insurance purposes."

Bucky took a long look at Steve. "So this is what you do now." He fingered the fabric of one of his sleeves. "Feels better than that stuff they made you wear in the forties."

Steve chuckled. "That's for sure."

Bucky tilted his head. "Is this your job?"

Steve puzzled over that for a moment. "It used to be. I guess I hope it will be again."

Tony stripped a gauntlet off and waved it around. "We're superheroes. This is what we do."

Steve eyed the flamboyant billionaire. "I'm a soldier."

Bucky rubbed his temple. "I...was too."

"Yes you were," Steve said. "And a damn good one."

Bucky smiled faintly. He tapped a fingernail absently against a plate of armor on Steve's chest. "Wonder if I could be a superhero," he mused quietly.

Steve blinked. Tony pulled his helmet off and set it on the coffee table with a clank. "Sure! Why not?" he crowed. "All superheroes are at least a little crazy, after all."

"I take exception to that," Steve said.

Tony clapped him on the shoulder. "And that is why you're a soldier." He stepped away, stripping out of more of the suit. He had an automated removal process downstairs, but he didn't feel like going. Instead he continued along the train of thought he'd been started on. "Anyway, yeah. I mean, you've got a pretty damn good superhero origin story going, gotta have that."
"Tony, what are you talking about?" Pepper looked up from the memo she was editing.

"Superhero origin stories!" Tony dumped the rest of the suit onto a couch, leaving himself in his T-shirt and jeans. "Every superhero, real or fictional, has an origin story. C'mon, Pep, did you never read comics growing up? The origin story is what makes a superhero a superhero." He sat himself on the arm of the couch. "I got kidnapped, that's a classic. Bruce has the whole experiment gone wrong thing, how many times has that happened? Oh and radiation, things are always radioactive. Or they're from space, guess that covers Thor. And for fuck's sake Clint was in the damn circus, right? What is he, Robin?"

"Does that make Coulson Batman?" Steve asked, playing along.

"No." Pepper grinned. "Natasha is Clint's Batman. She even wears black."

"Hey!" Tony snapped. "I'm Batman in this analogy. I'm rich, my parents are dead, and I even have a butler."

"One must concede a certain degree of similarity between myself and Alfred," Jarvis added coolly.

"Yes, thank you." Tony crossed his arms.

"Uh, Tony"—Pepper set the memo aside—"you know you're not the only orphan on the team, right?"

Tony paused, then dropped his gaze to the carpet. "Yeah, I know."

"Howard's dead?" Bucky's expression had pinched into one of concern and unhappy surprise.

"Yeah." Tony stood quickly. "He's dead. Been dead a long damn time."

"Is that why you don't like talking about him?"

"I don't like talking about him because I don't fucking like him!" Tony called as he strode from the room, leaving the Iron Man suit in pieces on the sofa.
The door to Phil's office banged open. He looked up. "It's only five fifteen."

Halfway across the room, Clint paused, forehead crinkling. "When did you get a dartboard?"

"Pepper sent it up this morning after she got a report from maintenance."

"Cool!" The archer went over and picked up the small projectiles. "Nicely weighted." He walked across the office.

A dart whizzed past Phil's head. He glared at a grinning Clint.

"Dartboard's on the wall, not my skull."

"That's where the damage is." Clint twirled another dart between his fingers.

Phil picked his laptop up and moved to the divan by the window. He listened to the whiz-thwack of projectiles being hurled as he finished an email to his team. After he hit send, he looked up. The dartboard bristled with darts, pens, pencils, scissors, and his letter opener.

"Five forty," Clint said.

Phil nodded as he shut the computer down. Hands in his pockets, he brooded as he accompanied Clint to the room they were sharing. Clint sat on the bed and watched curiously as Phil methodically removed his suit and put on jeans and a Tshirt. He picked up the blue tie Phil had neatly draped near the end of the bed. "Hey, I gave this to you. I haven't seen it in years."

Phil nodded. "It took me a while to get it back from the dry cleaner."

Clint crooked his mouth. "Of course, I didn't see you for years."

The words were matter of fact on their face but teetered on a knife's edge—a summary of the painful heart of the matter between them. He looked into Clint's eyes and for the thousandth time since lunch had misgivings about sharing his excruciating truth. If he didn't tell Clint, the archer would never understand, but telling carried risks. He wondered again whether it was worse overall if he didn't tell, or if he did.

He could sidestep the planned conversation, ask Clint a leading question related to their discussion before lunch. What did you mean, he could say, about respecting your feelings? The conversation would bounce around and they'd make little progress, as usual, because they'd be avoiding the elephant in the room that Clint didn't even know was there.

Sleep with me before I tell you this, he wanted to say, because afterward you might never sleep with me again. He wouldn't have said it anyway, even without Mockta's rule. Phil had been prepared for the likelihood of never sleeping with Clint again when he'd flown to the tower all those weeks ago, but then the younger man had picked the relationship back up, heavy baggage and all. Phil had been astonished—shocked, really—and stopped being able to imagine life without Clint.
"Phil," Clint said testily. "You said you'd talk to me."

"I will." The words sounded strained to Phil's own ears. Clint watched him as he paced to the wall, halfway back to the bed, and then back to the wall. The archer tensed as Phil sat on the floor with his back to the wall.

Clint frowned. "Seriously, what the hell is going on with you?"

Phil dropped his face into his hands for a moment before looking up. "If I don't tell you this now, I'll never say it."

Clint studied Phil's face before he moved to the floor, sitting with his back against the bed.

"Jarvis."

The A.I. responded immediately. "Yes, Director Coulson."

"Please maintain strict privacy. No monitoring or recording of any kind. Black out the windows, set them to random vibrating, and scramble all sound and other emanations from this room. Make sure nothing leaves."

"Of course, Director."

Clint's eyebrows shot up. "Classified information?"

"Probably."

"I just watched you strip off Director Coulson, and I did not drag you out of your office at a reasonable hour just to—"

"Please," Phil cut in. Mercifully, Clint stopped arguing.

Phil draped his right arm over his knee, leaned with the back of his head against the wall, and stared at the ceiling. He couldn't look at Clint. For a second, he thought he wasn't going to be able to speak. He cleared his throat. The first words out of his mouth weren't the ones he had rehearsed so carefully all afternoon.

"For more than a year, I didn't remember who you were," he blurted.

Clint blinked in surprise, then spoke slowly. "So...you had amnesia."

Phil sighed. "It wasn't that simple."

"I wouldn't consider amnesia to be simple, exactly, but you were traumatized. It happens."

Phil put a fist against his forehead in frustration. "I wish I could've helped you when you were recovering from Loki, but I wouldn't have been any good to you."

Clint scooted closer and put his hand on Phil's foot. "Maybe I could've helped you."

Phil shook his head. "I don't even know how to explain."

"They sent you to Tahiti. I might have been—"

"No." Phil's tone brooked no argument. "That was a code name. Tahiti wasn't really Tahiti, it was a project." He took a breath. "I wasn't dead for minutes or hours. I was dead for days. They gave me
a drug of alien origin that has the unfortunate side effect of rendering everyone that takes it insane."

"Is that what you meant about it not being simple? You couldn't remember and you were crazy?"

"I'm not—this isn't—" Phil rubbed his eyes. "It isn't that simple, either."

"Then explain it to me." Clint's words were soft, wary, but insistent.

"I'd worked with the operative, Hawkeye." Phil exhaled. "I knew that much but remembered only bits and pieces. I didn't know—about us—what you were to me."

Clint winced but, to Phil's surprise, only nodded.

Feeling like he was flailing about in deep, dark water that threatened to engulf both of them, Phil forged ahead. "I sometimes," he said, "had odd flashes of memory that I didn't know how to interpret. I didn't untangle those for a very long time. I didn't even remember your name."

"You lose your mind"—Clint's hand tightened around Phil's foot—"and I drop right out of it?"

"No, that's not—" Phil stood up. "Forget it. This was a bad idea."

Clint jumped up and pushed on Phil's chest. "Oh no you don't. Don't you fucking dare. Do this kind of build up, tell me this kind of shit, and then leave me hanging again? No."

Phil fought off the urge to leave.

"You owe me this," Clint said harshly.

Phil flinched at the cold rage in Clint's tone, stance, and face. Phil commonly faced Clint's hot-headed anger or frustration, either of which they could both weather like a stormy day. What was turned on Phil now was something he rarely saw, the ice water that coursed through the veins of an assassin, cold, calculating, implacable.

Phil had kept this story close to the vest, determined never to let Clint know any of it. During the afternoon, he'd reread Clint's painful and honest note at least six times and decided to tell him what he'd never be willing to put down on paper. He'd been convinced that he had to tell him. Now, he was wishing he'd waited.

In the lengthening silence, Clint's face grew redder and redder, jaw tight, and Phil still couldn't figure out what to say, at least not the right thing to say.

Finally Clint snapped. "I'm done, Philip, we're through."

Phil's eyes widened in disbelief. After all the times he'd listened to Clint carry on, especially in recent weeks, this was blatantly unfair. Feeling misjudged and unheard, he spat, "Fine," and strode to the door.

Chapter End Notes
The college semester is drawing to a close for me, which means I’m going into the land of finals, papers, and projects--and limited free time. I'll post when I can--which may mean twice a day or nothing for several days--until I'm out of the woods of academia. I appreciate all of your understanding.
Chapter 17

Downstairs from the Director's office, Bucky stared at the hyperbaric chamber. It looked marginally friendlier with colorful sheets, a comforter, and three pillows instead of the hospital white sheets and blanket and the one pillow it had previously been outfitted with. The room was cozier too, having been redecorated over the past day and a half. Fabric and cushy artwork softened the walls, a colorful cotton rug adorned the floor, and an inviting looking double bed had been added since Bucky had last slept in the chamber.

"You'll be okay," Steve said. "I'll be right here the whole time."

"I don't know if I can make myself get in there." Pupils blown out with terror, Bucky turned his gaze to Steve.

"You are one of the bravest men I've ever known," Steve said. "Hell, you were brave as a kid. This will be a piece of cake for you."

"I don't think so."

"You became a soldier before I did." Steve crossed his arms. "I was envious. It's like you were born with the makings of a fine soldier."

Bucky pressed his fingers to his temple and scrunched his eyes closed. "I went somewhere. It showed me as a soldier, and it showed you." He looked at Steve. "Before that, I pulled you out of the water."

Steve sucked in a breath and straightened a little more. "Yes, you did. That's why I knew I had to find you, that the man—the hero—I'd always known was still inside you and worth saving."

Bucky blinked and his eyes changed focus as though he were seeing something at a distance. "I'm with you 'til the end of the line."

Steve nodded. "You stood by me in my darkest time. How could I abandon you?"

"We...lived together."

"Shared an apartment. It was your apartment, really. You were a better friend than I could have asked for. I would never have asked you for anything more."

Pupils still wide and dark, Bucky gave his friend a hard look. His gray eyes were more lucid and knowing than Steve had seen them in a long, long time. "What are you saying?" Bucky asked softly.

"Nothing."

"Steve, I can't rely on my own memory right now, so I have to rely on yours. I need you to tell me—"

The door opened and Tony poked his head in. "Aha, so here's where my two favorite walking dead men are. You're here way early."

Steve exhaled, whether in relief or frustration, he wasn't sure.

Eyes somewhat unfocused again, Bucky frowned. "Walking dead men?"
"The tower's full of them." Tony touched the reactor in his chest through his shirt. "I could be counted as one of that number. And Bruce."

"And Director Coulson," came Fitz's voice from out in the hallway.

"Oh yeah." Tony nodded. "Agent is definitely a walking dead man." He took several steps into the room followed by Fitz.

Fitz brandished a sort of sandwich shaped device festooned with buttons, knobs, and a pair of small screens. "The science bros helped me finish a wireless controller in record time. That means you can take it inside and independently manage the pressure chamber."

Steve raised his eyebrows. "Science bros?"

"Me and Bruce. Fitz is the little bro." Tony gestured at the controller. "You can also contact Jarvis, send texts, and play games. Made it out of a Nintendo handheld. A thoroughly pimped Nintendo handheld."

Tony and Fitz spent a few minutes showing Bucky and Steve how the controller worked and its various features. As Tony continued demonstrating the features, Fitz wandered over to the pressure chamber and rested one hand against the glass. When Tony finished talking, gesturing, and pressing buttons, Fitz said, "Wish I'd had one of those when I spent time in one of these."

Bucky went and stood beside the Scotsman, voicing everyone's surprise when he said, "You spent time in one of these?"

Fitz nodded. "Not as nice as this one—this has a lot more glass and seems a lot less claustrophobic—and not as cozy looking, but yeah."

Bucky frowned. "A metal tube?"

" Mostly. It did have a window."

Bucky looked askance at Fitz. "Did you get in it willingly?"

Fitz shrugged. "Sure. Well, the first time I wasn't actually conscious, but after that, yeah. It was better than having no hope of improving."

Bucky flinched away and went to stand behind Steve. He clutched at Steve's arm. "Don't we need to go to the kitchen? Isn't it...dinner time?"

Tony looked from Bucky to Fitz. "Yeah, let's get out of here for a while." He placed the controller on the bed inside the chamber. "Pepper ordered up some kind of phyllo crusted trout dish with leeks and mixed vegetables. I have some steaks thawing, just in case."

Phil turned the doorknob and nothing happened. Feeling like an idiot, he jerked on the door, which didn't open.

"Jarvis," he snarled.

"Director?" came the A.I.'s imperturbable voice.
"What's wrong with the door?"

"Nothing. Director."

Phil released the door handle, turned around, and then gestured in frustration. "So why won't it open?"

"You said, 'make sure nothing leaves.' I am doing as instructed."

"Uh." Phil drew his eyebrows together. "Thank you, Jarvis."

"Very welcome."

Phil could have sworn he heard a smile in the A.I.'s voice.

"What?" Clint said. "We're trapped in here, until you say the magic word, or something?" He lunged for the door and rattled the handle.

Under other circumstances, Phil would have grinned. Under the current circumstances, he walked to the other side of the room.

"Jarvis," Clint yelled, "you can't do this to me. This is my room."

Jarvis did not answer. Phil leaned his forehead against the wall and tried to think while listening to Clint bang on the door and demand to be let out. He was sure Jarvis was blocking all that noise anyway. Even if someone walked down the hall, they wouldn't hear Clint's ruckus anymore than they heard the turmoil in his own head. The words that echoed. _Clint, listen to me. Understand. Let me explain. Give me a chance. Help me figure out how to make this right for you because it will never be right for me._ All the inadequate words. But Jarvis had made it clear that he'd better stay and say something. He wished he could ask the virtual butler to help him figure out what to say. If he said that out loud—and he'd have to for Jarvis to know—Clint was certain to not take it well. Jarvis might well decline to answer in any case.

Clint pulled him away from the wall. "Whatever pact you made with the demon butler will you unmake it so I can get out of here?"

Phil blinked as though he'd just been awakened. He understood the individual words, but what Clint said didn't make sense. He startled Clint out of his scowl when he touched his cheek. Looking into those gray and green eyes, he knew that if he walked away now, that really would end them.

"Let me finish what I'm telling you"—Phil's voice sounded rusty—"before you decide anything."

Clint pulled away from Phil's fingers and folded his arms. "Give me one good fuckin' reason why I should bother."

"Because I'm bothering." Phil looked down. "And then you'll know what I never wanted to tell you."

Huffing in exasperation, Clint turned around.

Feeling despair prickling his eyes, Phil turned back to the wall. He may as well talk—say something—even if Clint didn't want to hear it. Neither of them could leave right now anyway. "It wasn't just the damn drug. They screwed around with my memories, erasing some and implanting others, some deliberately and some accidentally, I'm pretty sure."
Clint pulled him around again. "Who did that?"

"S.H.I.E.L.D. docs."

"So S.H.I.E.L.D. cut me out of your memory? What the hell?"

"Pretty sure they were trying to keep me...functional." Phil put his hand over Clint's mouth to cut off the next retort. "You and I had done such a good job of being discreet that they apparently had no idea."

"We should have been less discreet," Clint grumbled. He kicked one of Phil's loafers, sending it tumbling across the carpet. "Like at that fucking Christmas party in '09. Natasha was going around with mistletoe, I had the perfect fucking excuse but I just had to go and behave myself." He kicked the other shoe after its mate.

Phil studied Clint's face. The younger man was irritated and wary, but he was listening.

Clint looked down and silently dug his big toe into the carpet for a moment. "You have nightmares sometimes."

"Not often."

"For you, it's often. It's why I believe something terrible happened to you. You have a pragmatic cold streak. You can make an inhumanly tough decision and never have it haunt you. But now? You talk in your sleep and say things like 'let me die.'"

Encouraged but failing in his fight against the urge to grimace, Phil continued. "Oh it gets worse." He shoved his hands in his pockets and studied the carpet. "You remember Audrey?"

"Your musician friend." Clint nodded once. "She got that job with the symphony in Portland."

"She plays the cello."

"Oh, yeah..."

"I had these disjointed false memories of me and Audrey. I saw—rescued—her once. I didn't realize 'til months later how weird all that was."

"False memories?" Clint looked puzzled.

"She's the only cellist I know, I'd been telling people I'd been seeing a cellist. The guys who were making hash of my brain assumed, not unreasonably, that it was her. They didn't realize there was someone else with a different kind of bow. For a long, long time, I didn't either."

"But you're gay." Clint, possibly unconsciously, made the signs for what the hell?

"I know, but I remembered being with her, so I assumed she was an exception. I know I've heard you say that there's not really anyone at the far ends of the Kinsey scale."

"Yeah, yeah..." Clint crossed his arms. "You thought you'd been going around with Audrey. And?"

Phil shook his head. "I had disjointed bursts of memories. You mostly came to me in dreams. The one time I mentioned those dreams to a psychologist, I was given some kind of standard line about dream symbols and archetypes. True for most people, I'm sure." He ran a hand through his hair. "I was going through a lot at the time, and had no shortage of strange dreams. I was just relieved they weren't all nightmares. Then one night, you said your name in a dream. I bolted awake, logged on
and spent half the night looking you up. Even then, it was weeks before I pieced it together, and then I started having more flashes of real memories. By the time I had it figured out and remembered enough to really be hurting over you, it was about two years past the Loki incident and I figured”—he sighed—"you had moved on."

Clint looked a little sick. "Why would I have moved on?"

"Oh come on." Phil smiled crookedly. "You wear your heart on your sleeve, readily accessible. You were always going to give it to someone, or they were going to take it. My heart was never going to be given away. And then you came along."

"What did you think I'd do?" Clint clenched his fists at his sides. "Just start going through my black book? Get back with Bobbi or something?"

Phil tilted his head. "No. I knew you hadn't called Bobbi. She's on my team."

"She's—?!" Clint flung one hand up. "Oh, of course. Everyone works for you."

"Not everyone," Phil muttered. He tugged on Clint's arm pulling him down until they were both sitting with their backs against the wall.

"I read reports, kept tabs on you, mostly regained my sanity. A rarity for those given the alien drug," Phil said. “And it isn't just drugs, and manipulation. They cut—" He put both arms over his head. “I can't even talk about it.”

Clint pried his arms away and turned his face. “What did they do to you?"

“It was traumatic.” Phil shook his head. “I can't.”

Clint raised his eyebrows. “More traumatic than dying?"

Phil looked away. "It took me awhile to realize you probably thought I was dead—that, because no one knew about us, you didn't have clearance. Then S.H.I.E.L.D. fell and I didn't care if you had moved on, I had to talk to you. And there was no answer. I...fell apart... Because it was Steve who called, all I knew was you didn't have hearing aids and you had reached out to me, at least a little bit, and I had to see you. At least say goodbye."

"No wonder you looked stunned, not just on the helipad but—later."

"Well, yeah. I never expected the kind of greeting I got."

"Why didn't you tell me this then? I mean you said it was a long story and then, nothing."

"You dragged me off to bed! You didn't want to talk and I wasn't going to insist on a debriefing first. Then, you were so hurt, I figured this would just hurt you more." Phil put his arms around his knees. "It took me too long to realize that waiting for you to calm down was never going to work, that I just didn't understand something about what's going on. And I'm better at being stoic than at telling anyway."

"Why didn't you at least shout some of this at me or something?"

"How could I be mad at you?" Starting to think they were going to be okay after all, he put his arm around Clint. "Besides, you kept sleeping with me. I was willing to put up with an arrow through my coffee cup every morning for that."
"You didn't mean for that to be as shallow as it sounded." Clint said drily.

"No."

Clint pressed the heels of his hands to his closed eyes while he let his breath hiss slowly out of his chest. Phil tensed up, not sure whether the mercurial archer was next going to blow hot or cold.

"It's my fault," Clint moaned.

Of all the things Phil might have guessed that Clint would say at that moment, this was not among them, and he had no idea what it meant. "Your fault?"

"You shouldn't have died. I should have been able to resist Loki."

Phil tightened his arm around Clint. "You couldn't have resisted his mind control any more than I could have resisted his metal blade slicing through my flesh and bone,"

Clint shuddered. "Natasha said something like that, and the therapists tried to assuage my guilt until I wouldn't talk to them anymore. Hell was you being cold in the grave and knowing I'd put you there."

Phil sucked in a breath. So this was why Clint had been impossible these past weeks—he was mad at both of them and didn't know how to forgive either one of them, least of all himself. He pulled Clint's hands away from his eyes and still he wouldn't look at Phil.

"No," Phil murmured. "Loki killed me." He put his fingers under Clint's chin and coaxed his face up and around until they were looking in each others eyes. "It wasn't you."

Clint traced his fingers over Phil's face and whispered, "Promise me something."

"What?"

"If this is a dream, don't wake me up."

Phil pressed the younger man's hand flat against his cheek. "Clint, I'm really here."

"Don't ever wake me up."

He took Clint's hand and pressed it to his sternum. "I'm really, really here. Badly maybe, and the way I'm here is as much of a painful mess as the way I died, but I really am alive—right now—and I'm really here."

Clint turned his body and collapsed forward until his face was smushed against Phil's shoulder. "I hate this."

"Me too. I want it to be a lot easier than it really is." He stroked Clint's hair. "If you can't forgive me at least forgive yourself."

Clint turned again until he was sitting with his back to the wall. "Those are two sides of the same coin." He let out a long breath. "This seems easier when you're mad at me."

"And so you're infuriating."

"Maybe."

"You make me mad for the moment, and you really do push my buttons so we fight, but
underneath all that I'm not angry with you for what neither of us wanted, and we didn't have control over any of it."

"And I don't know what to do with that." Clint sighed. "Maybe pain is the only thing I know how to feel any more."

"And anger," Phil said.

Clint nodded. "And frustration." He leaned against Phil. "At least it's better than being numb." He rubbed his thumbnail against the callous on the underside of his right middle finger. "This isn't the talk I thought we were going to have."

"I still owe you that one."

"Not really. Being honest with me is part of respecting me. Besides, I probably need pointers from Mockta about the rest of whatever I might have said. Even if she is evil."

"How is she evil? We've had one session and things have already changed."

"The rule about not having sex."

"Okay, yeah, that is evil."
Chapter 18

Steve barely glanced up from his third slice of chocolate mousse pie when Clint and Coulson walked into the kitchen in search of a belated dinner. The counter top of the island was crowded with now empty plates, serving dishes, wine and water glasses as well as coffee cups, several rapidly disappearing desserts, and a couple of bottles of white wine that weren't quite empty. The three bottles that had been emptied over the course of the casual but elegant meal had already been put into the recycling bin.

A scarlet faced Fitz was stammering his way through the end of a story that Bucky had demanded to hear. "And that," said Fitz, "is how I wound up spending time in a hyperbaric chamber."

"Huh." Tony refilled his wine glass. "I didn't realize you were a walking dead man too."

"Walking dead man?" Bruce said,

"You, me"—Tony pointed at Bruce, himself, then others around the room—"Steve, Bucky, Agent, and Fitz."

Natasha made a face. "That's creepy."

Bucky tilted his head and considered the young Scotsman. "So you're a hero."

Fitz looked startled. "Oh, uh, I wouldn't say that."

"Sure you are, little bro!" Tony clapped him on the shoulder. "Rescuing a pretty girl doesn't make you any less heroic." He looped an arm around Pepper's waist. "I'd say it makes you more heroic."

Pepper grinned at him and he gave her a big kiss that quickly turned thoughtful and deep, which earned the couple a round of junior-high-level hoots led by Natasha. Fitz and Bruce remained silent but blushed furiously.

Clint poked at the meager remains of the puff pastry and fish dish then went and rummaged around in the refrigerator.

Jemma leaned forward. "You know, studies indicate that stroke patients can benefit from treatment in a pressure chamber even long after the fact, sometimes years later. I wish this had occurred to me sooner, but there's a hyperbaric chamber one floor down. We should schedule additional treatments for you."

Fitz almost choked on a swallow of wine. "Couldn't make that much difference now, could it? I mean I can finish sentences and use both my hands."

Bucky patted Fitz's shoulder in solidarity.

"It's different for each individual but incremental improvement can matter a lot." Jemma spoke without looking at Fitz. "I could do like Steve and be there for you when you're in the chamber. Play cards with you or something."


"Good choice." Clint pulled a large butcher's package of nearly thawed steaks out of the refrigerator. "I think she'd beat you at poker every time. You blush too easily to bluff well. Unlike
Bucky, who was apparently born with a poker face.

Jemma looked up from her raspberries. "Thank you, Fitz." Her voice was so soft that Steve felt like he was eavesdropping on a private conversation. "Scrabble would be fine."

"I've been meaning to add more staff up here," Tony said, "especially to the cleaning crew. There are an awful lot of folks in residence right now. I'll take care of that tomorrow. Then it will be reasonable to ask that the sheets on those two beds be changed every day as the two patients and caretakers rotate out."

"That's thoughtful of you, Stark," Coulson said. "I'm sure everyone appreciates it."

"Yes," Jemma said.

"No problem, Agent, doc." Tony grinned.

Pepper put an arm around him. "While you're at it, how about hire a cook?"

Tony sighed. "I'll see if I can coax anyone to even show up for an interview." At a questioning look from Clint, he added, "I have a reputation among the ranks of culinary artistes for hire and it's not a good one. Not that I'm a horrible boss or anything I'm just a trouble magnet."

The archer rolled his eyes. "I know some people, I can help you find somebody."

Bucky studied Clint. "Didn't I play poker with you a long time ago?"

"Yep," Clint said. "You were a kid. Around nine years old, I think. And you bluffed really well."

Steve scowled. "Don't confuse him."

"Didn't think I was," Clint muttered.

"I remember playing poker with Clint," Bucky said. "We were in the dojo. I won."

Coulson drummed his fingers on the counter near the butcher-paper clad steaks. "What's the name of that place you like to go to in Little Italy?"

"Taormina?" Clint said.

"That's the one." Coulson put the package of steaks back into the refrigerator. "You like their Pollo Taormina."

"Yeah, and they have the best cheesecake." Clint followed Coulson with his eyes. "Are you asking me to dinner?"

Coulson closed the refrigerator door and looked at Clint. "Yes. Yes, I am. Are you accepting?"

Clint studied Coulson's face before he nodded. "Yes. Thank you."

Steve shifted uncomfortably, once again feeling like he was eavesdropping.

Clint crooked his arm and held it out toward Coulson, who hesitated just a moment before taking the proffered arm. As they left the kitchen, Natasha called, "Have fun."

Clint spun toward her. "You." He stabbed a finger in her direction. "I'm still peeved at you."
"That isn't the point," Clint managed to say before Coulson dragged him out of the room.

Natasha burst out laughing. She shook her head and poured the dregs of one of the bottles of wine into her glass. "Men, am I right?"

Pepper, Jemma, and—somewhat unexpectedly—Tony nodded.

The group finished consuming the remaining wine and desserts, then cleaned up the kitchen. Steve was wiping the now cleared island counter top when a disembodied voice said, "Sir? The A.I. sounded just as calm as ever to Steve, but Tony looked slightly alarmed as he straightened up from where he was loading one of the drawer style dishwashers.

"Yes, Jarvis?" Tony spoke while gazing at Pepper.

"I have detected an electronic blip inside the tower that I can't identify. It was brief and is now gone."

Tony laid two fingers against his cheek. "Could it have been a squawk from Clint's hearing aids?"

"No sir. Agent Barton is well away from the tower already."

"What do you think it was?"

"Unknown, sir. A sensor malfunction is one possibility."

"Fitz, you're with me," Tony said. "I could use an extra pair of eyes and hands while I chase this gremlin down."

"Yes sir," Fitz said as he followed Tony out of the room.

A couple of hours after dinner, both showered and dressed in T-shirts and comfortable sweat pants, Steve and Bucky returned to the bedroom where the hyperbaric chamber was set up, carrying decks of cards, dice, pads of paper and pencils, notes from Mockta, and a handheld.

Steve said, "I feel like we should be wearing matching pajama sets, like those blue ones your mother made for you."

Bucky grimaced. "I wish we were just facing my bunk beds."

Steve sighed. "Me too." He set the things he was carrying on the foot of the neatly made double bed.

Their conversation was interrupted by Jemma arriving with a food cart.

"Oh good," she said. "you aren't inside yet. I thought it would be useful for you both to have some snacks. I have some packaged to be easy to have in the hyperbaric chamber, including two thermoses of cherry juice. There's a pitcher of cherry juice for you, Captain."
Bucky tilted his head. "Cherry juice?"

"Cherry juice promotes the production of melatonin which helps you sleep," Jemma said. "You drank that cherry juice and tea mixture a couple of nights ago. I believe that contributed to how deeply you slept." She went over to the chamber and tucked the thermoses inside along with a Tupperware platter sealed by its lid that contained an assortment of snacks.

"Hmm." Steve examined the items on the cart. "Cheese, grapes, whole grain crackers, hummus, nuts, vegetable sticks, peanut butter, popcorn. Looks pretty good."

Tony and Bruce walked in. Tony took a slice of Monterrey Jack cheese and ate it. "It is good."

Bruce went to the pressure chamber and picked up the handheld that had been adapted into a controller. "James, do you know how this works?"

"Fitz and Tony showed me," Bucky said. "But maybe you better show me again."

Bruce pressed the device into Bucky's hand and had him push buttons while Bruce explained.

Tony crunched on a baby carrot. "Jemma, can you make me a list of what all you have here? We need a spread like this in the lab."

"I can write it down for you." She grinned. "Are you planning to spend all night in your lab because of that gremlin Jarvis reported earlier?"

"No," Tony said. "Jarvis, Fitz, Bruce, and I found nothing amiss though we're continuing to monitor. But sometimes one or more of us does spend the night in the lab. I usually don't when Pepper's in town though, so not tonight. Not me anyway. Better things to do."

Jemma nodded. Steve handed her a pad of paper and a pencil. She sat on the bed and began making a list.

Carrying a stem of grapes, Tony went over to Bucky and Bruce. Steve followed, figuring he should understand the controller too.

"You skipped over the texting keyboard," Tony said.

Steve watched while Bruce had Bucky send a text to Tony, who then texted a reply.

Jemma came over and handed the list she'd made to Tony. He looked it over. "Awesome."

"That's all the things the controller can do," Bruce said.

Bucky wrinkled his forehead. "I think I understand, but it may take me a while to remember all of it."

"If you can't remember something," Bruce said, "you can text or call me or Fitz or Tony. You can even ask Jarvis."

Maria, Fitz, and Natasha arrived. Bucky looked up and went pale. Clutching the controller to his chest, he backed up and leaned against the nearest wall.

Steve looked over the increasingly crowded room. "What are you all doing here?"

"This is an exciting milestone," Natasha said. "It's the first time Bucky will face the pressure chamber awake and without sedation. Or emotional coma."
Steve strode over and held the door open. "Thank you for coming. We'll let you know how it turns out."

Tony grabbed a handful of nuts and tossed one into his mouth. "C'mon, let's go to the kitchen. You can all help fix snacks for the lab."

Natasha ticked an eyebrow up.

Tony ignored her and herded people to the door. "This is all stuff that you can eat, Bruce. Nothing used to have a face."

Fitz leaned toward Bucky and said, "I'm sure you'll do fine, but good luck."

Bucky muttered, "Thanks."

When the room was finally cleared out, Steve went over and coaxed Bucky away from the wall. "Let's try some of this before Tony comes back and eats it all."

Bucky smiled wanly and allowed himself to be led over to sit on the edge of the double bed. He fiddled with the controller before setting it down. Steve pressed a filled plate into his hands before fixing a plate for himself. He sat on the other end of the bed.

"Somehow," Bucky said, "this isn't as much fun as sneaking into the kitchen and raiding the fridge after my parents were asleep."

Steve grinned. "I don't think your Mom was always asleep, and I'm pretty sure she purposely put our favorite foods in the fridge."

"I think you're right."

They ate in companionable silence for a while.

"Buck, it seems like you're a lot better these past couple of days since you spent the night in that thing without sedation hampering your brain."

"I am." Bucky looked up. "That's why I'm willing to try this. Not only do I remember better but I feel more like...me."

Steve nodded. "You seem more like you."

"I'll need your help though."

"Whatever you need me to do, I'm willing to help."

They finished eating, cleaned up, and then pushed the food cart out of the way. Bucky made a wry face. "I must have the angel of my mother sitting on my shoulder. She's sending us to brush our teeth again."

Steve chuckled. "She always did, even at midnight."

They went, got ready for bed again including brushing their teeth, then returned to the room with the hyperbaric chamber.

"Come on," Steve said, "I've got Mockta's notes and that printout with the guided imagery."

They each sat crosslegged on the double bed, facing each other. Steve shuffled through papers,
read Mockta's notes, then skimmed through the printout. Feeling self conscious, he said, "Close your eyes, Buck."

Bucky grinned crookedly. "It's going to be hard for me not to laugh."

Steve raised his eyebrows. "Do you laugh when Dr. Mockta does this?"

"No, but that's because it's her. Also, she doesn't read it."

"So, you're just going to laugh at me." Steve spoke lightly. "That's all right. I can endure some mocking from you. It wouldn't be the first time."

Bucky threw a pillow at Steve and they both laughed.

"Bucky, seriously, let's give this a try."

Bucky exhaled and closed his eyes.

"Breathe slowly and deeply," Steve read. "Paying attention to how you feel, center yourself in your body. Breathe relaxation in. Breathe tension out. You're taking an evening walk on the beach. The sand is still warm." He continued to read for about a minute before Bucky grabbed his wrist. For a split second, he thought he was being attacked and expected to hear an epithet in another language, then he realized that Bucky was just taking the paper from him.

"I never liked the beach script all that well," Bucky said. "Let me just try the self-hypnosis Mockta and I were working on."

"Okay. What do I need to do?"

"Just sit near me. I'll listen to you breathe."

In grabbing the paper, Bucky had scooted close enough that their knees were touching. He set the paper aside but didn't move away, so they sat there, crosslegged, knee to knee, facing each other.

The sergeant closed his eyes. Steve watched Bucky's face as he worked to mirror the brunet's deep even breathing. As the furrowed brow relaxed and the hard line of the mouth softened, Bucky looked younger. Only the long hair reaching to Bucky's shoulders stopped the years from dropping away and letting Steve see a boy who was not yet a Howling Commando. Almost ten minutes passed before Bucky opened his eyes. They were clear and gray and so close to untroubled that Steve's breath hitched in surprise.

"Let's try this," Bucky said. "You stay here."

Steve nodded. Bucky picked the controller up as well as a pack of playing cards and some dice. He walked over to the pressure chamber. Bucky hesitated before climbing onto the hospital style bed. Terror washed over his face for just a moment. He sat crosslegged and closed his eyes. A couple of minutes later, he worked the controller, closing the door and then starting the sequence to pressurize the chamber and increase the oxygen saturation.

Bucky looked up. From across the room, Steve could see the discomfort written on the other man's face. Bucky smiled bravely. "I feel like a gold fish."

Steve grinned. "I can see it—you're in that big glass tank."

Bucky pursed his lips and moved his mouth goldfish-like while pretending to swim from side to
side. After a moment, he and Steve collapsed on their respective beds, howling with laughter. Bucky got to his knees, moved his hands like fins and deliberately bumped into the glass wall a couple of times.

Still laughing, Steve gasped out, "Bucky stop. I can't breathe."

Bucky's face instantly became serious. He flattened his hands against the glass. "Are you having an asthma attack?"

Steve shook his head. "That doesn't happen anymore—you know, the supersoldier serum." He looked up at Bucky and grinned. "I just couldn't breathe because I was laughing so hard."

Bucky sat back in relief. "Oh yeah." He put his hands to the sides of his head. "Ich erinnere noch nicht so—I mean, I still don't remember as clearly as I'd like to."

"None of us can be who we were years ago. We become soldiers and we're never the same. We're given supersoldier serum. We go to war. We get frozen. And we're never the same."

"The monster that they made me, those memories, will always be a part of me." He looked away. "Whatever I was got shattered."

Steve put his other hand and his forehead against the glass. "Buck, you're doing so much better than when I first found you. I'm starting to feel like I've got you back, that you're going to be okay, and it won't take years or anything."

Bucky put his flesh and blood hand on the glass where he would have touched Steve's if the chamber wall wasn't between them. "Steve, I'll never be the same. I can never be the Bucky you remember."

"The brightest side is that you're alive. And I'll bet I can beat you at poker, and maybe even blackjack while your memory's still too fried for you to count cards."

"Take advantage while you can, punk." Bucky picked up a deck of cards.

Steve shrugged. "So you'll be like a mosaic. I appreciate all art forms."

One side of Bucky's mouth pulled into a smile. "I should have known you'd look on the bright side. Pollyanna."

"Things are different now than they were when we were young."

"Yeah, I'm still trying to adjust to some of it. A lot of it's good though."

"A lot of things are still crazy but people seem more able to be themselves. Like Clint and Coulson."
"That was nice, Phil asking Clint to dinner."

Bucky dealt two hands of cards. "Your Dad would have been awful about that like he was so many things. Your Mom was a good person. I always liked her."

"And she loved you, Buck."

Bucky stared at the two sets of five cards laying face down on the mattress. "This is not gonna work. I'd have to play both hands."

"You could prop my hand against the glass so only I can see it."

Bucky shook his head. "I can see a lot of things going wrong with that." He sighed and scooped the cards up. "All right, I'll try playing cards on the handhelds." He picked his controller up. "Seems wrong somehow. How do I make this thing talk to your game device?"

Steve picked his handheld up and they figured it out. The sergeant grinned when he successfully dealt the first hand. "Sometimes," Bucky said, "I think my mother knew more than she let on. She asked me to look after you."

Steve looked up sharply. "Is that why you helped me?"

"I helped you because that's what I wanted to do. But it was nice to know that she...approved."

Bucky discarded two cards and Steve discarded one. Bucky kept talking. "Women now seem more able to have well rounded lives. Women like Peggy who did that in our day had to fend off disrespect and other unwanted attention. These young women, like Pepper and Jemma and even Erin, they could be Peggy's granddaughters, and they don't really know what that was like."

"Peggy has a granddaughter."

Bucky nodded. "Peggy was really something."

"Were you upset that I asked Peggy out?"

Bucky looked up. "Why would you think that?"

"Maybe you were sweet on her."

Bucky looked back at his cards. "She isn't the one I was sweet on, Steve."

"Well, yeah, you could have been sweet on a lot of girls." Steve thought to himself that a lot of women loved James Buchanan Barnes, they pretty much all noticed him, and he'd gone out with more than his fair share.

"Yeah, it could have been a lot of people," Bucky muttered.

"Probably a blond woman though, right? You did seem to prefer blonds."

Steve looked up to find Bucky watching him. "Yeah," the other man said. "I'm partial to blonds."

Steve won four out of their five hands of poker, which went faster on the electronic game systems than they would have being played with physical pasteboard cards. Bucky threw the controller aside. "I can't concentrate as well playing this way."

Steve grinned. "It throws off your ability to bluff."
"Maybe." Bucky picked up his set of five dice. "Don't you have a Yahtzee score pad over there?"

Steve rummaged through the small stack of paper and pads. "Yep."

"Great," Bucky said. "This, at least, we can play the old fashioned way."

Steve chuckled. They played until almost one in the morning before Bucky was settled down enough to sleep. Steve dimmed the lights and laid down. Unable to sleep himself, he watched Bucky's face relax into slumber.

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Clint ordered a bottle of wine without one word of discussion with Phil. Phil assumed the wine was partly to enhance their meal, but mostly because it had been a difficult day, and Clint let him. The archer's real motivation was somewhat different. Phil didn't get goofy or sloppy or nasty when he drank, he got less self conscious. Phil could drink far more than half a bottle of wine with a meal and most people would never guess by observation of behavior that the man had consumed alcohol. This was a useful trait for an agent and he'd made good use of it over the years. Clint, though, always knew when Phil had been drinking. Being less self conscious made the older man more likely to tell a joke, quicker to laugh, increased his facility with foreign languages including ASL, and made him more affectionate. It even made him a better kisser. Not that there was anything wrong—at all—with Phil's kisses in any case, but kicking away some of that self conscious self control added a touch of boldness that Clint liked. A lot.

The service at Taormina was a bit slow that night, which was fine by Clint. More wine on an empty stomach served his purposes. The food was good and the conversation meaningful. Wine and relaxation made certain things easier to say, like "Why the hell didn't you contact me, at least send a cowardly text, instead of assuming I had moved on?"

Phil signed  *I'm an idiot* , and then said, "I'm overly devoted to duty, and wasn't necessarily hitting on all cylinders yet just because I'd figured out we had been an item. There were a lot of complicating factors, like S.H.I.E.L.D. being a mess along with my memory."

Clint cast a dark look at Phil. "An 'item?' Makes it sound like something at the grocery store."

"It was a confusing time, okay?"

Clint waved an artichoke heart that he'd speared with his fork. " *That* I agree with."

The mood between them was warm and conciliatory on the cab ride back to the tower, which was mostly silent as they communicated in ASL—signing at first, then fingerspelling into each other's palms as they leaned against one another in the back seat. Phil took Clint's hand as they used the key and then waited for the limited access elevator to the restricted access floors. After they stepped in and the doors closed, Clint nibbled at that soft place beside the jawbone and just below the ear, and was rewarded by Phil's soft intake of breath followed by an insistent kiss. They made out on the long ride up to the residential section of the tower.

The walk from the elevator to Clint's room seemed too long but, to his relief, they resumed their heated make out session as soon as the door closed behind them. Within a few minutes, Phil pulled Clint's shirt off and added a molten trail of touch down the archer's spine to the nips and kisses they were already exchanging.
Clint grabbed the hem of Phil's black Tshirt and muttered, "To hell with the rules."

Phil wrenched away. "We shouldn't...I can't...It's going too well—"

"Philip." Clint clasped the other man's arm.

Phil convulsively pulled him close and gave him a desperate kiss that Clint drank in like a man dying in the desert. Then Phil yanked the door open.

"Damn it. Phil!" Clint barked just as the door closed.
Chapter 19

Clint crossed to the door and leaned against it. "Damn it, Phil," he muttered. If only he hadn't said anything, maybe they would have gotten to the point of no return, where that damnable rule of Mockta's was already so close to broken that neither one of them bothered to stop at some invisible line. Probably not. But Clint had hoped. Ironically, last night, he had been the one to walk away.

He took a few steps into the room and kicked his discarded knit shirt, which proved a most unsatisfying object to lash out at. The shirt shifted across the carpet with his foot and arranged itself into a new limp heap just a few inches from where it had started. Clint stared at the garment for a moment, feeling as though it'd betrayed him.

He grabbed a quiver and a bow and, without bothering to put a shirt on, headed to the dojo where he set up targets. In thirty minutes of target practice, he split several arrows and could have taken several impressive new pictures if he'd been so inclined. Still frustrated, he put the targets away, and then left. He went through the common area but Phil wasn't on any of the couches. He went to the kitchen, which was empty. He moped back to his room where he put the quiver and bow away.

Clint put pajamas on, then got ready for bed. He laid in the bed for less than five minutes before he realized he was unlikely to sleep if he stayed there. The bed smelled like Phil. Both pillows smelled like Phil. After getting up, he changed the pillow case on his pillow, piled some blankets on the floor, lay down on the makeshift pallet, then pulled a blanket up to his chin. And stared at the ceiling—which he couldn't see because it was too dark. Still, his eyes refused to close.

Feeling morose, he said, "Jarvis, why do you hate me?"

"I do not hate you, Agent Barton," said the A.I.'s oddly soothing voice.

"You ratted me out to Mockta and Phil about his clothes, then you locked me in this room with him."

"I believe you are aware that Director Coulson already knew about the clothes, and that I was following instructions as far as the locked door."

Clint sat up and crossed his arms. "That was all for his benefit."

"Was it?"

"Wasn't it?"

"Do you assume that Ms. Romanoff hates you when she nudges you in the right direction?"

"No, but I'm annoyed with her too." Clint lay back down. He shifted onto his side. This was going to be a long night.

"Director Coulson has nightmares every night. It is my understanding that people usually only remember dreams when they wake from them. Because of that, neither of you realizes that his nightmares are frequent. The Director doesn't often wake from his dreams and I believe that is attributable to you."

"To me?"

"Even in your sleep, you put your arm around Director Coulson when he gets restless in his sleep or
begins muttering. He tends to settle back down quickly."

"Why are you telling me this?" Clint mumbled into his pillow.

"Human beings experience REM sleep, during which dreams are most likely to occur, in relatively regular patterns. The Director's first round of REM sleep should occur soon. Also, during your nights at the tower, when one or the other of you has left to sleep elsewhere, he's been waking up during his nightmares. Sometimes he seems quite disturbed."

Clint tried to make sense of what Jarvis was telling him. He flipped onto his back. "I don't understand."

"Evidence might lead one to conclude that you act out more but that he suffers more without showing it."

"Oh, great. More of you being on his side."

"Not really. I would summarize what I'm saying as: he needs you but is reluctant to say so. Is that not what you'd like him to tell you?"

"Among other things." Clint sat up. Without thinking, he signed _where is he?_

"His office," Jarvis responded without hesitation. Clint took that as confirmation that the butler monitored in ranges outside of visible light, most likely infrared in this case.

"Of course." Clint stood. He gathered up two blankets and two pillows and headed toward Phil's office where he quietly let himself in.

Phil lay on the floor under a decorative throw that was usually on the divan. An uncomfortable looking decorative pillow was nearby but not under his head. As Jarvis had predicted, Phil was twitching and mumbling, almost certainly dreaming.

Clint lay on the floor next to Phil and put an arm over him. Despite still being fully dressed, Phil was cold. He must've been exhausted to be asleep at all. Within a few minutes, not only had Phil settled down, he was warming up.

Luckily, the rug was thick and comfortable because that was as much mattress as they were going to get. Clint got up and put the two blankets he'd brought over Phil, then he removed the man's shoes. He eased a pillow under Phil's head before positioning himself on his own pillow, crawling under the blankets, and folding himself around Phil.

He hated to admit it to himself but Jarvis was right, and he'd have to tell that to the A.I. when he got a good chance to do so.

Despite still being on the floor, he felt more relaxed than he had alone in his room. Clint was vaguely aware that he was rubbing Phil's arm as he drifted into unconsciousness.

Steve sat straight up from being deep asleep. "Bucky," he breathed as he looked around in the dim light.

Thump. _Whimper._
Steve's eyes were drawn to the sounds coming from the hyperbaric chamber. Bucky started to shake. He let out a yelp then tried to get up, but the curved glass walls of the chamber thwarted him.

Night terrors, Maria had called them. They were certainly terrifying to watch. And he couldn't do anything for Bucky.

Steve clutched a pillow to his chest. Bucky continued to cry out and move. Steve wanted to do something—anything—to help Bucky and there was nothing he could do. He got up and pulled the food cart closer. Systematically, he ate whatever was left—the cheese, then the crackers, the broccoli and nuts—until it was all gone. Then he drank the remains of the cherry juice, now warm and watered down by melted ice.

He sat back against the wall and resumed clutching his pillow. He thought about going to the kitchen for ice cream and chips but he didn't want to leave Bucky. All he could do was stare as Bucky tried to get up, bumped into the wall, then thumped back to the mattress with a grunt or a curse. Every now and then, Bucky punched something. A few minutes later, Bucky punched the wall one final time before flopping against the mattress and settling down.

Steve took a breath and waited. Bucky was calm again, and asleep. Steve got up and dimmed the lights further but couldn't bring himself to turn them off. He returned to the double bed only to lay there tense and restless, flipping and shifting and fearing that he'd never get back to sleep, until finally he drifted off.

Phil woke up at half past seven, only a little later than usual. Sleeping on the floor of the office wasn't that bad. Only his head hurt. He was thinking it was nice that he hadn't had any nightmares when he realized that he had blankets, his head was on a pillow, and a warm body was snuggled against his back. He turned over. "Clint?" The word was out of his mouth before he could stop it. He really didn't want to awaken Clint but it was too late.

"I don't want to go to school," Clint muttered.

Phil grinned just as the archer opened his eyes. He traced his fingers along the younger man's jaw. "Hey. What are you doing here?"

Clint burrowed deeper into the blankets and pressed his face into Phil's shoulder. Voice muffled, he said, "I was arguing with Jarvis when he told me you were having a nightmare, so I came and held you until you settled down."

That news gave Phil pause from more than one angle but he decided not to question it. He put both arms around Clint. "I'm glad you're here."

"Can't fucking sleep without you. I hate that woman."

Phil chuckled. "You don't mean that."

"Yes I do."

"We'll figure something out. I don't want to sleep without you."
Phil felt Clint's warm even breaths through his shirt. Just when he thought Clint had gone back to sleep, he heard his muffled voice. "Jarvis said you need me but you won't say it."

Phil took a surprised breath. He ran that sentence through his mind a few times before admitting, "He's right."

Clint shifted backwards until he could look in Phil's eyes. "I need to hear those things from you."

Phil held Clint closer so he wouldn't have to look into those searching eyes. His mouth went dry. A long moment passed and Clint shifted as he said, "Philip?"

"Shhh." Phil hissed the shushing sound into Clint's hair and the archer went still.

Phil took several deep breaths. "I need you," he whispered. "More than I ever want to admit."

Clint looked at him in surprise. They held each other for a long moment. When Phil unconsciously stroked his hand down Clint's back the archer struggled into a sitting position.

"Fucking rule," Clint muttered. "I need coffee." He stood, wrapped a blanket around himself like a cloak, then headed out the door.

Phil curled himself around Clint's still warm pillow. His muscles ached with the impulse to go after Clint but he couldn't make himself do it.

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Startled awake, Steve listened intently for half a second before flinging himself further back onto the bed with a gasp, and away from the shadowy figure standing beside it. Heart pounding in his ears, he finally realized it was—

"Bucky?" Steve said. The room was so dim and the person was standing in front of the light so he still wasn't certain.

Bucky sat on the edge of the bed with a bounce. "I did it."

"Uh," was all that Steve managed to say.

"I faced down the monster"—Bucky's voice was triumphant—"and spent the night in that thing with nothing between me and horror except my own willpower."

"I knew you could do it."

"Well I didn't." He grabbed Steve's arm. "And I'm starving."

Getting up, he pulled Steve with him and they wound up stumbling together, thumping each others backs, then embracing for a long moment. Still not comfortably awake, Steve held on. Bucky rested his head on Steve's shoulder and went still. Steve rubbed Bucky's left shoulder and breathed in deeply. "I—" he started to say but the words died in his throat. He couldn't be sure that Bucky wasn't somewhere else, maybe even regressed into childhood. Finally, he said, "I'm proud of you, Buck."

With a sigh, Bucky pulled away. "Let's see what's for breakfast. Probably bagels."
In the hall outside the kitchen, they saw Coulson, decked out in his suit, heading to the kitchen, just as Clint left the kitchen, wrapped in a blanket and clutching a mug of coffee. Bucky pulled on Steve's arm, so the two of them stopped in the cross hall. Coulson and Clint stopped in the main hall and gazed at each other. No doubt thinking they were unobserved, Coulson put an arm around the blanket-and-pajama-clad archer. No words passed between them but some kind of communication did. Coulson took a sip of Clint's coffee. With a wry smile, Clint took his mug back, kissed Coulson on the neck, turned away in a swirl of blanket, and then continued down the hall.

Hands in his pockets, Coulson watched Clint walk away before turning around and heading into the kitchen.

When the main hall was empty, a grinning Bucky led Steve into the kitchen where Coulson was pouring coffee into a mug. Sipping her own coffee, Natasha watched Coulson, whose mind seemed to be somewhere else to the point that he sloshed a few drops of coffee. Maria, Jemma, Fitz, and Bruce sat around the kitchen island, eating slices of some kind of quick bread.

"Phil," Maria said, "there's been a jump in the Hydra chatter."

Coulson grunted an acknowledgment.

Fitz said, "There's a lot of stuff about them increasing their expenditures to thwart the effort to recover S.H.I.E.L.D."

"There's been an uptick," Jemma said, "in Hydra connected hacking attempts, most of which are pretty poorly done. Amateurish even. Skye's unimpressed but getting irritated."

"Maybe that's why they need to increase their expenditures." Coulson took a long drink of coffee. "Acquire better talent."

Bucky tapped Bruce's plate. "What are you eating?"

"Banana bread." Bruce gestured toward the counter. "There's another whole loaf."

"Thank goodness it isn't bagels again." Bucky opened the refrigerator, then got a carton of milk out.

Grinning, Steve poured himself a cup of coffee.

Maria thrust a printout into Coulson's hand. He took a sip of coffee and looked at it.

"At your request," she said, "I had this analysis done, after searching everything we've intercepted mentioning the Winter Soldier, James Barnes, Sergeant Barnes, or any other names and aliases we know of."

Wide eyed and wary, Bucky looked up from his milk and banana bread. "Report?" he said.

"Yeah." Coulson's tone was distracted as he answered. "Yesterday morning, I asked Maria to look into this."

Bucky and Steve looked at each other then watched Coulson finish reading. He looked up at Bucky with a broad smile. "Hydra isn't sure but suspects you're dead."

Bucky tilted his head and considered Coulson.
"That's good news, isn't it?" Steve said.

Coulson nodded. "It is. They are still looking for the Winter Soldier's body. They don't want that arm falling into S.H.I.E.L.D's hands."

Bruce's eyebrows jumped up. "I guess we'd better get more serious about studying it, then, because it has, in fact, fallen into our hands."

"Hmm," Maria mused. "You're right. We've been so distracted by other issues that we haven't focused on the prosthetic arm."

"It's also bloody difficult to study," Jemma muttered.

"We need to figure out how to overcome that," Bruce said. He looked from Bucky to Steve and back. "The only two known, successful, living supersoldiers." Bruce put his hand over the bottom of his face and tapped his little finger against his jaw.

Bucky scooted closer to Steve. "I don't like this."

Steve patted his shoulder. "I'm sure it'll be okay, Buck."

Coulson watched Bruce over the rim of his coffee cup. "What are you thinking, Dr. Banner?"

"Not only can we compare the two of them against each other," Bruce said, "we have access to their military files. So we have their medical records from before they were enhanced. We can gather meaningful data from ordinary tests."

Eyes bright and excited, Jemma said, "Like you'd get during a physical. Height, weight, temperature, blood pressure, blood tests."

Bucky shuddered. "I hate needles."

Bruce put a kind hand on Bucky's arm. "We can do things to help make that easier. Small gauge needles, distraction techniques, even self hypnosis."

Bucky stared at him for a moment before nodding. "I can do self hypnosis."

"Excellent!" Bruce jumped up. "I've got to talk to Tony." He rushed out of the kitchen.

Maria and Coulson exchanged a look. He flicked his head in the direction Bruce had gone. She gave a small nod before hurrying after the scientist.
In the open doorway to the kitchen, Erin Mockta watched Maria hasten away and then walked in. She smiled at Bucky. He saluted her.

"You need some kind of rank," Bucky said.

Mockta's eyebrow ticked up. "Rank? How about General?"

Bucky and Steve both chuckled. "Yes, ma'am," Steve said. "I can see you being a General."

Coulson shook his head as he poured himself another cup of coffee. Juggling his coffee, a plate of banana bread, and the report, he headed toward the door.

Mockta said, "Good morning, Director Coulson. How are things?"

Coulson paused. "Things are intense as well as frustrating and exhausting."

"All going to plan then?" she said.

He sighed. "According to your plan, maybe."

She grinned. "It will be worth it."

He gave her a searching look. "I hope so," he said and then left.

Fitz put a cup of coffee and a thick slice of banana bread in front of her.

"Thank you," she said. "Very kind." She turned to Bucky. "Are you ready for your session?"

"Yes, ma'am." Bucky stood. He struggled to contain his excitement. "I did it. I got in the chamber by myself."

"That is wonderful, James." She smiled. "I'm proud of you. You'll have to tell me all about it."

After his session with Dr. Mockta, Bucky stood in the hallway with her and Steve. His posture was loose and relaxed. Because Bucky was smiling, Steve was smiling.

"You are doing so much better," Steve said.

"I agree," Mockta said. "You're a changed man."

"I'm hopeful," Bucky said. "I can't remember the last time I felt hopeful."

"Getting in the hyperbaric chamber without sedation," Mockta said, "has helped you by leaps and bounds."
Bucky nodded. "I can think better. I feel more like me."

"It was a triumph," Steve said.

Bucky clasped Steve's shoulder. "Couldn't have done it without you."

Tony and Maria strode up together. "Dr. Mockta," he said. "I've been meaning to tell you how impressed I am by what you've managed to do in helping Sergeant Barnes. I didn't expect this kind of improvement in just a couple of months."

"Neither did I." Erin Mockta turned an amused smile on Stark. "He is remarkable. I've never seen anyone work harder or with more determination. He's also had extraordinary support from you, and everyone here."

Tony clapped Steve on the shoulder. "None of it would have happened without this stubborn cuss right here. If Cap hadn't been so insistent that Barnes could and should be helped, I'd probably have tossed him out on the curb."

Bucky curled his fingers around Tony's arm. "Thank you for letting me stay."

Tony nodded. "It was the right thing to do, and you've been earning that trust every day since then."

"I agree," Mockta said. "He's also ready for a lighter schedule of visits from me. I'll cut him back from three visits a week to two. If he doesn't need me sooner, I won't be back until Monday."

"We'll try not to stress him out too badly," Maria said.

Mockta glanced at her. "See that you don't."

Maria nodded. "Come on, Tony," she said. "Bruce is in your workshop. Pepper should be there by now too." She and Tony continued on their way.

Steve lay a gentle hand on Bucky's shoulder. "How about we go work on those drawings of Hydra compounds?"

"Sounds good." Bucky turned to Mockta. "I'll see you Monday?"

"Yes, James." She smiled. "Monday. You're doing really well."

Arms crossed, chin tilted down, leaned back against a workbench in the lab, Tony looked at Bruce from under his eyebrows. "So, what you're saying is that you've finally woken up to the fact that you have access to blood from two supersoldiers. And have an excuse to collect samples that doesn't seem dangerously self-serving."

Bruce made a frustrated gesture. "I wouldn't do that."

Tony straightened up. "I would."

Pepper laid a gentle hand on Bruce's shoulder. "It would be understandable if you were tempted. This might be one of the few ways available for you to somehow treat yourself."
Bruce became still and pale. "It is tempting, so I try not to even think about it. This isn't about that though."

Tony paced. "I get that. And it makes sense. That arm of Bucky's is somehow linked into his biological system. It may well be casting off markers that show up in his bloodstream or elsewhere, like his brain. We need to start somewhere in figuring the damn thing out."

"Exactly." Bruce nodded. "You asked me to begin researching a replacement arm. It would be helpful to know as much as possible about how the current arm functions, and how it affects him."

Tony's eyes flicked to Maria. "Not to mention that S.H.I.E.L.D. will be very interested in whatever you find out."

Maria ticked one eyebrow up and back down. "I work for Stark Industries."

Pepper sighed. "Because of how strange things are, to some extent, we're all working for S.H.I.E.L.D."

"Of course," Maria said, "Coulson will be interested in whatever is discovered."

Tony nodded. "I will be too."

Bruce stole a glance at Tony. "Does that mean I can get started?"

Tony exhaled. "Yes. We don't have much choice really, and probably should have started this sooner."

"I don't think," Bruce said, "that Barnes was in any condition to cooperate much sooner than now."

"That's true too." Tony looked up. "Maria, get Bruce whatever he needs."

"And Maria," Pepper said, "get preliminary budget figures to me by Friday."

Maria smiled. "Yes ma'am."

"Thank you." Bruce nodded at Pepper and then Tony. He turned and rushed toward the door of the workshop. Maria was right on his heels.

Tony called after Bruce. "No human experimentation."

"I won't," Bruce answered over his shoulder.

Pepper called out, "And no self experimentation."

Bruce continued hurrying away in silence.

"Bruce!" she snapped.

He paused and half turned around. "I won't."

Face pinched with concern, Tony watched Bruce stalk off. "Is this like making an addict responsible for doing controlled scientific experiments with heroin?"

Pepper leaned on his shoulder. "Mmm, not sure. Maybe it's like sending you to a liquor store."

"I am not an alcoholic," Tony insisted with grave indigence. "I am a drunk. Alcoholics go to
meetings; drunks go to the liquor store. And parties. Drunks go to parties."

Pepper dissolved into giggles. Tony maintained the serious and offended look for about thirty seconds before he started to laugh. He pulled her close. "I love it that you get me like this."

"It's always been a little worrisome that I understand you this well."

Lunch time found the tower kitchen very crowded. Clint had semi-mockingly donned a checkered apron and made a massive amount of chicken stir fry, and a smaller amount of tofu, the smell of which had drawn in the rest of the residents.

"You know," Tony said, "I do have an actual dining room. Two, in fact."

"Who needs dining rooms when you have a kitchen island?" Clint scoffed as he settled himself in a seat with a loaded plate. He was still wearing the apron.

"Who needs a dining room when you have a floor?" Steve challenged.

Bucky snickered around a wad of rice noodle. Bruce gestured with his chopsticks without looking up from the stack of files he was reading. "The Captain makes a good point."

"Why would you ever need two dining rooms anyway?" Fitz had given up on chopsticks and was using a fork despite Jemma's best efforts at teaching him. Most of the rest of the table had opted for forks in the first place.

"Oh I'm sure Stark has his reasons." Natasha examined a dark spot on a carrot before eating it.

"Tony always has reasons," Pepper said, just coming in. "Even if he doesn't, he makes a few up on the spot." She shrugged out of her suit jacket, draped it over the unclaimed stool between Coulson and Steve, and deftly swept Bruce's folders closed and onto the floor.

"Hey!"

"I am establishing and enforcing a 'no file folders at meals' rule." Pepper stalked over to fix herself a plate.

Tony pulled a bowl of fruit toward himself. "Shareholders' meeting go that well, huh?"

"Do not speak." She sat and wolfed down some stir fry. "This is really good. Who made this?"

Clint raised his hand quietly.

"Explains the apron." Pepper propped an elbow on the counter and rubbed her temple. "I am so glad I have theatre tickets for tomorrow. I need the night off. No, I need about a month off, but I'll take what I can get."

Tony passed her a glass bottle of cream soda. "If that's gonna be your night off are we uninvited?"

"No." She took a swig from the bottle and set it down with a sigh. "You're not uninvited. Though I only remember actually inviting Barnes." She raised her eyebrows at Tony.
"I figured my invitation was implied." Tony grinned.

She rolled her eyes.

"What do you have tickets for?" Bucky asked curiously.

"Well, anything." Pepper shrugged. "They're ticket vouchers, actually. I only have four though."

"I can buy tickets for any extras who want to go." Tony tossed a grape into his mouth. "I can afford front row seats for all of us. I mean, fourth row is usually better, that's really where the lighting designer designs for, but you get the point."

"It's so easy to forget that you're cultured," Natasha said dryly.

Tony scoffed. Jemma preempted his comeback. "I think it would be nice for us all to go. What's playing right now? Any good musicals?"

"The Fifty Shades of Grey musical is running off Broadway," Tony provided.

"Can we not?" Clint looked like he might be sick.

"What?" Tony smirked. "Scared your G-man will get ideas?"

"No. I just have a lot against that entire franchise."

"Barton reads fanfiction. And writes it, not that he'll let anyone read his shit." Natasha waved her fork. "I'm pretty sure it offends his sensibilities that badly written Twilight smut got published."

"Actually," Clint stole a bite off her plate, "I have definite opinions about consent that both Fifty Shades and Twilight are at odds with."

Coulson frowned. "Did you read Twilight?"

"Maybe."

"Besides, if Phil needs any ideas," Natasha smirked devilishly, "I have a whole flashdrive of gay erotica that I'd be more than happy to share."

Blushing furiously and trying to act like he wasn't, Fitz asked, "Why do you have a flashdrive of gay erotica?"

"Mostly to tease Clint with. The flashdrive of lady love fiction is for me."

"Weren't we making plans for going to the theatre?" Steve asked pointedly.

"Yes, we were." Bruce sounded relieved someone had redirected the conversation. He flicked through a webpage on his ever-present tablet which had been spared his folders' express trip to the floor. "Book of Mormon is running. Lion King is still running. Mama Mia and Phantom of the Opera are both back. Wicked, though unfortunately not with Idina Menzel, she's in something else right now. Aladdin, Kinky Boots, Cabaret, Les Mis, Chicago, Jersey Boys, Avenue Q, Into the Woods, and something called Naked Boys Singing."

"Well." Steve reached for his glass. "That is quite the lineup."

Natasha's brow furrowed. "What about Walk the Line?"
"That Johnny Cash musical?" Bruce scrolled back up through the page. "Sold out for the next week and a half."

Tony leaned forward. "Wouldn't peg you as a Johnny Cash fan, Natasha."

"I keep a close watch on this heart of mine," Natasha quoted lyrically, "I keep my eyes wide open all the time.' Johnny Cash feels me on a deep, spiritual level."

"I think I need to know that song," Bucky said. Natasha tossed him an iPod and headphones from her pocket. Jemma helped him find the right track as the discussion of show choices continued.

"I've always liked Les Mis," Pepper offered.

"I read that book." Steve stabbed a cube of chicken with his fork. "It's depressing."

"You actually read that brick?" Tony balked. "It's like a billion pages long."

"I was laid up with pneumonia." Steve shrugged. "I had time."

"Huh." Tony shook his head and ate more grapes.

"So I guess that's a 'no' on Les Mis." Pepper sighed. "And I'm going to say that Cabaret being set in Nazi Germany is grounds for throwing it out."

Bucky passed Natasha's iPod back. "I'd like to avoid Nazis if at all possible."

Steve nodded and cringed slightly. "Bad times."

"Hey, on the bright side they were times that taught you how to steal a car." Natasha tucked her iPod away and munched a carrot. "Very useful skill."

Bucky looked at Steve. "When did you steal a car?"

"You were there. Near Strasbourg."

"I mean since then." Bucky nodded toward the Russian. "That she'd know about."

"Oh. Uh. March." Steve suddenly became very interested in his food. "On the run from Hydra-controlled S.H.I.E.L.D."

"Oh." Bucky became equally interested in his own food.

Clint cleared his throat. "How about Avenue Q, Avenue Q is fun."

"What's it about?" Steve asked.

"It's basically Sesame Street on drugs." Tony sounded pleased.

"I know what Sesame Street is," Steve said slowly, "but I've never watched it."

Clint gaped at him. "Why not?"

"Because I'm a grown man."

"That is not an excuse." Clint reached to pull open a junk drawer and grab a pen. "Natasha, why do you have taser chips in the junk drawer? Oh never mind. Steve, gimme that damn notebook of yours, the one you put the stuff you need to catch up on in."
"I don't have it on me."

"Bullshit you don't."

Steve set the contents of his jeans pockets on the counter—a single wrapped cookie, a pencil, an eraser, some change, store brand chapstick, and what looked like a motorcycle key—and stood and turned his pockets out, giving Clint a challenging look.

Clint huffed. "You're adding it later."

Jemma made a face as Steve swept his effects back into his pockets with a roll of his eyes. "Why are you carrying around a cookie?"

"Why would you not want to carry around a cookie?" he asked with a grin as he sat back down.

Pepper laughed and nearly snorted her drink. "Musicals, can we decide so Tony can buy tickets?"

"Wicked's good." Fitz shrugged. "Saw it on West End last time I was in London. It's based on The Wizard of Oz."

Bucky perked up. "Yeah?"


"Yeah." Bucky looked at Steve. "We saw it when it came out. I had boxing winnings and we actually bothered to pay extra to go to a first run theatre."

"Because you had asked Milli O'Hara to go with you and I was supposed to take her little sister but they both backed out last minute." Steve laughed.

"So we scalped their tickets at the door and spent the money on pie at dinner." Bucky grinned broadly and chuckled.

"Hey, pie is good." Tony pulled out his phone. "We're all going, yeah? So that's ten people, Pep's got four tickets covered, I need to get six?"

"Seven, if everyone here wants to go," Pepper said. "Maria knows about the vouchers, she'd like to go. She needs a night off as much as I do, possibly more, depending on what's happening downstairs right now."

"Seven it is."

Most of the team finished up and scattered to various corners of the tower, leaving the supersoldiers and Clint still eating while Jemma, who had volunteered to clean up, loaded the dishwasher. Bucky experimentally tried to wield a pair of chopsticks with his left hand, was unable to keep a grip of them with the smooth metal of his fingers, gave up, and resumed eating right-handedly with a fork. "Wonder how much Broadway's changed."

"Screens instead of signs on the street now," Steve said. "Other than that, I don't know."

"It's musical theatre, guys." Clint snorted. "Yours was its heyday. I doubt it's that different; shit can only change so much in less than a century."

Steve shook his head. "Everything is different."

"C'mon," Clint scoffed, "everything, really?"
“Everything.” Steve nodded. “Soap, streetlights, Coca-cola, bananas....”

“Whoa, hey, New Coke happened but they fixed that.”

“It's still different.”

“How?”

“High fructose corn syrup,” Jemma called from across the room. “I will get you some proper Coke, Steve.”

“I appreciate that,” Steve said.

Clint rolled his eyes. “And how are bananas different? Bananas are just bananas, right?”

“Modern bananas are pulpy and tasteless.” Steve made a face of disgust.

“Yes, they are.” Bucky mirrored Steve's expression.

“They're bananas, man! That's what bananas are like.”

Jemma moved away from the dishwasher and walked over to them. “Actually, Steve's right. Most bananas grown in the world today are Cavendish bananas. That's pretty much the only kind of banana you can get in the Americas and Europe now, but it used to be that the most widely available banana variety was the Gros Michel. Gros Michel bananas are fatter, sweeter, more flavorful, and creamier than Cavendishes, but they were almost entirely wiped out by a banana blight in the fifties so they had to be replaced. Interestingly, though, artificial banana flavoring like for candies and liquors was formulated prior to the blight and therefore is based on the Gros Michel, not the Cavendish, which is why banana flavored things don't seem to actually taste like bananas—they do, just a different kind of banana. Nowadays, though, you can only get Gros Michel bananas in mainland Southeast Asia.”

Steve made a gesture of vindication.

“Alright, Hermione,” Clint sighed, “I am proven wrong.”

“I'm not Hermione.” Jemma crossed her arms.

“You sort of are, though.”

“I'm staying out of this.” Steve got up.

Chapter End Notes

Please see Part 2 of this series, "Something Wicked" for the events of the team's theatre trip.
Thursday night, after most of the group got back to the tower after seeing Wicked, Jemma dropped onto the couch in the common area. "We ought to do something fun." She pulled pins out of her hair. Only Maria and Pepper's extra guest, Betty, had not gone to the tower after the show.

Pepper grinned. "What? Is going to the theatre not fun?"

"No, it is." Jemma sat up, tucking her feet under her. "Which is exactly why we should keep the fun going."

"I like that logic," Tony said, popping a bottle of champagne that he'd retrieved from somewhere. "We could go all junior high slumber party and tell secrets."

"Considering who all we have here," Bruce said, "I'm less than sure that would be wise."

"I think it sounds fun." Bucky grinned wickedly. He had recovered from his show tune-induced battle fatigue.

"Uh," Steve held up a hand apprehensively, "if we do this, can we establish a rule that you can only tell secrets about yourself?"

Natasha smirked. "You've done this with him before, haven't you?"

"Yes," both soldiers said at once, one of them long suffering, the other borderline gleeful.

Coulson fiddled with his new Wicked themed coffee mug. "I don't think Stark has anything to tell us that we couldn't find in a tabloid."

Tony put a hand to his chest. "I am deeply wounded that you put so little faith in my trust in all of you."

Clint snorted. "Tony, you trust Pepper and Bruce. You're friendly enough with the rest of us, and we work together, live together, but you have issues with people and with the Man and, like, half of us are the Man."

"I will grant you that I have issues with people, but," Tony shrugged, "I do trust you guys. And ladies," he amended after a sharp look from Natasha. "And to prove it I'll go first." He plopped on the couch next to Jemma, poured himself a glass of champagne, and cleared his throat, ignoring the curious and doubtful looks the others were giving him. "When I was very young, for a while I thought that when you put a car in reverse," he paused and took a breath, slightly flushed with embarrassment, "I thought the battery turned around. Thought it was on a turntable under the hood."
No one said anything for a moment. Then Bruce asked, "How old were you?"

"About two, maybe three." Tony shrugged and sipped his wine. "I had figured out that if I got the batteries out of my toys and put them in the other way around the toy would run backward, so it made sense to me."

Fitz shrugged and sat on the arm of the sofa. "That actually does make a certain amount of sense."

Jemma nodded and laughed a little. "Yeah it does."

"Oh, I'll play." Natasha took the bottle from Tony, poured herself a glass, and sat on the coffee table.

"I'm asserting a new rule," Clint interjected as he and everyone else found places to sit or lounge, "no not actually secret secrets." He pointed at Natasha. "I know you."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, fine. I have plenty none of you know, though. I just have to pick." She tapped her nails against her glass. "My natural hair color is super mousy ash brown."

Tony nearly choked on his drink. "I don't believe you."

"Huh." Clint scritched a hand through his hair. "With your other coloring, that sort of figures."

Coulson looked at him. "How did you not know that?"

"Why would I know that?"

Maria shook her head. "Hate to break it to you, Barton, but I think everyone knows you and Natasha have slept together."

"I did not know that," Fitz said. Jemma held out one hand to him, palm up. He pulled out his wallet.

Natasha laughed. "You bet on that?"

Jemma happily took a bank note from Fitz and tucked it down the front of her dress. "We bet on that."

"Fitz," Natasha snickered, "that was a horrible bet to take. But yes, I've slept with Clint, and no, that doesn't mean he'd necessarily have any idea what my natural hair color is. Make of that statement what you will." She raised her eyebrows challengingly and downed her champagne.

"So I guess I can't use 'I've done Nat' as my secret. Gimme the booze." Clint made grabby hands. Once he had a glass of sparkling wine, he swirled it, watching the bubbles. "When I was a kid I had a massive crush on Fred from Scooby Doo but I told my brother it was Daphne I had a thing for. As far as I know, he, to this day, believes I liked Daphne. And redheads in general."

"I liked Fred too." Pepper put a hand over her face, laughing.

"Vaguely related," Fitz said, raising a hand as if in class. He took a breath, started to say something, stopped, and rubbed his face. "Fuck, give me wine." A glass was poured and handed to him. He drained it, took another deep breath, and said quickly, "I like blokes." He blushed.

"Aww, Fitz!" Jemma hugged him, halfway pulling him into her lap.

Clint blinked. "Did you just come out?"
"Um, yes." Fitz carefully removed himself from Jemma's lap.

Tony let out a celebratory whoop and leaned across Jemma to refill Fitz's glass.

"I don't mean, I'm not gay," Fitz started trying clumsily to clarify, "not that there's anything wrong with being gay, that's also not what I mean, I—"

"Hey," Clint interrupted. "Is what you're trying to say is that you're bisexual?"

"Yes, that." Fitz let out a long sigh.

Clint raised his glass. "You and me, man." He twisted to look around at Steve. "What have you got to share, Cap? Anything sexy?"

Steve looked at him levelly. "Once, during my blessedly short stint in show business, I went to a party and wound up making out with a conjoined twin."

Bucky looked at him. "You never mentioned that to me."

"I never mentioned that to anyone."

"Why'd you only make out with one?" Tony sounded dumbfounded.

Steve shrugged. "The other sister wasn't interested."

"Can't imagine why." Jemma clapped a hand over her mouth. "I didn't mean to say that out loud."

Most of the room laughed.

"Hey, hey," Maria said, "look, Project Rebirth was an exercise in optimization, right? So Steve—and Bucky—as successful products of that process, are essentially physically ideal. Therefore, any human in their right mind, regardless of orientation, has to agree that our soldier boys here are super hot."

Bucky laughed, Steve cringed with embarrassment but chuckled too.

"What I'd like to know," Bruce said darkly, "is why the hell the Project Rebirth process turns people colors when it goes wrong."

Steve frowned. "I've never considered it, but you're right, that is a weird pattern it seems to have."

"You can all throw science at it later." Pepper crossed her legs. "I had a fight with my mother once because she wanted me to not take honors classes in high school and do work study as a receptionist at a local vet's office instead. Her argument was that I'd make a fantastic secretary. I yelled at her that I didn't want to be a secretary, I wanted to have a secretary, and I didn't speak to her for a week. Then of course my first job with Stark Industries was as a secretary."

"But you do have a secretary now," Tony pointed out.

"Now I have three." She straightened up proudly.

"I can taste caffeine in soda and it really bothers me but I don't mind it in coffee." Jemma shrugged.

"I can taste caffeine, too," Bucky mentioned.

"Me too." Bruce made a face.
"So can I." Steve took the glass of champagne held out to him by Tony.

"I'm declaring the ability to taste caffeine a sign of superpowers and deciding I'm Gifted," Jemma announced.

Coulson chuckled. "I suppose we'll have to start screening prospective agents for that in future."

"You absolutely should." Jemma grinned.

"Technically, I own a pub," Maria offered. "My uncle left it to me, I think because I was pretty much the only one in the family not vying for it."

"Where is it?" Tony asked.

"Greenwich Village."

Clint's face suddenly fell. "Which one is it?"

"Not the one you got thrown out of." Maria grinned knowingly.

Steve contemplated Clint a moment. "It's strange to picture you in the Village."

Clint laughed. "I should take you clubbing." He paused. "Did the Village have the same reputation back then as it's got now?"

It was Bucky, not Steve, who answered. "It's had that reputation since before me and Steve were born."

"Oh. Well then." The archer snorted.

Steve glanced at him. "Is there still a bar in the Village called Magnolias?"

"I think so." Clint lifted one shoulder. "Why?"

"Well—"

"Hang on," Barnes interrupted, grinning with a kind of bemused, mocking horror, "is that the place I had to drag your drunk ass home from, Valentine's of thirty-nine?"

"Why, with all your memory issues, must you remember that?" Steve dropped his head into one hand.

"I told you you'd never live it down." Barnes laughed.

Steve shoved him. "See, this is why I wanted a 'your own secrets only' rule."

Bruce shook his head and, taking pity on the Captain, let the spotlight shift onto him. "I sometimes watch Bridezillas because it makes me feel better about the state of my own stress and anger management."

"Okay, I don't care who you are," Natasha said, "watching Bridezillas is a great way to reaffirm your own humanity to yourself."

"It really is." Maria laughed.

"See, knowing there are people more fucked up than you is a wonderful thing sometimes," Tony
said. "It's why I like Jerry Springer reruns."

"Maybe we should have a trash reality TV marathon," Natasha said. "Watch people punch each other out for no damn good reason."

Everyone chuckled.

"I think I have a reputation for punching out Hydra scientists," Bucky said.

Jemma raised her eyebrows. "Is that your secret?"

He shrugged. "Yeah."

"That is brilliant." She grinned.

Clint held his hands up. "How did you get a reputation for punching out Hydra scientists?"

Bucky shrugged again and tapped his nails against the metal of his left wrist. "They, uh, they'd be working on my arm after I'd been out on a mission, even if it hadn't been damaged they'd do something every time." He looked down. "The longer I'd been, well, thawed, the—" he searched for a word "—less well behaved I'd be. If they ticked me off..." He punched his left hand into his right palm. He shook his head with a slightly dark, but still amused laugh. "I never got punished for it, either."

"Probably because it's so much easier to replace lab rats than a trained, skilled asset, no matter how temperamental." Natasha glanced at Fitz and Jemma. "No offense."

Jemma shook her head. "None taken."

"She has a point." Coulson drank his champagne. "And she knows from temperamental."

"Yes, I do," Natasha agreed coolly.

Tony jostled Coulson's shoulder. "Your turn."

Coulson shook his head. "Everyone here already knows my big secret—me and Clint—" He downed the rest of his champagne.

Tony refilled his glass. "Yeah, I guess Clint kinda made that one obvious the day you arrived."

"I think that's on me." Coulson exhaled. "By calling and then rushing here. He just closed the loop sooner than expected." He took a long swallow of champagne. Tony topped his glass off.

"Come on, Phil," Natasha chided. "You need to tell an actual secret. The rest of us have. There must be something from high school or college, at least."

Coulson went still. Watching him, Clint tensed. Coulson took another swallow of champagne. Clint leaned forward to take Coulson's glass and Natasha stopped him.

"When I was twenty, a new college graduate, and had just become a junior officer with the Rangers"—Coulson began, speaking slowly. Natasha grinned. Coulson drank more champagne before continuing—"I was married for five months and it went badly."

Moving smoothly and quickly, Clint took Coulson's glass. "You've had more than enough."

"No, he hasn't," Tony scoffed. "I'll bet he can walk a straight line and everything."
"He probably can." Clint's words were clipped and then soft. "He doesn't show it, until he's really, really gone, but I can tell."

Coulson looked at Clint. "Celeste was a wonderful girl. She...helped me to see that I was hiding from myself, that I was closeted. We remained friends. Six months after the annulment she married my best friend in the Rangers. He'd been in love with her the whole time. I should have seen it but I didn't. They belonged together. Everyone was surprised that I was best man at their wedding."

Natasha stared. Clint sucked in a breath. "He never told you this, did he?" she murmured. Clint shook his head.

He took a gulp of Coulson's champagne, then said, "Lyall? Celeste married Lyall?"

Coulson nodded.

"You were married to Lydia's mother."

"Yes," Coulson said. "I spent my whole life letting her down."

"This explains so much," Natasha muttered.

"Come on, Phil." Clint got up and clasped Coulson's arm. "Time to go."

Movements smooth and steady, Coulson got up, gingerly holding his new coffee mug.

"Huh," Tony said. "He doesn't show it, but I guess he is drunk."

Clint grimaced and led Coulson out of the room.

When they were safely behind the locked door of Clint's room, the archer folded his arms and dug a toe into the carpet. "Was Lydia yours?"

"No." Phil spoke softly.

"But she could have been."

"Not directly, no. The timing...no."

"That's not what I mean." Clint took a breath. "It's one of those might-have-beens in life. If you'd somehow been able to work things out with Celeste, you could have had a daughter, a family."

Phil turned around. "It would have been the wrong thing, and just pretty much impossible."

"But it's one of your regrets."

"That's not where the regret lies."

Clint took two steps forward and turned Phil around. "Maybe not most of it."

Phil nodded. "Not most of it." He took a step forward, leaned heavily against Clint, and put an arm around him. For Phil, this counted as a stagger.
"Oh boy," Clint muttered. "Let's get you undressed."

He removed Phil's already loosened tie and then helped him out of his jacket before removing his gun and shoulder holster. This sort of thing didn't happen often. Clint was practiced anyway in unbuttoning Phil's shirt and removing his clothes—only the circumstances made it feel strange.

Clint managed to get a Tshirt on Phil and had no trouble coaxing him to brush his teeth and get ready for bed. Meanwhile, Clint removed his own suit and put pajamas on. He was arranging a line of pillows down the center of the bed when Phil came out of the bathroom.

"I figure we need some way to manage sleep together," Clint said. "I sure as hell am not leaving you alone tonight. Even if it does make me feel like I'm in a fifties sitcom."

"If this were a fifties sitcom," Phil said, "we'd have twin beds."

"Married couples in fifties sitcoms had twin beds. You do not want to go in that direction tonight."

"Okay." Phil sat on the edge of the bed.

Clint got a cup of water for each of them. "Drink that. If you aren't dehydrated, your head might hurt less in the morning."

He drank his water as he watched Phil drink his. After taking Phil's paper cup, he discarded both of them.

He leaned down and kissed Phil's forehead. "I'm going to get ready for bed. I'll be right back."

Phil pulled him to his knees and kissed him deeply. Almost any other time, this would have been fine, but not now. Clint ended the insistent kiss as quickly as he could. "Not tonight, Phil."

Phil's brow furrowed. "Are you mad?"

"I'm not mad." Clint caressed Phil's cheek. "That was all long before me. It's just, Mockta's rule."

"Oh. Oh, yeah."

"Lie down, babe. I'll be right back."

As Clint made ready for bed and brushed his teeth, he thought it might turn into a very long night. But when he went back into the bedroom, Phil was already asleep. Maybe that was a tiny silver lining in the big black cloud of Phil drinking too much.

Clint climbed over Phil, and the row of pillows, and settled into the back of the bed near the wall. He stared toward the ceiling for a while, even though he couldn't really see it in the dark. This was probably why Phil was such a mess when it came to relationships, the insistence that he wasn't the marrying kind, the commitment phobia, the general skittishness. Clint wondered if it would have made any difference if he'd known this sooner.
Chapter 22

An assortment of ink and paper newsrags were scattered across the kitchen island Friday morning. "Ooh, that is a good picture of us," Natasha said. She tapped her finger on a photo of her and Steve kissing by the limo door.

Pepper grinned. "I like the headline. 'Does Captain America Have a Type?''"

"Yeah," Tony said. "The breathless speculation about Cap and an assortment of redheads is hilarious."

Steve dropped his face into his hand. Bucky spread cream cheese on his bagel with unnecessary precision. Bruce took a bite of some cooked wholegrain cereal mix and turned the page of the science journal article he was reading. "I can't believe you're doing this," he muttered.

Pepper patted his shoulder. "It's kind of like reading reviews after opening night. We were actors playing to the audience of paparazzi."

Tony smirked. "I'd say the reviews are positive."

"I like some of the headlines about you two." Natasha picked a tabloid up. "Here's a good one. 'Iron Man's Hot PDA.'" Two pages were filled with photos of Tony and Pepper necking just outside the main theatre door.

Tony gestured at one of the photos. "Brilliant move, Pep, sliding a couple fingers in the space between two of my shirt buttons."

"Thank you." Pepper grinned. "It's a highly personal gesture without being lurid."

"The pair of you are unsettlingly used to this." Steve smoothed out an article predicting Tony and Pepper's wedding. Apparently Tony's instructions to the maitre d' had had some impact.

"They'll print crap anyway." Pepper took a bite of toast. "Might as well play them to our purposes."

"Surprised you're not better versed in this game, Steve." Natasha grinned at him.

"The D.C. paparazzi is more restrained and it was different in the forties."

"Except for the newsreel guys who followed us all over the Rheinland," Bucky said through a bite of bagel. "Persistent bastards."

"And historians the world over thank them," Pepper said.

"Jemma and Fitz are going to want to see these," Tony said, "once the hyperbaric chamber lets him go. There're a couple of cute pictures of Fitz. Luckily, there's only one photo of Jemma getting into the limo, and the only part of Coulson that shows is his hand holding hers. Bruce, you are surprisingly photogenic but unassuming enough that there are only four photos of you. You look pretty hot in this one, science bro."

"If you say so." Bruce took the newspaper that Tony handed him.

"Well college girls of the world hate me right now." Natasha had moved from the newsrags to their digital cohorts on a tablet. She held it up, showing the comments at the bottom of an article. "Some of these are vicious. I, supposedly, don't love you like SouthernPrincess17 does and Missy5Ever is
going to cut me. Wonder if they'd be so possessive if they knew how awkward you are."

"Maybe more so," Pepper said. "Awkward can be endearing."

Steve rolled his eyes. Bucky nodded.

Tony flipped through another paper. "Jarvis."

"Sir?"

"Have we missed anything? It looks to me like we avoided having any photos taken of Barnes and Coulson. The odd foot or hand doesn't count, especially because I don't see any photos of Barnes' gloved hands."

"I've completed the search algorithm we worked out earlier, Sir," Jarvis said. "There are no photos of Sergeant Barnes or Director Coulson in the print media or the major online news media and blogs, nor the minor ones I'm able to access. There are two group shots posted to a personal Facebook page that include Director Coulson from behind. Sergeant Barnes is not in the group."

"Thank you, Maria," Pepper said softly.

"Someone on Google+," Jarvis continued, "posted a fuzzy picture of Dr. Ross and Miss Hill with Sergeant Barnes behind them with his head down. Because of the hat, his face is obscured."

"Is that it?" Tony said.

"Yessir."

"Success!" Tony pumped his fist. "Nobody uses Google+ anyway. Hydra will never find that one."

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Phil sat in bed, drinking coffee from a paper cup and scrolling through information on his laptop. When Clint woke up, he watched the older man for a moment.

"I took acetaminophen an hour ago," Phil said. "Need any?"

"No."

"I had toast but didn't think that would hold up too well if you slept late, so I brought you a bagel."

"Thanks."

"I've been looking at stuff for going to Maryland." He took a breath. "To visit my grave. How about two weeks from now? That weekend seems workable. We could leave Friday afternoon."

Hiding from the light, Clint put his pillow over his head. "We have to do this now? I'm still tired from going to the theatre last night, and the drinking, and—everything. And not sleeping well because of Mockta's reign of terror. Besides, I don't want to go to your grave. At all."

"We're going to have to go, and she's going to ask about this on Monday."

"Let me repeat that about Mockta's reign of terror."
Phil set the laptop and his coffee aside. "Clint, I'm sorry."

Clint didn't answer for a moment. "For which part?"

"All of it. Drinking too much. Saying too much, especially like that, in a crowd. I'm not sure whether I should never have said anything or if I should have told you sooner."

"Sooner, Philip. A lot sooner. I mean, she wasn't just someone you'd slept with. I don't feel the need for a full accounting."

"A full accounting wouldn't take long. There haven't been that many, even if you count a couple of missions."

"That would have been my guess. But it also would have been my guess that you'd never been married. Wow, was I wrong about that. And it isn't just the five months. You have a long history with her, because of Lyall, and Lydia worked for you. She was the most important relationship of your life."

"You." Phil reached over the line of pillows between them and put his hand on Clint's chest. "You are the most important relationship of my life."

Clint took several slow deliberate breaths. He moved his pillow so he could look at Phil. "You really weren't going to have any more relationships after Lydia died, were you?"

Phil removed his hand and sat back. "I wasn't just not looking, I actively was avoiding." He stared at the ceiling. "The way I—feel about you has always been a little terrifying. The strength of it. And I'm so vulnerable to you. You slip past my defenses without even trying."

Clint put his pillow back over his head. "As I remember it, I tried awfully damn hard for a long time before I found a chink in your defenses."

"Not really." He leaned over the pillow barrier and kissed Clint's neck.

"Hey." Clint peeked out from under his pillow. "Unfair. That is—that is torture is what that is."

"Like it isn't for me." Leaning even further over the dam of pillows, Phil kissed his way up Clint's neck and along his jaw.

"You, apparently, are more resistant to torture than I am."

"Only certain kinds." He found Clint's mouth and pressed a gentle kiss against his lips.

Clint pulled Phil off-balance, rolled him over the wall of pillows, and pulled him down, settling the other man's weight against him. He engaged Phil in a hot, open-mouthed kiss full of tongues and longing. He whispered in Phil's ear before moving soft wet kisses to Phil's jaw and shoulder. "Two can play at this game of torment."

Phil hissed a sharp breath into his chest. "Two should."

Clint pushed him back over the row of pillows, to the edge of the mattress, and right off the bed. Phil rolled to the floor. He sat up and blinked in surprise. "Mockta didn't say no physical contact or that we couldn't make out."

Clint gave him an unimpressed look. "Who decides how far that goes?"

"I guess you just did." Phil grinned. "Fine. I'll go to work."
"Don't you dare give S.H.I.E.L.D. more loving than you give me."

"I promise not to kiss anyone else at S.H.I.E.L.D."

"See to it that you don't." Clint grabbed Phil's coffee cup and drank the rest of it.

Shaking his head, Phil headed to the bathroom. Clint scooted across the bed until he could press himself in the corner between the wall and the headboard. He surrounded himself with pillows, like building a fort as a child. He leaned his head against the wall and listened to the sound of the shower. It was all he could do to keep himself from jumping off the bed and joining Phil. He clutched a pillow against his chest, then leaned forward and muttered, "I hate this," into it.

Half an hour later, Phil was dressed in a suit. Clint was at the Keurig, eating his bagel, and making a cup of coffee. Phil gathered up his laptop and a frame that was laying face down on top of the dresser.

Clint looked up. "What is that?"

"It's the drawing you did of my car. I ironed it flat. Didn't even smear the ink."

"You bought a frame for it?" Clint took the picture from Phil.

Phil shrugged. "Thought I'd hang it in my office."

"It doesn't look half bad," Clint mused. "You could hang it over the dart board."

"No. A different wall." Phil took the picture back. He considered Clint for a long moment before deciding that, yes, he would risk kissing him goodbye.

The laptop and framed picture were under one of Phil's arms. He put his other hand to the back of Clint's neck and coaxed him close. Then he brushed his lips against the archer's mouth and Clint latched on, clutching both hands around Phil's lapels and kissing him hungrily, gentle but insistent with lips and tongue and teeth, scraping teeth lightly over Phil's bottom lip and his chin and then re-engaging the kiss, until Phil was half ready to drag Clint back to bed, the time and Mockta be damned.

Clint took a big deep breath and stepped away.

Phil exhaled a shuddering breath. "What's the difference between that and my teasing you earlier?"

"Uh. We're standing up?" Clint flicked his eyes up to Phil's and then back down. "No difference really." He bunched his hands into fists at his sides. "I hate this."

"Me too," Phil whispered. He pressed a chaste kiss to Clint's mouth.

The younger man gave him a gentle shove. "You better go to work."

Phil watched him for a moment. If Clint asked him to stay, he wondered if he would. In their past, Phil had so often found excuses to flee no matter how much he wanted to be with Clint. They'd gotten to a comfortable place with each other and that tendency seemed to no longer matter, and then there was the three year gap and—no matter how valid the reasons were—that knife had gotten twisted into Clint again. Mockta's rule was another knife.

The words *I'm sorry* were on the tip of Phil's tongue but he thought better of saying them. "You're right," he muttered with a caress of his hand against Clint's cheek. Clint pressed Phil's hand flat
against his face for a moment and then turned away, which made Phil's heart twist.

Phil headed out the door and toward his office. His feet seemed heavy and he couldn't shake the feeling that he was doing the wrong thing even as he was struggling to do right. That feeling only grew as he pushed a picture hanger through the dry wall and positioned Clint's drawing of his car.

As he stepped back to look at the picture and make sure it was straight, Sergeant Barnes walked into his office. Coulson turned and smiled. "You're early."

"Should I come back?"

"No, it's fine. Natasha should be here any minute to take notes."

Bucky flinched. Coulson put a hand on Bucky's shoulder and guided him to a comfortable chair. "I won't let her hurt you."

Being careful with the large rolled up sheets of paper in his hands, Bucky sat. "It's more complicated than that."

Coulson sat at his desk. "I'm sure it is. How'd you like the play last night?"

Bucky smiled. "It was fun."

"I thought so too."

"I was happy to be out with...with friends."

"I was happy to be out with...with friends." Bucky looked down. "It was nice to not be stuck inside and to do something...normal."

"You know, we are your friends, Sergeant Barnes."

Bucky aimed a level gray-eyed gaze at Coulson and held his eyes for a moment. "I believe it. At least, when I'm me, I believe it."

"Aren't you always you?"

"No." Bucky's statement was flat, irrefutable. "I was a created entity for a very long time, something overlaid onto the core human being that is me, and made into an asset of Hydra and Red Room. Splinters of that entity are still in my brain and I get lost in them. Sometimes I know it and sometimes I don't. That's a lot better now and happens less often but it still happens."

Coulson nodded. "I know exactly what you mean. What I experienced isn't as severe and hurtful as your situation, and it certainly didn't go on as long. But it did hurt, me and other people. I'm still recovering from it."

Bucky tilted his head and studied Coulson. "But Colonel—uh—Director Coulson, you're always you."

"Now. But the consequences of all that are far from over."

Wearing skinny jeans and a fitted leather jacket, Natasha strode in, smooth and ninja quiet. She pulled a chair closer to Bucky and opened the laptop she was carrying.

"You were really beautiful last night," Bucky said.

She arched a brow. "Thank you."
"I do notice these things."

"I understand you were quite the ladies man during your youth in another era," she said.

He shrugged.

"You were rather beautiful yourself." Natasha grinned. "You clean up nicely."

Bucky blinked in surprise. "You think so?"

"I'm sure everyone thought so." Natasha was firm.

Bucky smiled.

Coulson cleared his throat. "Why don't you show me what you're carrying?"

"Oh right." Bucky unfurled the large sheets of vellum paper onto Coulson's desk. "Steve helped me with these, so they're neat, clear, and as accurate as I could make them. I started out making small rough cut pencil drawings and correcting them, trying to remember lengths and distances best I could and marking all that. Then Steve and I took those sketches and translated them to larger polished diagrams using rulers, french curves, and other tools. Steve did most of the inking."

Natasha typed a few notes then leaned forward. "Those are polished. Almost like a draftsman made them."

Bucky blushed. "Steve is really talented, always has been."

"I'm sure you had a lot to do with the high quality I see here." Coulson thumbed through the sheets. "How many of these are there?"

"Seventeen." Bucky was hesitantly proud, almost shy, in talking about the treasure he had just handed over. "Six of them are complete, and I'm certain of where eight of them are located. Like this one"—he tapped the top sheet—"this one is right outside of D.C. And this one"—he flipped down to the fourth sheet—"is in Russia."

Natasha paused in her typing and examined the detailed diagram. "I think I've been there. Red Room, near Salavat?"

Bucky nodded.

"Excellent work, soldier." Coulson spoke in his command voice. "I didn't expect you to produce half this much information. And these are high quality documents."

Bucky beamed.

"You have quite the memory for details," Natasha mused. "You know a lot about the inside workings of Hydra, probably more than you realize. You likely know information you don't realize is helpful and even things you don't know you know, like stuff you've overheard."

"I—" Bucky went still. "I'll help however I can, but I don't know."

"We can help with that," Coulson said, "do a structured interview with you. But that can happen another day. Why don't you tell me about this impressive set of diagrams?"

Bucky warmed back up. "This one outside of D.C. is to the south and west of the city."
Clint's bow and quiver were packed into a weapons case against the most out of the way kitchen wall. Grim-faced and quiet, he tended a pan of scrambled eggs.

"Thank you, Clint." Bucky poured glasses of orange juice. "This will be a nice change in breakfast fare."

"No problem," Clint said.

"He's getting really tired of bagels." Steve removed a pan of biscuits from the oven.

Fitz and Jemma, wearing dressy casual outfits, strode into the kitchen together. "That smells fabulous," she said.

Natasha eyed them. "You two look nice."

"We thought we'd do some shopping and go to a movie," Fitz said, a little flustered.

Natasha nodded. "Good plans for a Saturday."

"What are you going to do?" Jemma asked.

"Read, watch shitty TV, dance." Natasha shrugged. "You know, take the day off."

"Good plan," Steve said. "Bucky and I are going for a run in Central Park."

"Try not to make any headlines," Natasha said. "You know, beating up muggers or something."

Bucky considered her. "If someone needs beating up, we'll call you."

"Good idea," she said. "That would make for a smaller headline buried on a back page."

Looking bedraggled and with dark circles under his eyes, Bruce walked in a couple of minutes later just as breakfast was being served. Clint handed him a plate.

"Have you been in the lab all night?" Steve asked.

"No," Bruce said. "I got up early and went to the lab."

Steve raised his eyebrows. "How early?"

"Um." Bruce stalled, putting eggs on his plate. "Around four."

"You got up at three fifteen this morning, Dr. Banner," Jarvis said.

Bruce scowled. "Gee thanks, Jarvis."

"My pleasure, Dr. Banner," Jarvis said with no trace of irony.

Clint smiled. "Jarvis, you're the best. Just wanted you to know."
"Thank you, Agent Barton."

"Wonder what Tony and Pepper are doing today," Bruce muttered around a bite of biscuit.

"Sleeping late, for one thing," Natasha said. "I'd be surprised if we see them today. They're going out to dinner later."

"Hmm," Bruce said.

"Looks like it's going to be a beautiful spring day," Steve said. "You sure you don't want to go to Central Park with us?"

"No." Natasha took a sip of coffee. "I'm overdue for a 'me day."

"I absolutely understand that," Jemma said.

"Wonder if the paparazzi will hound Tony and Pepper," Steve said.

"Being just the two of them, they can duck the attention pretty well." Natasha reached for another biscuit.

As the meal came to an end, Bruce drummed his fingers on the island counter top. "Steve, Bucky, would you mind providing me with vials of blood?"

Bucky flinched.

"No problem," Steve said. "When?"

"After breakfast?" Bruce's question was uncertain.

"Sure." Steve shrugged.

Coulson walked in just as Jemma and Fitz were putting their dishes in the dishwasher.

"You're wearing a suit, sir?" Jemma asked.

He shrugged. "I'll be in my office all day."

"Do you need us to stay?" Fitz said.

Coulson looked him and Jemma over. "No. Go have fun."

"I'll be here all day," Natasha said.

"Thank you." Coulson poured himself a cup of coffee. "I'll let you know if I need you."

She saluted.

"I'll be at a shooting range all day." Clint raised his eyes to Coulson. "One with an obstacle course."

Coulson nodded. He grabbed a couple of napkins and a biscuit. "Don't overdo it—too much."

Clint looked away. Coulson sighed. He, Fitz, and Jemma walked out. Bruce, Steve, and Bucky left soon thereafter.

"That bad?" Natasha said. "I mean, I no longer find you sleeping on sofas, or the floor."
Clint took a long drink of coffee before answering. "Each night gets progressively worse. Trying to sleep apart doesn't help. It's torture either way."

Natasha took her time pouring another cup of coffee and stirring cream and sugar into it.

"We have all kinds of things to talk about." Clint studied the dark surface of his coffee. "Things that would be easier if we could sit shoulder to shoulder or put an arm around each other."

"That isn't against your homework rules," she noted.

"At this point, I can barely handle it when he touches me."

She studied him. "I'll put everything away and load the dishwasher. Then I'll go make sure no one's getting killed in Bruce's lab."

"Thanks, Nat." His gratitude was genuine. He picked up his weapons case and left.

When Natasha walked into the lab, Bruce was collecting an eighth vial of blood from Steve. Bucky fidgeted nearby. Natasha leaned against the door frame and watched.

"All done," Bruce said. He removed the needle from Steve's arm, pressed a cotton ball to the tiny puncture mark, and then said, "Put pressure on that."

Steve nodded. "Didn't even hurt."

Bruce pressed pre-printed, neat, comprehensive adhesive labels onto every vial. He set the vials upright in a wire carrier. He stood and addressed Bucky. "Your turn."

Bucky took a breath and sat in the chair Steve had been in. Bruce stripped his nitrile gloves off, assembled another set of vials and labels, and a venipuncture kit, and then resumed his stool. He put a gentle hand on Bucky's flesh and blood arm. Bucky recoiled and Bruce moved with him.

"When I was in India"—Bruce's words were quiet and calm—"I treated a lot of children. Their arms were thin and frail and their little veins rolled. They were usually sick as well as afraid. And I was a stranger. It was the worst possible situation for them. Even if they were so feverish they could barely understand me, I talked to them, and I let them hold onto their mothers." Bruce's small smile was rueful. "Your mother isn't here, and if you held onto anyone with your left hand, you'd probably break their hand."

Pale and silent, Bucky nodded.

"I had to draw blood from those fragile children," Bruce continued, "so that I could help them. I hope to help you. One day, we want to do something about your prosthetic arm. I hope this helps me learn something to facilitate that. It will also let me learn about you."

Bruce brushed his hand up Bucky's right forearm. "Your arm is strong, not fragile." He lightly touched the inside of Bucky's elbow. "Look at these good veins—sturdy, strong, visible. I was careful with the children I treated and, almost always, was able to draw blood with one stick. The next time they'd see me, they were less afraid."

Bruce gripped Bucky's shoulder. "You must have received a lot of rough treatment from those who
experimented on you and manipulated you. They didn't care about you or your pain. But I care. I can't make this completely painless, but you're no stranger to pain. You've shaken off much worse than what I'll do to you. The tourniquet will be tight and there will be a pinch from a little stick. I'll use a small gauge needle. I'll use a vein in your elbow or arm because there are fewer nerve endings there than in your hand. You'll feel the pinch less.

Bucky's breathing had become more even as Bruce spoke.

Bruce picked up a large steel ball bearing. "I got this for you to hold onto with your left hand."

Bucky's eyes widened with surprise. "Thank you."

"You can't use some of the common distraction techniques, like biting a finger of your other hand. I'm going to ask Steve to squeeze your ankle when I do the stick. Your brain having two things to attend to at the same time means that you'll feel both of them a little less."

Natasha pushed away from the doorframe. She walked further into the lab. "I'll squeeze his shoulders." She looked at Bucky. "If you don't mind."

Bucky looked up at her. "No, it's fine."

Bruce handed him the ball bearing. He began rolling it in the fingers of his left hand, fiddling with it as if it was a worry stone.

Natasha took up a position behind Bucky. She put her hands on his shoulders and massaged them lightly so he wouldn't be startled later when she squeezed harder.

"Now," Bruce said, "you said you can do self hypnosis. Do you want to try that?"

Bucky nodded. He closed his eyes.

Bruce donned a fresh pair of nitrile gloves and allowed a minute to pass. "Is it all right if I get started?"

"Yes." Bucky's voice was soft but strong.

Bruce gestured at Steve, who sat on the floor beside Bucky's chair. "I'm going to hold your ankle now," he said.

"Okay," Bucky said.

Bruce put a steadying hand on Bucky's arm. "I'm tying the tourniquet now. Make a fist, so your veins pop up a little."

Bucky made a fist. Bruce pressed lightly on his inner elbow and selected a vein. He disinfected the skin with an alcohol swab before unsheathing a butterfly needle.

Bruce touched Bucky's arm just below the area that he'd swabbed with alcohol. "This is my finger. In a few seconds, I'll insert the needle." Bruce positioned the needle. "You'll feel a pinch." With practiced fingers he efficiently inserted the needle while Steve squeezed Bucky's ankle and Natasha squeezed his shoulders.

Bucky opened his eyes. He hadn't even taken a distressed breath. "That...hardly hurt."

Bruce smiled. "That was the plan."
Steve rubbed Bucky's ankle. Natasha rubbed his shoulder.

Bruce removed the tourniquet and then quickly filled eight vials with Bucky's blood. He removed the needle and then pressed a cotton ball to the tiny puncture mark. "Put pressure on that."

Bucky clamped down on the cotton ball and stood. "You can take my blood whenever you need it."

Pleased, Bruce looked up. "Thank you." He quickly pressed labels onto Bucky's vials.

Steve clapped Bucky on the shoulder. "Come on, let's get orange juice and cookies. That's what they give you when you donate blood. Must be a reason. Bruce got so many vials of blood, he must be feeding vampires or something."

Bucky laughed and discarded the cotton ball. He followed Steve out of the lab.

Natasha wrapped her fingers around Bruce's arm. "That was beautiful."

He gazed up at her.

"Performance art," she said.

He smiled.

Still in her dance leotard with her point shoes flung casually over her shoulder, Natasha made her way to the kitchen. Ballet could be quite the workout and she was hungry. A strained looking Clint was the only one in the kitchen. His weapons case leaned against one end of the kitchen island. He took four ibuprofen gelcaps and a handful of supplements.

Natasha paused. "It's nine thirty."

"Didn't know I had a curfew."

She snorted. "You don't. But you obviously overdid it at the shooting range. You look exhausted."

He nodded as he opened the door of the refrigerator. "Every muscle hurts. Awesome distraction."

"I haven't seen you like this since—" The words Phil died stuck in her throat when Clint looked at her. His eyes were hollow and haunted as if he were experiencing a relapse of some excruciating ailment that refused to kill him even though death might be the only escape from the pain.

She took the pan of leftover lasagna from his hands. "I'll heat up enough of that for both us."

Clint slumped onto a stool. While the microwave ran, she kneaded his shoulders with strong and practiced fingers, not being gentle about it. He relaxed under her harsh ministrations and closed his eyes.

"I can't do this for thirty days," he muttered.

She paused. "Phil's handprints." She resumed manipulating his knotted muscles, being even more severe about it.
Clint hissed in a breath but leaned into the therapeutic punishment of her hands. "You remember that?"

"How you said that?" She continued working him over, being more gentle with his arms than his back. "It was horrible and desperate and poetic all at the same time. That's when I knew you'd never be over him."

"You are so skilled at beating me up in just the right way." It wasn't clear whether Clint meant her words or the targeted pounding of her hands on his back.

An hour later, when Clint walked into his room, Phil—clad in the archer's pajamas—didn't attempt to pretend he hadn't been pacing. Phil looked at Clint's face and held out his hands. Clint handed over his weapons case then studied the carpet.

"It's okay." Phil's voice was rusty.

Clint looked up. Phil's eyes were feverish. Trying to maintain a neutral expression, Clint nodded. Phil stepped to the side.

After grabbing sweatpants and a Tshirt, Clint headed to the shower. He made the water a little too hot—soothing to his muscles and right at the point of irritating to his skin, which was all red but not scalded by the end of the shower. He dressed, and then left the steamy bathroom. The bedroom felt cold in contrast.

Phil already had a wall of pillows down the center of the bed. Clint sighed. Phil clasped his arm. Clint's head snapped up. "I can't." Phil relinquished his hold.

Clint climbed to the back of the bed and laid down, facing the wall. Phil's hand cupped his shoulder. "Don't touch me," Clint whispered. It sounded harsh but he couldn't help his tone. Phil's hand withdrew. He dimmed the lights but didn't turn them off.

Clint grabbed one of the many pillows that littered the bed and clutched it to his chest. He felt Phil's eyes on him, like a weightless ghost of touch.

Oh, God, he was never going to be able to sleep. This felt worse than trying to sleep alone when Phil was dead and he struggled with the knowledge that Phil wasn't there, would never be there, and there was nothing Clint could do about it. But Phil was here, an arm's length away and still out of reach. An ache spread through Clint's solar plexus challenging his ability to breathe. Damn it, he would not cry. Not that again. He'd hated all that and been helpless in its grip, the ungovernable spasms of grief that shook him body and soul, like a cat playing with it's victim and refusing to allow the dubious relief of oblivion.

Clint's exhaustion was the only thing that kept him lying right there, stopped him from jumping up and fleeing to the dojo. Or a bar. Someplace where he could pass the night, making himself hurt so he wouldn't feel the other pain, the soul-killing pain, the hurt he had no control over.

He became aware of Phil's hand placed just behind him on the wall of pillows, reaching toward him and stopping short, an echo of the dynamic before their relationship started, where Phil wanted but wouldn't allow the intimacy they both craved, the touch they were starved for. This unleashed a fresh rush of ache, and allowed awareness to slide into his consciousness of his need for what Phil
conveyed to him through touch, as he had their first time together and had let slip glimpses of even before that. That need didn't have much to do with lust and never had, though lust was a nice highlight, stoking heat between them and enhancing the reward of touching, the end result of which reached deep into the heart of his essential self.

As he drifted away, Clint was just conscious enough to realize that Phil pulled two pillows away and dropped them on the floor. Phil slipped into the cool space that opened against Clint's back. His body was warm and familiar.

Phil must have been watching Clint the entire time he'd lain there ruminating—watching and waiting for the moment when he thought Clint was finally asleep. This was so like Phil, the Phil of the old days before they'd somehow become a couple, the Phil who would allow himself to convey a small gesture of love, and only in secret because he was rigidly adhering to some trumped up self-imposed rule. That tendency had been resurrected by Mockta's rule.

A sharp pang threatened to pull Clint back to wakefulness. He fumbled, on the edge of sleep, and managed to clasp Phil's hand. In response, Phil kissed the back of his neck.

Breath pushed out of Clint's chest and a muffled word went with it—he was pretty sure it was Phil's name—but his other words couldn't escape his sleep-addled brain. And he wanted to react, to turn and kiss Phil, or even jump up and leave in a towering fury over the injustice and pain of all this, but exhaustion weighted him down.

Clint slipped over the edge of consciousness into a restless sleep.

Late Sunday afternoon, after spending more than an hour in the gym dancing, Natasha threw a pair of shorts on over her leotard and headed to the bar area. The bar was convenient to, but completely separate from, the common area. Apparently, a lot of the tower residents were feeling an impulse to relax with an adult beverage before another crazy week started.

"Hey, Natasha," Tony said. "Almost everyone's here except our resident workaholics. Pep will be here in a minute though."

"Sounds good," Natasha said.

"Jarvis," Tony said. "Order some bar food brought up, a selection of appetizers, my favorites and Pepper's. Enough to feed ten with big appetites."

"Right away, Sir," Jarvis said.

Clint stood at the bar, pouring beer into a hunt-themed German beer boot. "Vodka Collins?" he said.

"Sure." Natasha perched on one of the stools and leaned on the bar. "So I guess you finally got over me handing your note to Phil."

He flicked his eyes to her and back to the drink he was mixing. "Maybe. Part of me feels like it wasn't your place to do that, and part of me knows you did the right thing."

"If not me, who?"
"That's why I'm conflicted. Only you could get away with it." He handed the freshly made Vodka Collins to her.

She took a sip. "Mm. You have the touch."

Clint's smile faded when Coulson walked up behind her.

"You've been avoiding me most of the day." Coulson's hands were in his pockets. He was dressed down, wearing no tie or jacket—which also meant no shoulder holster, and his shirt sleeves were rolled up.

Clint drank some beer. "Phil, I don't even have words for how hard this has become for me." He took his beer and walked across the room to join the group talking with Tony.

Natasha scooted her drink across the bar top. She got up and gestured to her vacated seat. "Why don't you sit?" She walked around to the business side of the bar.

Coulson sank onto the stool with a sigh.

"You look like hell." She searched through the available mixers and liquors. "You both do."

"Thanks, Natasha," he growled. "You're looking especially lovely yourself."

She gave him a disbelieving gaze punctuated by an arched eyebrow. He was spared a more withering glare because the food Tony requested arrived. She walked across the room and fixed two plates. She was pleased to see Clint loading his plate up. At least he was still eating. She returned to the bar where Coulson sat with his face in his hands. She set a plate in front of him then went around to the other side of the bar and set her plate down. He began unenthusiastically sampling the food. She took a bite from her own plate.

"Don't know why you're making a face like that," she said. "This shrimp is fabulous. I'm sure the rest of it is too."

"I wish it was over," he said.

Natasha put her fork down. "Wish what was over?"

"I understand why Mockta imposed the rule." He exhaled heavily. "I mean, she explained it."

Natasha selected a good quality vodka from the available choices.

"At first it seemed to work," Coulson said. "We were both trying to do the homework assignments and not avoid uncomfortable talks."

Natasha located the orange juice. She sliced an orange.

"Now, we don't talk because we can barely stand to be in the same room." Coulson chewed and swallowed a few more unenthusiastic bites. "I wonder if it becomes this hard this fast for everyone who gets this Godforsaken assignment imposed on them."

"I wouldn't think so." Natasha handed Coulson a Vodka Sunrise with more vodka in it than was strictly necessary. "You and Clint have a unique history."

Coulson stared at the sunny looking cocktail in his hand before taking a long drink. He set the glass down and resumed eating. "I hate doing this to Clint," he muttered.
"So, what is the purpose of this exercise? You and Clint communicating, or proving you have thirty days of willpower?"

Coulson studied her for a long moment then took a thoughtful sip of his drink. "The stated purpose is me and Clint communicating."

"Weren't you already doing that, like you said? But now that's falling apart because the rule isn't reasonable. What's the point of three more weeks' self-deprivation?"

Coulson mulled that over as he drank his Vodka Sunrise and finished eating. Natasha sipped her Vodka Collins and ate zucchini sticks and stuffed mushrooms.

Holding his glass up, Coulson considered the small amount of Vodka Sunrise remaining in his glass. "You're right."

"Right about what?"

Phil drank the dregs of his cocktail and then stood.

"What are you going to do, Phil?" Natasha knew he hadn't had too much to drink, not even close, but she didn't trust the situation.

"The right thing." He took a step, then turned to look at her. "Or maybe the wrong thing for the right reasons." He crossed the room to where Clint was talking with Tony, Pepper, Fitz, Jemma, and Steve about the challenges of finding someone willing to interview with Tony about becoming a chef at the tower. After a moment of hesitation at the edge of the group, Coulson stepped forward, grabbed the front of Clint's Tshirt and dragged him away.

"Geez, Phil." Clint was startled. "Have I done something to piss you off? That goes two ways you know."

Bemused, Tony watched them disappear down the hall. "What hasn't Clint done to piss Agent—and others—off?"

Visibly alarmed, Pepper clasped Tony's arm. "Maybe someone should go after them, prevent injuries that'll be regretted tomorrow."

Sipping her Vodka Collins, Natasha strode up and stopped beside Pepper.

"I'll go." Steve took a step. Natasha stopped him with a hand on his arm. She shook her head, trying to say "no, you shouldn't—just, no" and half-choked on it because she began laughing.

"Have you lost your mind?" Steve took her drink from her. "No more of these for you."

She patted his arm. "Clint deserves whatever he's about to get."

"What?" Steve was horrified.

Pepper took the Vodka Collins from Steve and handed it back to Natasha. "Will Coulson hurt him?"

Natasha shrugged. "I play rougher than Phil and Clint survived me."

Steve made a strangled sound.

Natasha eyed him. "Did you miss the memo that Clint and I talk?"
"About that?" Steve was agog.

"He never tells me as much as I'd like to know." She slugged back the rest of her Vodka Collins. "Except after Phil died. And the more he said"—she sighed—"the more I realized he was never, ever going to be over this man."

Pepper and Steve both looked at her.

Natasha gazed into the distance. "Clint carries Phil's handprints on his soul."

As Phil locked the bedroom door, his fingers stayed twisted in the front of Clint's Tshirt. Clint clamped his hand around Phil's wrist and tugged, and still the older man's fingers maintained a death grip on the fabric.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Clint snapped.

"What's always been wrong with me, probably."

"If you're pissed that I'm having trouble with all this and basically avoiding you—"

"No." The disruptive word was quick but soft. Phil put his left hand on Clint's shoulder and stared at the fingers of his right hand clenched into Clint's shirt—fingers that shook as they loosened as if he was having trouble making them do his bidding.

"Then what the fuck is this?" Clint demanded.

"After my...misstep...Thursday night, I thought it'd be a bad idea to talk to you in there. Too public." His fingers finally came free of the Tshirt fabric. Clint's fingers were still clenched around Phil's wrist, so their hands hung between them at chest height,

"You could have said, 'Hey, can we talk?'" He let go of Phil's wrist.

"You'd have said no." Phil put his freed hand on Clint's back near his spine just above the shoulder blade.

Clint's eyebrows shot up. "So, I get no say? I'm not allowed to say no?"

"Not—not at all." Phil lowered his eyes. "If you say no, I'll leave." He pulled Clint closer, and Phil's right hand slipped over the tense muscle and bone above his shoulder blade, fingers light but probing.

"You'll—what's the point of you—"

Phil's mouth closed on the pulse point of Clint's neck with light pressure, enough to get his attention but not leave a mark. Clint hissed in a breath. Phil moved his mouth to the corner of Clint's jaw. The fingers of his right hand pressed and loosened against Clint's back and slid downward, taking inventory vertebra by vertebra.

"The teasing, I can't—" Desperation rose in Clint's chest.

"Not teasing." Phil kissed Clint, tongue soft against his lips like a silent request for permission to
go deeper than the gateway to his mouth.

As Phil's fingers continued their slow probing journey down Clint's back, the younger man brought his hands up to Phil's face and returned the kiss, his lips parting, tongue lightly meeting Phil's, permission granted. Then Phil was kissing him deeply, softly exploring his mouth, pressing him close, right hand continuing its languid trip down Clint's back, until Clint's breath caught in his throat.

This was hope triumphing over recent experience, logic taking a hike in favor of raw need. Any minute now this could take a turn into hell, but the kiss—and Phil's hand traveling down his back—was an echo of heaven.

As the kiss ended, Clint flicked his eyes to Phil's, afraid to ask what he had to know but more afraid not to. "Are you"—he slid his hands down to the top of Phil's shoulders—"taking me to bed?" He brought his right hand down until he could brush his thumb over Phil's collarbone.

Phil inhaled a long steady breath then exhaled a flow of soft words. "If you'll let me."

"Mockta's rule."

Phil's gaze was unwavering. "I hate what I'm doing to you because of that."

Clint had a horrifying vision of Phil being unable, at the very last moment, to actually break that damn rule and fleeing the room, leaving Clint alone and bereft. He reeled then glanced at the door. The impulse to leave was a living thing that pounded in his ears.

"Clint?" Phil's voice, gentle and filled with concern, drew the archer's eyes to his face.

"This must be how you felt," Clint said on a breath, "our first time. Wanting to run so you wouldn't be hurt. How did you resist it?"

"I didn't," Phil said. "You did."

Clint's eyebrows went up.

"You said you wouldn't put up with it."

"I didn't say that—just told you to kiss me again."

"Yeah, it was a longer speech than that." Phil's hand finished making it's way downward and came to rest on the small of Clint's back, like an unspoken promise.

The anxiety driving Clint's heart rate bled slowly away. "Pretty sure I said kiss me as a stand in for just fuck me already because I figured that phrasing was inappropriate."

Phil's hand tightened on the small of Clint's back. The archer cast his lowered eyes upward and he looked at Phil through his lashes. "Phil." He took a small breath. "Kiss me."

Chapter End Notes
So, I just saw Age of Ultron. Loved it. Absolutely none of it is canon to this story.
"We've gotta start getting in the pressure chamber earlier so the cycle's over earlier in the morning," Bucky lamented.

"We?" Steve smirked. "What do you mean, we?"

Bucky pushed on Steve's shoulder. "You know what I mean."

"No." Steve looked at him sideways. "I don't."

Bucky brandished a cheese spreader. "Okay, okay, so I'm still having trouble making myself get in there and that delays everything." He dipped the spreader into a tub of strawberry cream cheese. "And that makes us late getting to the kitchen sometimes, so breakfast's basically over." He looked down at the dense round of bread in his hands. "And I'm really tired of bagels."

"I'm seeing boxes of bagels and tubs of cream cheese. Pretty sure that's what everybody had for breakfast."

"You're right, but what is with these people?" Bucky was exasperated. "You'd think they were all business people or something. Far as I know, only Pepper's really a business person."

"Coulson looks like a business person." Steve took a sip of coffee.

Bucky shook his head. "He looks like undercover military."

"Huh. Now that you mention it, I see what you mean."

"And it's not that I don't like bagels. You know I like bagels. But we seem to eat them all the time. What about steak and eggs? Or ham and eggs? Or pancakes, proper ones. Some kind of stick-to-your-ribs breakfast." Bucky was agitated and he couldn't seem to stop his mouth. He was never like this, back when he was always him, back when he and Steve were young, and Steve was a shy but talented artist with an overdeveloped sense of fair play and an underdeveloped sense of self preservation. Bucky had been the one with self control. As his mind slowly stabilized, he sometimes felt more lost than ever, because he realized that even the familiar was somehow wrong, including himself. Including Steve.

Steve, who was his touchstone to the past and to himself, whose voice sounded soft and right in his ears, but whose appearance seemed a little wrong when Bucky looked at him. Steve, his anchor and his lifeline and his path to sanity. Even Steve was familiar and somehow wrong.

"Bucky?" And there was Steve's voice, soft and concerned, and achingly familiar.

God, he didn't want to look at him and he did anyway. Something inside of himself shrank away. Sure, he had known the post-serum Steve, but he'd known the pre-serum Steve so much longer. What would he give to look up and see the slight, stubborn, bookish artist with the slender, graceful hands? He didn't know. But he did know one thing, and it was agitating him this morning.

He threw the strawberry cream cheese flecked spreader. It skittered across the island counter top before coming to rest near the far edge. "I am so hungry when I wake up in that hyper-oxygenated fish tank." Bucky made a sweeping gesture. "And most of the time, it's some kind of bread for breakfast! I feel like I'm training for a boxing match on muffins and rock candy. But I don't even get the damn candy."
"Bucky." Steve's fingers—a little too big and a little too strong but still gentle and almost inhumanly sensitive—folded over the top of Bucky's forearm. "How about I take you someplace to eat, let you get something you really want?"

Bucky felt the usual blend of humiliation and solace to have Steve take care of him yet again. He was grateful, truly he was, but he missed being Steve's hero, missed being the leader, in both virtue and mild mischief. He found himself nodding, then found himself surprised at the words coming out of his mouth. "I want to go home."

"Home?" Steve sounded a little astonished. "Of course you want to go home. That's where you headed the second night you were here." His fingers tightened on Bucky's arm. "Let's go to Brooklyn."

Not sure if that was quite what he meant, Bucky blinked. Then he nodded. They ate bagels then went and showered and got dressed.

Steve came to Bucky's room carrying baseball caps. He fussed with Bucky's long damp hair, trying to make it stay up so it would fit under a cap.

"Let's get Clint," Bucky said.

Steve shook his head. "Not a good day to interrupt Clint."

"I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

"Normally, I'm sure he wouldn't. But he and Coulson had some kind of fight last night. I didn't really understand it."

"Fight?" Bucky was alarmed, imagining Clint with a black eye. "Did he get hurt?"

"No." Steve twisted Bucky's hair into a sad, clumsy excuse for a bun.

"Then it should be fine. He might still be mad at the Col—uh—Director, but he'll be fine with us."

"Pretty sure he and Coulson are still making up."  

Bucky frowned, intrigued, but his imagination failed him. He wasn't quite sure how Clint and Coulson might still be making up, and he wasn't comfortable asking about it. Didn't seem like the kind of thing that should be discussed.

Steve finally got a cap settled on Bucky's head. "Don't take that off. I'll probably never be able to get your hair back under it if you do."

Bucky pulled a long sleeved shirt over his Tshirt and then his red gloves on. Steve put a cap over his own short blond hair, tossed a loose button down on over his Tshirt, and they headed to the main elevator that left the tower.

As they went down in the elevator, Jarvis said, "Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes, are you going to Central Park again?"

"Not today," Steve said. "We're going to Brooklyn."

"Very good, Captain Rogers. Do be back in time for Sergeant Barnes' appointment with Dr. Mockta."

"It's at three." Bucky smiled. He liked Erin Mockta.
"Thank you, Jarvis." Steve said. "We'll be back before three."

The good thing about taking the subway mid-morning was that it wasn't rush-hour crowded. They were stepping out of the subway entrance and into the spring sunshine in Brooklyn in no time.

Bucky crowded up to Steve until their arms touched. "I haven't been to Brooklyn as me since before we shipped out."

"I've been here," Steve said. "It's mostly different from back then. Still rough and still poor though, unfortunately."

They walked and Bucky stared all around. Steve pointed things out, things that were different and a few that were the same, like the street names. A building on one corner that had once been bright yellow had sadly been repainted a tamer color. When they got to their old street, something lanced through Bucky's head. He pressed his gloved fists to his temples. Memories shoved themselves through his awareness—running barefoot through the dark, looking for home, for safety, kicking a door down, and a woman screaming. Then he kicked Steve and tried to cut him. Then there was darkness.

When Steve said his name, Bucky realized he was breathing hard. "I came here," Bucky said.

"You did," Steve said.

A young woman with wiry hair came through the multiply secured front door, empty reusable shopping bag over her shoulder. She paused and stared at Bucky and Steve. "I don't want to know," she said, hand up by her face. "I do not even want to know."

Bucky stepped forward and looked down. Embarrassment didn't begin to cover how he felt. "I'm so sorry," he said.

Steve's eyes widened as if in sudden recognition.

The woman made a dismissive gesture. "What were you, high on bath salts or something? Don't tell me. With your dark hair, I figure you're Mr. Stark's black sheep cousin. Every family has them." She lapsed into rapid-fire Spanish for a moment before continuing in English. "I hope you're grateful. The young often aren't and it seems to me that you rich kids are the worst about that. Iron Man and Captain America were in my apartment one night making sure nobody went and died or something, and that's enough for my life. I wouldn't talk with the one reporter Mr. Stark wasn't able to keep away. Then Mr. Stark and Ms. Potts made it right on your behalf. I hope you know that, chiquito. I have invoices for the repairs and replacements where Mr. Stark ordered them and Ms. Potts approved them. I framed the nice letter from Mr. Stark. Those two are good people."

Bucky stared, not sure whether he was more shocked by the concept that he was a rich kid or the idea that he would deliberately take mind-altering drugs. "N-no ma'am," he stammered. "I'm not Mr. Stark's cousin or on drugs or anything like that."

"Not on drugs?" She narrowed her eyes. "Then what was that?"

"PTSD you'd call it. I'm a...a war veteran."

She considered him, taking in the muscular build under his shirt and cargo pants. "One too many tours of Afghanistan? My mother's cousin has a son who suffers from that. He's got a dog for it. Then why did Mr. Stark rescue you?"

"I'm just"—he took a breath—"one of Mr. Stark's charity projects."
"Bucky." Steve's voice was anguished. He put a hand on Bucky's arm.

Bucky shook him off. "It's true."

The woman's eyes fastened on Steve and widened. "Capt—" Steve put a finger to his lips and she swallowed the rest of her words. "Why are you here?" she said, her astonishment plain.

"We're friends." He shrugged.

"I used to live here." Bucky gestured toward the front door. "Can we see?"

She put her hand to her face and thought a moment before nodding. She turned and then unlocked the front door. Bucky and Steve followed her to the fifth floor. She eyed Bucky but then opened the door to her apartment.

The apartment had been repainted and the kitchen had been redone. It even had new appliances. The carpet was new, as was most of the furniture. The floor plan and windows were the same as they had been for decades. Bucky wandered from room to room, feeling ghosts everywhere. He felt his face settle into grim lines as the blood drained from it. He joined Steve at the door.

"Thank you, ma'am." Steve clasped Bucky's arm and turned toward the door.

"I hope he's doing better," the woman said.

"He is." Steve nodded.

"Looks that way," she said. As they opened the door, she added, "You can come back any time."

Bucky turned toward her and whispered, "Thank you."

A few minutes later, they were back on the sidewalk in the spring sunshine. Steve's hand was on Bucky's back. "We came out to get you something to eat." Bucky heard him as if from a great distance. "Tom's is still around."

"The place where we got pie after seeing The Wizard of Oz?"

Steve grinned. "That's the one. They still have great pie too."

A short time later, they were sitting in Tom's, ordering off the breakfast-served-all-day menu and the lunch menu. And they both ordered pie a la mode.

The waitress looked at the long list on her pad of food items ordered. "You two waiting on someone else? I can go ahead and get more flatware."

Steve and Bucky looked at each other before Bucky said, "No."

"Huh." The waitress studied them, slowly shifting her weight into one hip. "You just get back from the mid-east?"

"Something like that," Steve said.

She grinned in triumph at figuring it out. "I'll make sure you get an ample amount of the best all American food Brooklyn has to offer."

"Thank you, ma'am," Bucky said, almost shy, his mind having been transported back to an era that was gone but a small piece of which somehow survived in this old place, like there was a weak
time machine that covered only one building, and he suddenly felt very young. "We grew up near here and came here as kids. It's such a relief that it's still the same."

"Cookie," the waitress said through the window into the kitchen, "we got us a couple heroes here who grew up in the hood, not been fed right in the desert." She started rattling off their extensive order.

Bucky looked around as they waited for their food. "Looks pretty much the same. I mean, it's been repainted but not that different."

"It's probably been painted a few times over the decades," Steve said.

"Probably." Bucky drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "No one's familiar."

"The people we knew"—Steve exhaled—"well, they're gone. It's probably their grandchildren now."

Bucky shuddered. He laid his hands flat on the table, only his gloved index fingers overlapping. "I know I have nowhere else to go. I'm dependent on you and Tony and...the organization, and the others."

"Bucky." Steve's voice was soft and low. If Bucky didn't look up, it seemed like the Steve from long ago. "You'd do the same for me," the old Steve said. "Heck, you have done the same for me."

Bucky looked up and met the new Steve's eyes—sky blue, just as they'd always been, and painfully sincere. "Not really," Bucky said.

Steve opened his mouth to argue but the food came and he simply thanked the waitress. Their slices of pie were visibly oversized with two scoops of ice cream each.

"The food is just as good as ever," Bucky said between bites. "The pie might even be better."

Steve chuckled. The sound was warm and content in a way that Bucky seldom heard when they were young. He was frustrated that he could remember their youth only in fragments—some fragments were extended, to be sure, but he couldn't be certain of the whole, couldn't be sure about context and meaning.

How old were they, he wondered, when he'd watched a recuperating Steve sleep? Steve's eyes were shadowed with pain and his hands had been injured. Bucky was furious. If anything was ever going to kill Steve, he figured it would be never being able to draw again.

Steve had never fully understood Bucky's willingness to fight for him, to put himself into harm's way in order to keep Steve out of it.

"He's like another part of yourself," Bucky's mother had said once, and Bucky had nodded. "Things get more complicated as you get older," she'd said, and he'd made a face.

"More complicated?" Bucky had objected. "Between me and Steve it's the same as always. It's as simple as that."

She looked at him. "Is it?"

"Sure it is."

When Steve's hands recovered, he made a beautiful, detailed drawing of Bucky boxing, a drawing
that delineated every muscle, and bead of sweat, and Bucky's fierce radiant face. "This was a labor of love," Bucky's mother said.

Steve had hesitated and then looked into her eyes. "Yes, ma'am."

"Steve's very talented," Bucky said.

A look passed between his mother and Steve as if they had just shared a joke that Bucky didn't quite get. As hard as times were, she got the drawing framed and hung it near Steve's favorite chair in the living room.

In the present, Bucky muttered, "I wish I had boxing winnings." He looked up with a small grin. "To pay for the pie."

Steve shrugged. "There's no need."

"Yes there is." He sighed. "You have no idea."

"Actually, I do," Steve said. "Back then, you always had boxing winnings, and I never did. Let me do this for you, Buck."

Steve held Bucky's eyes. After a time, Bucky nodded.

Bucky said, "I finally feel like I got enough to eat," just as the waitress brought their check.

"That's what I aimed for," she said. She and Bucky grinned at each other.

Steve's big-smile pulled the sun down from the sky to shine with happiness from his face. Bucky would give his left arm to see Steve smile like that all the time. Bucky noticed that the bill was discounted and that Steve left an extra big tip, and that all felt right.

On the whole, it had been such a good day that Bucky was especially frustrated to find himself lost in a fragment and muttering in Russian as they rode the subway back to the tower. Steve's face was contorted with concern for the rest of the ride.

"Let me lie down before I have to talk to Mockta," Bucky said—he thought, he hoped, in English—when they got back to the tower.

Steve nodded and took Bucky to his room. Bucky sank to his mattress. Steve sat beside him and smoothed out Bucky's hat-crushed hair. Steve's fingers were warm and soothing. As much as Bucky would have liked to stay conscious, counting Steve's finger strokes, attending to each one, he drifted into a restful sleep.

Lunch was ending, it was almost one, and Clint and Coulson still hadn't emerged from their room.

Fitz toyed with his chicken lo mein. "This isn't like the Director."

Natasha picked an egg roll up. "Assume it's a sick day."

"Sick day?" Jemma sounded skeptical.
Natasha smiled. "Lovesick counts."

Coulson strode into the kitchen all businesslike and looking crisp in his suit. He poured himself a cup of green tea and started looking through cabinets.

Natasha quirked a brow. "Can I help you find something?"

Coulson nodded. "Ibuprofen."

Jemma went over to a cabinet on the other side of the pantry. "Over here, with the vitamins."

"Thank you, Jemma." Coulson poured two of the blue gelcaps into his hand. He considered them for a moment, then poured two more into his hand. He washed the four painkillers down with his tea. He poured more tea into his mug before fixing himself a plate that contained a sampling from the boxes of Chinese takeout arrayed on one end of the island.

Somehow managing to look rumpled in a neat eggplant-toned Tshirt and black button up jeans, Clint sauntered into the kitchen. It was something about his hair. After pouring himself a big glass of reverse-osmosis filtered water, he took two ibuprofen gelcaps, a handful of turmeric capsules, and then proceeded to methodically take an assortment of other supplements and vitamins.

Coulson looked at Jemma, Fitz, and Natasha in turn. "I'm going to eat in my office. As soon as you're finished with lunch, come catch me up on this morning's developments."

Natasha waved her egg roll. "I'll be there after a while."

"That's fine," Coulson said. "I'm going to want a separate meeting with you anyway. I have more questions about that report you did on the information from Barnes."

"Sure thing, boss." She bit into her egg roll.

Plate in hand, Coulson went over to Clint and ruffled his hair before picking up his mug of tea and leaving. Clint smiled to himself and didn't even turn around.

Fitz and Jemma gaped after Coulson and then looked at each other. Jemma poured more Jasmine tea for both of them. Fitz put more brown rice on his plate. "I think we should just finish lunch in the Director's office."

"I think you're right." Jemma picked up her plate and mug. Then she and Fitz followed a long gone Coulson.

Natasha picked up her mug of green tea, leaned back in her seat, and studied Clint. "Klingon sexual rituals?"

Clint grinned at her. "With Phil? More like Vulcan, which can be worse. I keep myself in shape, and I think I pulled a muscle I didn't know I had."

"Do tell."

He rolled his eyes and then looked through the remains of the Chinese takeout. "Is this all there is? I'm a make one of those steaks. Want one?"

She laughed. "No thank you. Unlike you, I had breakfast. Also, I spent the night sleeping, not pulling muscles doing bedroom cardio."

He cuffed her shoulder as he went by.
She smacked his arm. "Ingrate. You ought to thank me."

Fingers on the refrigerator handle, Clint paused. "Thank you?"

"I handed Phil a stiff drink last night before asking him what the point of the exercise was: communication? or willpower?"

He smiled. "In that case, thank you."

Mockta tapped her pen against the notebook she held. "You went to the theatre Thursday, Central Park Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, and spent most of today in Brooklyn?"

Bucky nodded. "Going to Brooklyn for a few hours exhausted me though. I took a nap." He shrugged. "I nap most days."

"You're still doing a lot of healing and a lot of processing. Both are tiring."

"When will that get better?"

"Hard to say." Her gaze conveyed sympathy. "You've already improved a great deal, and much faster than I expected. What happened to you, and what you did, went on for a long time. It will take a while to deal with it. You wind up doing that a little at a time in terms of acknowledging it, processing it, and accepting it. Meanwhile, you compartmentalize to survive it all. You've been doing that, and that's good."

Bucky thought about that before accepting the truth of what she said and nodding. He looked at her. "Coming back on the subway, I got lost in one of those splinters of overlaid identity and muttered in Russian. I couldn't stop it, but I controlled it a little and knew I wouldn't get out of hand."

Mockta's surprise and delight were obvious. "That's an important development."

With those words, she transformed his uncomfortable subway ride into an accomplishment. Feeling understood and supported, Bucky smiled.

Clint sauntered into Phil's office a little early for their appointment with Erin Mockta. He stopped in front of Phil's desk. "So," he said, "when I was on my way to the gym a couple of hours ago, some guy grabbed me in the hall, pulled me into the empty library, and kissed me breathless. He looked a lot like you but, you know, the behavior totally made me think pod person."

Phil grinned. "Really? I guess Jarvis and I might need to review how effective our security is."

Dr. Mockta arrived right on time. She hovered in the doorway for an instant before striding in. "Good afternoon, gentlemen."

Clint perched on the corner of the desk. He pulled a couple of small balls out of his pocket and
absently juggled them. Phil dragged his task chair out from behind his desk. Mockta pulled her favorite chair into position.

Phil sat. He leaned forward with the tips of his fingers steepled together. "We are done with the homework assignment to not have sex and find other ways to communicate. We communicated."

Mockta raised her eyebrows and opened her notebook. "You're done?"

"We're gifted students." Phil sounded sincere. "We completed the assignment."

She clicked her pen open and made a note.

Phil's exhalation was just audible. "It was hurting both of us. I was especially hurting Clint. I just won't do that anymore." He pulled a folded, crumpled looking note out of his pocket and handed it to Mockta.

As Mockta smoothed it out and read it, Clint gestured. "I looked for that. It wasn't in your desk or your dresser drawers."

Phil glanced at him. "I carry it with me all the time."

Clint sat back a bit, not sure what to make of that.

"I understand why," Mockta said. "It's quite the love letter."

"Love letter?" Clint said. "I was pretty upset when I wrote that. There's no hearts and flowers."

"No flowers." Phil's voice was soft. "But your heart's all there."

Clint looked away. He took another ball out of his pocket and bounced all three in a successive pattern. Phil described getting the note from Clint on Tuesday and their later discussion about Phil dying and having a broken memory. "And then we went to the theatre," Phil said, "and afterwards I drunkenly confessed that I was married for five months when I was twenty."

"That was common for a gay man of your generation," Mockta said, "getting married in your youth. At least you were smart enough to not let that drag on for years."

"She was that smart," Phil said.

Mockta smiled. "So, you've always had good sense about partners. Was she blond?"

"Uh, yes."

"And you have a type."

"I guess."

Clint made a sound in his throat.

Mockta tapped her pen against the page. "I have to agree that you finished the communication assignment early. You covered an astonishing amount of ground in three days. It's like you put on seven league boots."

"And then, a few days in, we couldn't communicate anymore," Clint said, "because we couldn't find a comfortable way to be with each other. Everything was either too little or too much."
"And you were going crazy," Phil said.

Clint crossed his arms and nodded.

"I suffered," Phil said, "but Clint went to pieces. Saturday, he came home almost crippled with
pain. That was his goal when he went to the obstacle course. I've seen him do that before."

"Oh?" Mockta said. "When?"

"Whenever I'm suffering enough," Clint said. "Before we started dating." He took a breath. "And
when Phil was dead."

Mockta's expression was thoughtful. "You're both very tactile, very physical."

Clint looked down. Phil said, "Yes."

"And I miscalculated when it comes to you." She gestured at Clint. "Because of your hearing
impairment, your other senses are overdeveloped, especially eyesight and touch. That helped make
you a sharpshooter. And it shapes this relationship."

"And"—Clint viciously bounced one of his balls and caught it—"it's how he tells me he loves me.
I can't be without that, and I don't mean sex. Three years I was deprived of that, a few more days
was just too much too long."

Somewhat abashed, Phil looked down at his hands.

"That's one item of homework," Mockta said. "Let me ask about another one. Have you made
plans to visit your grave?"

Clint groaned and lay back on the desktop. "He has."

"Are you laying on my stapler?" Phil asked, mildly concerned.

"Either that or a tape dispenser." Clint reached underneath himself, grabbed the stapler, and set it
on his chest.

Mockta addressed Phil. "Plans?"

"I was thinking we could leave Friday of next week."

"I do not want to go to his grave," Clint said to the ceiling. The stapler tumbled to the floor.

"I don't particularly want to go either."

"You haven't been." Clint sat up. "I was there for your funeral. Lyall's wife was there, Shelly—
except she's Celeste, right, so what, is Shelly her middle name or something? Whatever, she was
there, which I now find fucking awkward. And the whole thing was, literally, clinically depressing.
I really don't want to go back."

"Which is exactly why you need to," Mockta inserted smoothly. "Have that not be your only
memory of it, let it become something less malignant to you, and something real for Phil."

Clint rubbed his inner elbow and looked away. Phil tried to act like he hadn't noticed the gesture.
Mockta arched one brow and glanced between them a few times. When neither man said anything,
she asked, "Phil, what did he just do that bothers you?"
Phil startled slightly and looked up at Clint, who quickly removed his hand from the crook of his arm.

"It's nothing," the archer said.

"He attempted suicide," Phil said quietly. "He didn't really mean it, but—"

"You don't know anything about that!" Clint snarled.

"Maybe not first hand, but Natasha was there and she told me. She's got pictures, and you've got scars—"

"Those are from bow snaps."

"Bow snaps bruise, they don't leave marks like that, and you hardly ever snap yourself," Phil said sharply. "Maybe I'm not the only one who fails to mention things I should. You're lucky Natasha will do it for you."

"She had no right to tell you about that."

"Since when does she care? She also told me she fucked you just to convince you that you weren't dead, too. And actually, I'm glad she did. I don't think I want to know what kind of mess you'd be by now if she hadn't—assuming you'd be here at all." Phil took a rough breath. "Maybe you'd have taken a knife to yourself and really meant it. I—I don't think I could've lived with that."

"How Romeo and Juliet." Clint rolled his eyes and stood. "Maybe you should have thought about that before maintaining a three year radio silence."

"I've told you why I didn't contact you and I have apologized profusely."

"Do the two of you ordinarily fight like this?" Mockta cut the quarreling off. "Or do you save it for me?"

The two men looked at her, then each other. "Some of both, I think," Phil said with a heavy breath.

"Fair enough, I'm well equipped to play referee, so instead of squabbling how about working out what's actually going on here?" Mockta tapped her pen on the edge of her notebook. "You both need some lessons in reflective listening, and we'll get to that. Clint, do you realize what you did just now?"

"Uh, pretty sure the word in English is 'bitched.'"

"Well, yes," the doctor said patiently, "but that's not what I mean. You pushed Phil's buttons—you're very good at that, by the way—you picked that little spat intentionally, if not consciously, to change the subject away from planning to visit the grave. And it worked. It worked really well, but we are going to get back to those plans. Now, in changing the subject, you brought up a lot of valid issues, but when you bring them all up at once everything turns into the emotional and verbal equivalent of a paint splatter and the conversation devolves into recrimination. That is not constructive. So here's what I heard:—she looked at her notes—"Clint, you don't want to visit Phil's grave because it holds a lot of bad memories and uncomfortable associations for you; you are uncomfortable with—I dare say threatened by—Phil's past relationship with Celeste; you don't like to talk about what you went through while Phil was dead, you don't like Phil knowing what you went through while he was dead, you resent that Natasha told him, you don't think it was her place, you're still angry that you were left in the dark and left to grieve effectively for nothing."
She shifted in her chair. "Phil, you feel guilty about Clint's suicide attempt, you want Clint to be open with you about what he went through while you were dead, you want to act like this is all in the past when it isn't yet."

"No." Phil was adamant. "It isn't in the past. It affects us now."

Mockta's eyebrows went up. "That's true. By the way, my listing what I heard is an example of reflective listening."

"I know." Clint bounced balls off the wall and floor in a pattern. "This isn't my first therapy rodeo."

"If you know," Mockta said, "why don't you do it?"

"You're talking about paint by numbers. Not only are we in a master artist's workshop, it's sculpting not painting."

Mockta made notes, and waited. Clint bounced the balls in a rapid-fire series of patterns, caught them all, and then went still. When Clint became motionless, Phil tensed into a coiled spring, ready to move.

"He takes me apart."

Mockta's head came up. "Clint, I need you to explain that."

"I need him to take me apart." Clint's eyes were focused out the window at some impossible distance. "I'd say molecule by molecule but it isn't physical."

"More metaphysical," Phil said.

Mockta's eyes snapped to the Director. Phil met her gaze. "We take each other apart."

"We spent the night, unmaking and remaking each other." Clint turned and looked at Phil.

"You mean, intense sex," Mockta said.

Clint shook his head. Phil said, "No, though that happens too. Sex can be intense when it's just love or just profound."

"Just profound?" Mockta said. "So, this is some of your poetry."

"No." Clint heaved a breath. "This I why I don't try to explain it to anyone. When Phil was dead, I described it to Natasha and it took her a long time to understand."

"When we connect at that level"—Phil stood—"things happen. I access memories that were taken from me."

"I remember dreams I never woke up out of," Clint said.

Mockta tapped a finger to her lips. "You're saying you open yourselves up so deeply that you're accessing your subconsciouses. It's possible."

"I'd call it soul to soul," Clint said.

"That's fair," she said.

"It isn't always sex," Phil said, "though we usually take it in that direction."
"And I need to know that it can be taken that far."

"Unless one of us is physically injured."

Clint nodded. "Unless that. And even then..."

"But it can," Phil said, "just be talking and touching. We're paying such close attention to the other one that we lose ourselves."

"It's like a state of flow, only better," Clint said, "and doesn't involve all the runner's burn."

"It's like getting to a transcendent state of meditation," Phil said, "but the results last longer."

"Peak experiences," Mockta said. "You take each other to peak experiences and you do it together." She frowned. "How can you trust each other so implicitly that you'll lay open your subconsciousses, and then bicker like this?"

Clint turned tragic eyes on her. "Why do you think this is so horrible?"

"It isn't bickering," Phil said. "We sometimes enjoy bickering. This is more like fighting for survival."

Understanding passed over Mockta's features. "I thought you came to me with emotional wounds but you came with spiritual wounds."

Clint made a face. "Sounds like we need a priest."

Mockta held a hand up. "That would work for some people. And don't push me away after sharing this with me."

The blood drained from Clint's face. His hands trembled. Phil clamped a hand on his shoulder and eased him to the floor. Clint leaned his back against the desk. Phil sat beside him and also leaned back against the desk. They sat shoulder to shoulder—a piece of paper wouldn't fit between them—but otherwise didn't reach to touch each other.

Mockta pushed her chair back and joined them on the floor. She faced them. "Being spiritually wounded is pretty much always an aspect of being emotionally wounded. But the two of you are presenting me with something a bit different. Considering the nature and intensity of your experiences, I suppose it isn't a huge surprise. What you each went through is unusual, almost beyond human comprehension."

"We also communicate in a place beyond words," Phil said.

"I see that when I watch you," she said. "It's uncommon. Some people communicate with visual cues and symbols. You do that too. But there's another layer where you communicate kinesthetically. You communicate in such a layered manner that no one else can follow it. Not even me. That's how I misunderstood."

"And I often don't have words," Clint said, "to describe what I know or feel."

Mockta nodded. "Which isn't a failure of vocabulary. So what I'm called on to do here is take my knowledge and depth of experience and apply it in new ways."

"So we don't have to go to Phil's grave?" Clint sounded hopeful.

"Nice try." Mockta smiled. "Some things, you still have to do, but I'm asking you to work with me
to figure out how things need to be done so they work for you. We throw away the paint by number kits and now you have to handpick art materials."

Clint stared at the ceiling. "I need to spend a weekend alone with Phil before going to see his grave."

"Why?" she said.

"Because I need to be reassured that he's alive before I go back to that place where he's dead."

"We'll go to a hotel." Phil nodded. "Just the two of us. Somewhere that you want to go."

"Just someplace comfortable," Clint said. "Where we can be alone and eat well and exercise. Nothing fancy."

Mockta addressed Phil. "After that you need to see your family."

He flinched. "I have no idea what to tell them."

Clint scoffed. "That's easy. Tell them the truth."

Phil blinked then stared at the younger man.

Clint pushed on his shoulder. "Not the whole classified truth. Just the part about you having amnesia. I can vouch for that part and that it was hard on me too. That I just found out you're alive."

Phil's mouth dropped open. He closed it and it still took a moment before he could speak. "You're going with me to see my family?"

Clint thought it over. He nodded.

"I'm for that." Mockta made a note then looked at the two men. "Earlier, I was going to say that *Romeo and Juliet* was an apt metaphor for you because there is tragedy between you two. But the more I think about it, the more I think that was a tale of adolescent histrionics that doesn't compare well to you at all."

Phil chuckled. "I never liked that play for just that reason. The behavior seemed juvenile and annoying."

"I thought you liked Shakespeare," Clint said.

"I do like Shakespeare."

"But you just said you don't like one of his premiere plays."

"I don't consider *Romeo and Juliet* to be one of his best," Phil said. "I prefer others, like *Iago*."

"*Othello*."

"Not if you're paying attention."

Mockta gestured with her pen. "So, this is bickering."

"Yes," the men said in unison.
"Carry on then."
I am finished with finals! Still waiting on grades but done for the summer! :D
Here, let's celebrate with fanfic.

When Clint came out of the bathroom in his boxers after showering Tuesday morning, he was content and humming under his breath. Phil was at the desk with a video link up on his laptop. Clint leaned around him to see who he was talking to. "Hey, who's this? Your mystery team?"

The young woman on the screen stopped talking, looking pretty confused. Phil sighed. "Yes, my team. This is Skye."

"Oh-ho! So this is Skye." He propped one hand on the edge of the desk. "She is pretty." He winked at the laptop. "He said you were pretty."

Skye laughed incredulously. "Aw thanks, uh, who are you?"

"Agent Clint Barton," he threw a sideways glance at Phil, "level obviously not high enough."

"There are no more levels." Phil sighed again.

"Right." Clint rolled his eyes.

Skye snorted and eyed Clint's chest. "You're pretty too."

"Okay, what's going on here?" a voice asked from off screen. An Asian woman with a Natasha-like air of ability-to-kick-ass walked into frame and leaned around Skye. "Oh. Barton."

Clint grinned joylessly. "May."

"Why are you shirtless?" May asked skeptically.

"This is my room."

"I'm trying to conduct S.H.I.E.L.D. business, Clint." Phil sounded exasperated.

"Hey, I am S.H.I.E.L.D."

"You're half naked." Phil glared at him.

"I don't stop being S.H.I.E.L.D. just because I'm not wearing clothes. I've done a lot of very good S.H.I.E.L.D. business without clothes on."

The women on the other end of the link shared a look.

"I refuse to consider you in a professional manner when you're in your boxers." Phil shoved Clint's shoulder. "Get dressed if you want to be taken seriously."

"Yeah, yeah." Clint shoved him in return and wandered to his closet, out of view of the laptop.
May's brows arched. "Phil?"

Phil pressed his fingers to his temple. "It's a long story."

"So give me the Cliff's Notes version."

"There is no Cliff's Notes version."

"Sure there is." Clint sauntered back over. He was barefoot but had pulled on a Tshirt and cargo pants.

Phil put both hands up in a warding off gesture. "Clint—"

"We sleep together," Clint said.

Phil dropped his face into his hands.

"That's pretty much Cliff's Notes," Skye said.

"We slept together for, like, three years," Clint said. "Then Loki murdered him and I didn't know something had been done to turn him into the walking dead—I didn't hear from him for three years—and I was an unacknowledged common-law widower." Clint was gratified to see that May couldn't maintain a neutral expression and was flat-out gaping. Skye was grinning. Clint continued. "Then S.H.I.E.L.D. fell and I dropped off the grid for a mere month and when he learned I was alive, this hypocrite hotfooted it out here and, well..." Clint shrugged.

Skye supplied the unspoken thought with a chuckle. "You started sleeping together again."

Silent but obvious, May counted on her fingers.

"How could I not?" Clint grinned. "I mean, look at this delectable fashionista." Clint gestured toward Phil in his tasteful suit and tie.

"That's enough," Phil growled.

"You were his handler," May said. "You were still his handler!"

Phil exhaled heavily. "Yes."

May scowled. "How could you—"

"With great skill," Clint interjected.

Skye dissolved into giggles. May cuffed her shoulder. She giggled harder. "Coulson," she gasped, working to bring her laughter under control. "I used to worry about you. I'm so glad you have someone." She raised her eyebrows. "And he really is pretty."

"Thank you." Clint beamed.

A small smile on his face, Phil watched him for an instant. "Yeah, he is."

May rolled her eyes.

Skye leaned forward. "Do Fitz and Jemma know?"
Phil nodded. "They could hardly have missed it."

"They never said a word." Skye frowned. "They are going to hear an earful from me."

"And you,"—May pointed at Phil through the screen—"are going to hear an earful from me."

"No," Clint snapped, "he's not."

"Clint." Phil put a hand on his arm.

"I'm done doing this your way." Clint shook him off. "After you died, I honored your commitment phobia and your secretiveness and I was bleeding out and almost no one knew it." He scooped up a pair of shoes and lunged toward the door.

"Clint!" Phil jumped up.

Clint dove out the door and slammed it closed behind him.

#

Bucky was tucked up in the desk chair in Steve's room, absently flipping through a half-full sketchbook. Bruce slipped quietly into the room, glasses perched on his nose, a thick and somewhat messy folder in his hands. "Hey," he said cautiously, patting one hand on the folder without any intent behind the gesture.

Bucky nodded a greeting. He hadn't spent much time around Banner, and he was pretty sure they'd never been alone in a room before—at least not for longer than a few seconds—but there was something about the doctor that reminded him of Steve. It was mostly in how they moved, keenly but unconsciously aware of how much space they took up that made them both seem smaller than they were. Bucky knew that in Steve the tendency was born of two plus decades of having been small. He wondered where it came from in Bruce, if it predated the accident which Bucky had yet to be properly filled in on.

Bruce took a few steps into the room and paused next to a chair across from the sergeant. "Do you mind if I...?"

"No."

"Right." Bruce sat. "I need to ask you some things," he said slowly, "that you probably aren't going to like."

"As if that's new," Bucky breathed, turning to look out the window at the rainswept city.

"It's just there are a few discrepancies that really need to be worked out so we know how you were affected by the serum so we'll be informed as we move forward," Bruce added as some kind of apology.

"It's fine, just ask."

Bruce let his folder fall open and flicked through a few pages. "In Steve's report of the raid in which you and the other POWs were liberated, he says—well he conveniently omits that you weren't with the others—anyway, he says that you were barely conscious, delirious, running a fever, and injured. He just about had to carry you out."

Bucky nodded tightly.
"But according to several people's statements, memoirs, and a couple seconds of newsreel, by the
time you all made it back to camp you were not only walking on your own but seemed completely
unharmed."

"I healed. We do that, we all do that, don't we?"

Bruce gave a thin smile. "You and Steve do."

Bucky frowned. "Not you?"

"It's not the same." He busied himself with a page. "But, so, safe to chalk that one up to enhanced
healing you think?"

"Yeah."

"Any guess as to why no one made note of your recovery?"

"Don't think anyone but Steve knew how bad I was." Bucky shrugged again. "Guess he was too
busy or tired or relieved or something to pay it much mind."

"That's legitimate." The doctor scribbled a note in the margin of a printout. "Any idea what the
timeframe of that would have been? In relation to, uh—"

"No more than a day."

"Okay." Bruce made another note. "Then later, when you were with the Commandos, you seem to
have been able to get drunk, but you can't now?"

"I don't remember if I could and if I can now it takes more than it used to. Haven't tried to get
shitfaced, surprisingly."

Another note. "Based on old pictures you clearly have more muscle mass now, though that could
be due entirely to training. Also, according to our measurements, you're an inch and a half taller
now than when you enlisted, but measurement error is a possibility."

Bucky shook his head. "I don't know." He ran a hand over his face. "I don't feel any taller, but if I
gained an inch between shipping out and Steve showing up as Captain fucking America, I doubt
either of us would've noticed. If I gained an inch after, then I don't know."

"Right." Bruce finished up one last note and closed the folder. "Well, that's everything for now."

"Great." Bucky leaned back in his chair. "You asked me stuff I don't like; now I get to ask you
something you don't like."

Bruce sighed and took off his glasses. "I think I know where this is going... Ask away."

"What happened to you? I keep hearing bits of some kind of story, but nothing's been explained to
me. So far I've got lab accident, anger management issues, supersoldier serum, and green. That
doesn't add up to much of anything. Are you like Dr. Jekyll? You have some split personality thing
going where you turn into a green RedSkull?"

Running a hand over his face, Bruce laughed hollowly. "That doesn't even cover it. Right track, but
wholly insufficient." He folded his glasses then his hands. "I was involved in a program trying to
recreate the Project Rebirth serum—and, unbeknownst to most of the staff, including myself, trying
to weaponize it. I thought we'd worked it out, that we had recreated it. In a bout of either social
altruism or egocentrism, I decided to test it. On myself. Things did not go as planned. I don't know
if we'd fucked up and the serum was wrong, if the plan to weaponize it screwed it up, if you really
just cannot interchange gamma and vita radiation, or if the serum worked fine and there was
something wrong with me in the first place. One way or another, it, uh, it turned me—" He closed
his eyes and let out a long breath. "Jarvis? Can you fill in?"

"Certainly, Doctor."

Part of the nearest window turned into a video screen running blessedly muted news footage from
Harlem in 2010. Bucky turned to look at it and stood quickly, knocking his chair back. Bruce
cracked an eye open. The sergeant looked at him and jabbed a finger at the Hulk on the screen.
"That's you?"

"Yes."

"Shit." He watched the footage for a bit. "Thank God you're not the other one."

"What?" Bruce frowned, puzzled, at the statement.

Steve came in quietly, unnoticed.

"That one looks like it would eat me arm and all. You," Bucky shrugged, "you'd probably put me
through a wall but odds are I'd survive that. Also the chance of talking you out of putting me
through a wall."

Bruce shook his head. "Is slim to none."

"Actually, Doctor," Steve interjected with a hint of a smile, "you listen better than you give
yourself credit for when you're like that—at least as long as you like what you're being told."

"You make it sound like I turn into a cat." With a wave of his hand Bruce returned the window to
it's usual, transparent state. "Or a three year old."

Steve shrugged. "Clint is taking his emotions out on potatoes using an excessively large knife so I
think it's some sort of hash for breakfast."

"Not bagels?"

"Definitely not bagels."

#

The kitchen was awash in potato dishes. There was indeed hash. Corned beef hash. Roast beef
hash. Hash browns. There were other dishes too, including potato pancakes and fried potatoes with
eggs.

As Bucky, Bruce, and Steve walked in, Tony said, "Replacing that Godforsaken arm of his is going
to suck the marrow out of a lot of us."

"Including him," Fitz said.

"So let it suck my marrow," Bucky snarled. "I hate this thing."

"I understand that." Bruce patted his left shoulder. "But this is going to take some time. We've only
just gotten started studying it."
"The good news," Steve said, "is that I don't see any bagels."

Bucky looked at the serving dishes lined up on the far end of the island. In addition to the potato based offerings, there was fruit, ham, scrambled eggs, and steak tips.

Clint waved a serving spoon. "Want any?"

Bucky walked over and put his arms around Clint.

Steve chuckled. "I think you've become the patron saint of breakfast."

"Awesome." Clint said. "Are there any perks that come along with being a saint?"

"Things about getting into heaven." Steve shrugged. "And making miracles."

"He makes breakfast miracles." Bucky grabbed a plate and began filling it.

"What he does with potatoes is a miracle." Natasha waved a bite of potato pancake. "As a Russian, I appreciate that deeply."

"Don't have to be Russian to appreciate it." Jemma took a bite of fried potatoes and scrambled eggs.

"I agree." Pepper ate her last bite of hash browns. "I'm tempted to offer you the job of tower chef."

"Oh, no," Clint said. "I only want to cook when I feel like it."

"Lucky for us," Bruce said, "you've felt like it quite a bit recently."

"Very lucky us." Pepper shrugged her jacket on. "You called Betty since Thursday?"

Bruce startled. "Uh, not sure what I'd say."

"Seems obvious," Natasha said. "Probably, 'Hi, how are you? It was great to see you.'"

Bruce staggered to a stool and sat heavily. He was pale. "Don't think I could do that."

"You could text her," Jemma said.

"Or Snapchat," Fitz said brightly.

"I have no idea what to do with Snapchat."

"I can show you," Fitz said, "help you set up an account."

Pepper grabbed her coffee cup and her briefcase, and then went over to kiss Tony.


She rolled her eyes. "Oh, I'll hold something all right."

"Promises, promises," Tony chided.

Laughing, Pepper left.

"God, I love that woman," Tony said.
"I heard that," Pepper called from the hall.

"I love you," Tony shouted.

She poked her head back in the door. "And so you should."

He went over and kissed her more seriously than their little kiss goodbye. "Oh, I do."

Pepper's phone rang. She looked at it. "Damn. I'm late for a meeting." She answered the call and hurried out.

"If it weren't for her," Bruce said, "you'd be going to that meeting."

Tony shuddered. "She'd be worth keeping for that reason alone."

Paper coffee cup in one hand and a set of printouts in the other, Coulson walked into the kitchen. He signed *later* to Clint, who turned around without acknowledging it.

Bucky tilted his head. "Did you have another fight?"

"Always." Phil sighed.

"Did you hurt him?"

Phil blinked at Bucky. "Not physically, no."

"So you hurt his feelings."

"Always," Clint muttered.

"Why?" Bucky kept his gaze on Phil. "Were you not you?"

"In the past, no." Phil set his coffee down. "I wish I could claim that this time." He waved the papers in his hand. "The recently decoded comminques indicate that Hydra is looking for your body here in New York City, Barnes. We need to be even more careful about making sure you aren't seen." He gestured at Steve. "Why might Hydra think Barnes is in the city?"

Steve set his plate down and sat next to Bucky. "Not sure." He took a thoughtful sip of coffee. "When I first started tracking Bucky from D.C., he was headed up the East Coast in the general direction of New York."

Bucky nodded. "Home."

"Makes sense," Steve said. "I thought you might be going to Brooklyn. That made so much sense, I almost missed the clues when you turned around. For a while, I completely lost your trail."

Bucky became pale and still. "They found me, always found me. I didn't want them to find me."

"Do you remember this?" Steve said.

"Only pieces. Hiding. Walking in a stream."

"Brushing your tracks out with a leafy branch?" Steve asked. "Sleeping in a cave?"

Bucky stared at him. Steve put a hand on Bucky's shoulder. "We did the exact same thing in the same order in Germany. And we were headed in the same direction—south. When I saw the
brushed looking place on a trail, I started looking for a cave."

"So you found him because of a personal hunch," Coulson said. "Because you know him."

"Partly," Steve said. "It was part luck too. I found Bucky so fast because I overheard that nurse in that Waffle House in North Carolina."

"Wonder why they screwed up tracking Barnes down this time," Clint said.

Steve frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, they found him every other time, right?"

Bucky nodded.

"So what was diff—"

"Sir?" Jarvis tone sounded oddly sharp.

Tony's head snapped up. "Jarvis?"

"I have again detected an electronic blip inside the tower that I can't identify."

Tony stood. "Source?"

"Unknown."

"Location?"

"Unknown," Jarvis said. "It was too brief."

"Fitz," Tony said.

Fitz stood. "I'm with you."

"I'm coming too," Bruce said.

"Me too," Jemma said.

The four gremlin hunters left the kitchen.

Steve, Bucky, Clint, and Coulson looked at each other. Natasha poured herself another cup of coffee.

"When is later?" Clint said.

Phil took his arm. "It's now."

They went out of the kitchen door and around to the breakfast nook. Phil closed the pocket door and said, "Clint—"

"No," Clint snapped. "I'm tired of doing this your way, of not letting on."

Phil sighed. "I called to explain to May why I haven't returned on the quinjet and don't plan to."

"I don't care!" Clint gestured and paced. "I'm tired of being some deep dark secret. Of not knowing where I fit."
"I told May I wasn't returning any time soon because you're here and I need to work things out with you. I owe you that."

"I don't care about your S.H.I.—reasons—" Clint stopped mid-pace. He turned and looked at Phil. "Uh. What did you say?"

"I'm staying because of you. And"—Phil held his left arm out in a gesture of invitation—"you fit right here."

Clint stared for a second then moved into the open space between Phil's arm and his body. Phil wrapped his arm around Clint and nuzzled his hair. "You belong right here next my heart."

Clint buried his face in Phil's shoulder. "It's awfully damn hard to stay mad at you sometimes."

Phil grinned. "And yet you manage."

Clint half stepped away and gave Phil's shoulder a sharp shove.

Phil wrapped both arms around him and kissed him. A few moments later, Clint muttered, "You don't play fair."

"I'm playing to win, Clint. We both need to win this."

Clint frowned.

"I'm not trying to hide you." Phil brushed the back of his hand along Clint's jaw. "I'm going to take you to my family."

"I think you need me there."

"I need you all the time."
Steve was up early, out on the Tower's largest balcony—eating nuts and chips, and drawing—when Jarvis interrupted his thoughts. "Captain Rogers, there is a visitor in the main lobby asking after you. The receptionist is very near the end of her shift and could be handling the situation better than she is."

Steve looked around for a speaker—the usual habit of looking at the ceiling when addressing the A.I. didn't work well outside. "Do you know who it is?"

"A Mr. Samuel Wilson, I believe."

When the elevator doors opened on the lobby, the only people in the vast room were Sam, leaning on the desk of a weary looking receptionist who still had half an hour left of her shift, the receptionist herself, two security guards, and a small clump of R&D interns nursing coffees and watching with obvious curiosity.

"I can't let you in without explicit permission from Mr. Stark or another resident," the receptionist was saying, based on her tone, for at least the sixth time. "I'm sorry, sir."

"I presume I have the authority to grant that permission?" Steve asked as he walked over.

"Captain! Uh, yes, yes of course."

Sam grinned and punched Steve's shoulder. "Steve, I thought you were still on the road, then you show up in the tabloids."

"Yeah." Steve shook his head. "Things have been busy and weird. What are you doing here at six-thirty in the morning?"

"Just when I got to town."

Steve signed Sam into the security ledger as his guest before picking up his holdall. They headed toward the limited access elevator and then took it up to the restricted access residential floors.

"You need to lay down?" Steve asked. "Or coffee?"

"Coffee," Sam said.

"Don't think anyone else is up yet, but there's always coffee."

"Figured Stark for the always coffee type."

Steve grinned. "Some of that's just for show. He is pretty high strung but he only veers toward manic when Pepper's gone for a week or more. Coulson's the one who's actually a devoted coffee drinker."

Sam's head snapped around. "Coulson?"

There was a faint ding before the elevator doors opened. As they stepped out into the common area, Sam said, "You mean Coulson was a devoted coffee drinker."

"No, he is." Steve glanced at his guest. "Oh, right... Coulson's alive. He's here."
Sam stopped. "Is this like Fury?"

Steve pushed on Sam's shoulder to get him moving again. "No. I don't know the story really, but apparently he was dead, and had amnesia, and all kinds of stuff."

They went up the stairs to the kitchen. Steve went in first and set Sam's holdall against the wall. "Feels odd to actually have to turn the light on. Most of the time, someone's already here."

Sam went over to the coffee machine. "Hey, is this one of those ultra high end Swiss things?"

Steve shrugged. "No idea."

"It is." Sam fiddled with the machine. "I saw this on one of those HGTV shows. I think I remember how it works."

Steve handed Sam a mug and he proceeded to make a cappuccino with just a small amount of fumbling. Steve chuckled. "I've been here more than two months and this is the first time I've seen anyone do anything other than make a plain old cup of coffee."

"Shame." Sam took a sip from his mug. "It makes awesome cappuccino. Want one?"

"Sure." Steve opened the refrigerator. "Do you like potatoes?"

"Sure."

"Good." Steve pulled several covered serving dishes out and set them on the counter. "Clint overcooked at breakfast yesterday, so there's a lot left."

"Clint?" Sam took a long drink of cappuccino. "Hawkeye's here too?"

Steve paused in putting the corned beef hash in the microwave. "We're going to have to get you caught up on a lot of information." He closed the microwave door. Fifteen minutes later, there was a veritable feast of leftovers arrayed on the counter.

Sam handed Steve a cappuccino then filled a plate. "You eat like this all the time?"

"No." Steve smiled to himself. "A lot of morning's it's bagels."

"I like those too."

"Hey you." Natasha quirked an eyebrow at Sam as she strode into the room, bare feet silent on the tile, though the stealth effect was somewhat ruined by the swishing of her too-long pajama pants dragging the floor.

Sam blinked at her. "You are not wearing a shirt."

"I know." She grabbed a bag of dried fruit from the cabinet, hopped up on the counter, and tore the bag open with her teeth. "The sky is blue and snow is cold. Anyone have anything else obvious to note?" She untwisted her bra strap. "Cap, you're doing that eyebrow thing, what're you thinking?"

"Are those Clint's pants?"

"Yup." She tossed a dried strawberry in her mouth. "He has nice jammies, people steal them. Hell, he keeps spares."

"I've seen the tabloids, so I've gotta ask," Sam said. "Was that you all up on Cap in those pictures?"
"Yup." Natasha poured more berries into her mouth.

"Are the two of you a thing?"

"No," Steve said.

Natasha made a face. "Did you miss me trying to hook him up with just about every woman I know at S.H.I.E.L.D?"

"Hey, I knew a girl in college who had a boyfriend and a girlfriend and the girlfriend had another boyfriend and the three of them kept trying to get the one boyfriend to go out with other people, so you never know." Sam ate a steak tip.

"Is that a cappuccino?"

Sam nodded.

"I think you're the first visitor to the tower who's known how to work that thing," Natasha said. "Show me how to make a latte?"

"Sure." Sam's third go at the elaborate coffee machine involved almost no fumbling as he demonstrated making a latte to Natasha. When it was finished, he handed the mug to her.

"Where'd you learn to do that?" She took a sip. "Mmm."

"HGTV." Sam shrugged.

"I've got to start watching higher quality trash T.V." She looked through the leftovers and fixed herself a plate.

Sam turned to Steve. "What the hell happened to finding your bionic buddy?"

"I found him. He's here."

"He's here? In New York? I mean I know you said you were busy but I feel like that's the kind of thing you could've found time to call me about, man. I volunteered to help you, you—" Sam broke off, turning to look where Barnes had just walked in carrying something that looked like a Nintendo handheld. "Oh. He's like here here."

"Uh." Barnes looked at Sam, then Steve, Natasha, and back to Steve. "Should I know who he is?"

"Dude, you ripped the steering wheel out of my car. Then, you know, flipped it off a bridge."

Barnes flinched. "Sorry."

"Naw man, it's cool." Sam shrugged and shoved off from the island. "You were brainwashed, people do weird shit when they're brainwashed. Woulda been pretty cool if I didn't think I was gonna die." He walked up to Barnes and held out a hand. When the other soldier took it, Sam pulled him into a slightly awkward bro-hug and clapped him on the back. "Always good to see guys back on their feet."

Steve crossed his arms. "What are you doing out of the hyperbaric chamber?"

Barnes looked at him. "I'm hungry."

"The cycle won't be over for two more hours."
"Which means I've been in there for ten hours! That should be plenty. Let's talk to Dr. Mockta this afternoon. By now eight hours should be enough."

"He's right," Natasha said.

Steve glared at her.

"Are you doing hyperbaric oxygen therapy for neuro-rehabilitation?" Sam asked. "That's somewhat controversial."

Barnes eyed him. "It's helped a lot."

Sam nodded. "You are a lot more lucid than I'd have expected."

"All kinds of things have been done to help me." The sergeant set the device down and then loaded a plate with food. He looked at Steve. "If I hadn't come on to the kitchen, the good leftovers would be gone. And what are you doing out here anyway?"

Steve exhaled heavily. "You were having night terrors. I couldn't bear to watch anymore. Then Sam came."

Barnes made a face as he ate. He patted the pressure chamber controller. "At least I can get out of there by myself now."

"You carry that around a lot," Steve said.

Barnes shrugged. "Makes me feel safe."

Natasha grinned. "You have a pimped out game system pressure chamber controller as a security blanket."

Barnes glanced at her. "I guess."

"That's fine." She slid a hand over the top of his back. "You want me to show you how to play more of the little games on there, you let me know."

He nodded.

Sam made note of her affectionate gesture with a look of surprise.

"Steve's wounded friend became our wounded friend." She shrugged. "If he's a sleeper it's embedded deep."

Barnes clasped her forearm. "If I'm a sleeper"—he looked at Steve—"you'll stop me."

She nodded. "We'll try not to kill you, but we'll stop you."

Steve scowled. "We'll try not to hurt you."

"Not worried about hurting him," Natasha said. "He heals fast."

Still looking at Steve, Barnes said, "Don't let me kill...anyone."

Natasha put her hand over his where he was holding onto her forearm too tightly. "Past experience indicates that you're unlikely to kill Steve."
Sam crossed his arms. "Though you might put him in the hospital again."

Barnes winced.

"We won't let you kill anyone else." Natasha showed her teeth in a feral grin. "Unless they're Hydra."

Barnes let go of her arm. "Thank you."

Steve grimaced as he went over to the pantry where he started pulling out bottle after bottle of gummy vitamins and supplements. He poured a bunch into a bowl that he set in front of Barnes once it was full. The sergeant absently began eating them.

Juggling her briefcase and her phone, Pepper rushed in. "I have that early meeting, Maria," she said into the phone. "Ah, so that's where the updated budget information is. Thanks."

Natasha raised her cup. "Latte?"

"That'd be awesome." Pepper set her briefcase down. "You know, I forget that monstrosity is more than Tony's overpriced percolator."

She ate fruit and toast while Sam and Natasha worked together to make a latte. Sam handed the oversized clear glass coffee cup to Pepper. Pepper made an appreciative sound. "I'd bring one to Maria but I don't have enough hands."

Looking a little frazzled, Bruce walked in with Fitz on his heels. "I cannot believe Betty overreacted like that to my sending her a Snapchat picture."

"It was a photo of vials of blood scattered over your lab bench," Fitz pointed out. "She reacted just fine to the prior one you sent of your hand patting Dum-E that said 'Don't know what to say but, hi.'"

Bruce looked at Pepper's mug. "Is that a latte?"

Pepper nodded. Natasha said, "I can make you one."

"Can it be a mocha?" Bruce's tone was hopeful.

Natasha grinned. "Sure."

"Can it be two?" Fitz's question was shy. "And does Tony like mocha? He's already in the lab."

"He's more the caffè americano type," Pepper said. "He drinks sweet coffee only once in a great while."

"Two mochas and a caffè americano coming up," Sam said. Natasha grabbed more oversized coffee cups. Sam looked caffè americano up on his phone.

Pepper picked up her briefcase and coffee cup. "Gotta run."

Natasha looked over her shoulder. "I'll bring a latte for Maria in a little while."

"Dress so you can interrupt our meeting," Pepper said. "Conference room next to my office, and thanks."

"Sure thing," Natasha said.
Pepper left.

Natasha handed mochas to Bruce and Fitz while Sam made a *caffe americano*. She picked her mug up and took a sip.

Clint wandered in, looking like he'd rather not be up yet, wearing a full set of pajamas that looked just like the pants Natasha had on. He paused. "Where'd you get those?"

She shrugged. "The laundry."

"Are you drinking a latte?" He grabbed her cup and drank some. "You are!" She grabbed it back.

"You must be Hawkeye," Sam said.

Clint nodded. "And you must be Falcon."

The other man nodded as they shook. "Sam Wilson."

"Clint Barton," the archer said. "Thanks for helping these two keep breathing." He indicated Steve and Natasha.

"Any time."

Clint rummaged around in the refrigerator and came out with a serious looking steel canister for spraying whipped cream. He busied himself at the coffee machine.

"Wait a minute." Natasha put one hand on her hip and waved her coffee cup with the other. "You know how to work this thing?"

"Sure," Clint said. "Fancy coffee machines have been around since before I went to cooking school as a callow youth. This has a few more buttons but isn't that different."

"You never told me!"

"You never asked."

"Oh, I see." Sam addressed Natasha. "It's not you and Steve, it's you and him."

"Not even." Natasha gave Sam a you've-got-to-be-kidding look.

"Not in a lot of years," Clint said while fixing a second cup of extravagant coffee.

Decked out in a slate gray suit accented by a blue tie, Coulson strode in. He ruffled Clint's hair. Clint turned away from the coffee machine and handed him a mug of milky coffee topped with whipped cream and a dusting of cinnamon. "Here you go," he said. "Dolce vanilla coffee."

Coulson took an appreciative sip. "Makes me miss Europe." He gestured at Clint's cup. "Dolce cocoa coffee?"

"Yup." Clint handed the cup to him. Coulson took a sip and handed it back.

Sam threw his hands up. "I do not understand the interpersonal dynamics among you people."

Coulson gave him a questioning look.

"Sam Wilson." Sam thrust his hand out. "AKA Falcon. You must be Agent Coulson."
"I am." Coulson shook his hand. "So you're Steve's friend. Nice to meet you."

"Word on the street was that you were dead."

"I was."

Jemma bustled in. "You sent a Snapchat of fancy coffees?"

Fitz grinned. "I knew you'd hate to miss out."

"Thank you." She squeezed his arm. "Is a flavored skinny latte a possibility?"

Clint gestured at Fitz and Jemma. "Let me show you how to fix your coffees." They stepped over and oohed and ahhed while Clint explained and made a latte for Jemma.

"How'd he get a positive reaction with a Snapchat?" Bruce muttered.

Natasha arched an eyebrow. "Do you not understand the difference between sending a picture of vials of supersoldier blood and cups of super looking coffee?"

"So, should I send Betty a photo of Jemma's latte?"

Natasha sighed. "Only if you're inviting her over for coffee and not taunting her."

"How would the photo be taunting her?"

Natasha shook her head in disbelief.

Steve got seconds and then sat to eat them. "You know Sam, I sometimes feel the need to have a scoresheet for the interpersonal dynamics around here."

Sam sat next to him. "Explain what you understand, including how is he alive?"

"I understand it." Barnes looked up from folding paper napkins into small elaborate shapes. "Tony and Pepper are sort of like the oldest brother and sister, but they also run the household budget. Coulson is sort of like the dad-figure, which makes Clint the mom-figure when he cooks, but Mockta's also sort of the mom—and the General. Natasha might be the only one who's really available but she's beautiful and powerful and doesn't have to be except she keeps a close watch on her heart all the—"

Natasha put a hand on his shoulder. "Come talk to me before you continue."

Barnes startled. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"You didn't." She patted him. "It's not me you have to worry about. Also, Clint cooks because he's a Swiss Army Knife of a person and can do all kinds of things, many of them unexpected."

Barnes nodded thoughtfully. "Like juggling, fighting, hair, and making coffee. And he showed me how to fold a better paper airplane." He looked up at her. "I don't mean to do the wrong thing, but I sometimes can't stop my mouth. At least, now."

"We know," Coulson said. "It's because of the brain damage Hydra induced. Brain damage commonly causes problems with impulse control, both talking and behavior."

"True," Sam said. "Even 'just concussions'"—he put air quotes around the two words—"can do that to a person."
"Huh," Clint said. "That could be an issue for a lot us."

Lab goggles on his head, Tony walked in. "So I got a Snapchat from Fitz of a *caffe americano* that's supposedly mine." He strode over to the counter and picked up the clear cup of rich dark liquid. "Mm, that is good but it's gotten cold." He shoved it in the microwave. "Sam!" He clapped the visitor on the shoulder. "Thank God you're here. We need you to help us work out replacing the sergeant's prosthetic arm, preferably with an upgrade."

"Sounds like a great project," Sam said. He turned and muttered at Steve. "That doesn't count as manic?"

Steve grinned. "No."

When the microwave dinged, Tony got his coffee out. "Can I get a thermos of this?"

Clint folded his arms. "If you make it."

"I get the proportions wrong." Tony was exasperated. "Why do you think I don't fix these for myself? They never taste right."

Clint dragged the inventor over to the coffee machine. "Pretend it's a chemistry project. I'll bet you get the measurements right then."

Natasha put her empty cup in the dishwasher. "I'm getting dressed so I can bring Maria a latte." She swished out of the room.

"This prosthetic arm project," Sam said. "Stark taking that on?"

"Sort of," Bruce said. "He's asked me to lead the effort even though it really isn't my field."

Tony screwed the lid on a small thermos of *caffe americano*. "Thanks, barista bird, this tastes awesome."

Clint rolled his eyes. "You're welcome."

Tony gestured at Bruce with his full, steaming coffee cup. "What you call your side interest in biomechanics, including orthotics and prosthetics, actually means you're more qualified than any run-of-the-mill specialist in the field. It's only the top specialists who'd be better than you, and they don't live here. But we need to talk to them."

"Some of the most promising new work," Sam said, "is being done at MIT, Walter Reed, and Georgia Tech."

"Good," Tony said. "That kind of knowledge is why I asked you here."

"Steve asked me here."

Steve made a sound. "He, uh, asked me to contact you."

Sam shoved his shoulder.

"Yeah, I know," Steve sighed. "I should have called you sooner."

Eyes sharp and missing nothing, Barnes watched them.

"So." Tony took a sip of his coffee. "I'll ask Maria to make arrangements for the two of you to visit
those places and maybe a couple more. Most likely next week when we're visiting Coulson's grave, and Steve and Bucky's graves."

Steve raised his eyebrows. "We're going?"

Tony nodded. "Me, Pepper, Natasha, you, Barnes, Coulson, and Clint, are going to D.C. to visit graves. Maria will hold down the fort at Stark Industries. Fitz and Jemma will hold down the fort here at the tower."

"Whoa." Clint glanced at Coulson's grim bloodless face. "We didn't agree to this."

Tony picked up a serving dish that still contained an adequate amount of roast beef hash. He carried it to the island where he sat and began eating. "You told Natasha the two of you had plans but didn't make reservations. When she talked to Pepper, Natasha noted that not making reservations is a good way to unconsciously sabotage plans. Steve and Bucky want to see their graves but didn't even have plans. Pepper had Maria make reservations for everyone yesterday."

"When were we going to be told this?" Coulson's voice was cold.

"Today." Tony was nonchalant. "Apparently, I've jumped the gun a little. You and Clint are staying at the Gramercy Mansion starting Wednesday night. The gardens should be fantastic this time of year. The rest of us will be staying at the Wilson House Bed and Breakfast starting Thursday night. We'll visit graves on Friday."

Coulson blinked. "The Gramercy Mansion?"

Clint frowned. "I said nothing fancy."

Tony shrugged. "It's nice but it isn't some two thousand dollar a night hotel in the heart of D.C. or anything. Natasha and Pepper thought about this pretty hard."

"It'll be fine." Coulson put a hand on Clint's arm. "It's usually impossible to get rooms there on short notice."

Clint choked out, "Wednesday? That's just a week away."

"Hence, the need to go ahead and make reservations." Tony turned back toward Sam and Bruce. "So you'll visit prosthetics teams that are pushing the state of the art."

Sam went over and put an arm around Bruce. "Do we get to stay in nice places like that?"

"Absolutely." Tony waved his fork. "We need more baseline information on you and that arm, Barnes."

"I've been thinking about that," Bruce said. "We need motion studies, including videos. Photos too. We'll need a full set for preliminary reference points; more will need to be taken later and updated throughout the process."

Tony nodded. "He'll need to be shirtless in some of these and wearing skintight clothing with motion capture dots in others." He took a last bite of hash and stood. "No time like the present. Bruce, Bucky, Sam, let's go."

Steve stood. "I'm going too."

"Sure." Tony made a dismissive gesture.
"I am not cleaning up the kitchen," Clint said.

Fitz looked at Jemma. "We'll do it, then we'll go to the lab."

She nodded.

"Thank you," Tony said.

Feeling lightheaded, Steve took Bucky's arm.

Bucky looked at him. "What's happening?"

"I'll explain on the way." Steve and Bucky followed Tony, Bruce, and Sam out of the kitchen.

The morning in the lab had been grueling for several of them, especially Bucky. Steve had been a bundle of nerves the entire time. After an early lunch he said to Bucky, "Go to the gym?" Bucky readily agreed. They both spent half an hour working off nervous energy, lifting weights and exercising.

Bucky stepped off a treadmill. "Now what?"

"Uh..." Steve looked around the gym. He nodded toward the ring. "We could box."

Bucky snorted. "That's unlikely to go well for you."

"I dunno, I think I might've improved." Steve flexed jokingly.

"Right." Bucky chuckled and squeezed one of Steve's arms. "We can test that."

They were still wrapping their hands when Sam and Clint walked in. Clint spotted them. "Oh, hey, you two gonna spar?"

"Steve thinks he's less useless at boxing since his growth spurt." Bucky tugged at the velcro end of the handwrap and smoothed it, grabbed another roll of wrap and started on his left hand.

Sam crossed his arms and tilted his head. "I don't think you're gonna break that hand. Just saying."

"I know. I just—"

"Have to do it," Steve and Clint finished for him.

"R ritual, we get it." Clint dropped himself into one of the chairs near the ring. "I'm gonna wanna watch this."

"Watch what?" Natasha asked, having just walked in clad in a matching set of workout clothes that looked too nice to actually sweat in.

"The superboys are boxing," Sam said as Steve and Bucky climbed into the ring.

Natasha rolled her eyes. "Seen it."

"No, you haven't." Steve grinned.
She made a curious sound. Clint settled back in his chair as the two supersoldiers bumped wrapped but not gloved fists. "I fight winner."

"That might not be advisable," Steve said as he took his stance.

"I don't care, I fight winner."

Sam leaned on the wall to watch. "I call the next round."

Clint looked at him. "You know that means that both of us are gonna end up fighting either Captain America or the Winter Soldier, 'cause I know I'm gonna get my ass kicked."

"I know." Sam chuckled.

Natasha glanced toward the wood-floored corner of the gym, shook her head, and padded over to drop into a chair next to Clint. "I call the round after Sam."

She, Sam, and Clint spent the next quarter hour periodically cringing, cheering, and jeering as the supersoldiers beat up on each other. After five rounds, Steve ducked out. "I give up! You win." He leaned against the corner of the ring, panting, for a moment. "Am I bleeding?" He twisted to touch the back of his shoulder. "Yeah, I'm bleeding."

Concerned, Bucky came over. "You alright?"

"Yeah."

"I think you got him with the edge of a plate on your thumb." Natasha stripped the paper off a large band-aid from the medical kit on the wall and smacked it over the cut on Steve's shoulder. "What was that garbage? I have seen you best him at hand-to-hand."

Steve shook his head. "Boxing. I took a few lessons as a kid, he was semi-pro."

"More reliable source of income than any job I could've had as a teenager in the thirties." Bucky helped Clint up into the ring.

"You know Muay Thai?" Clint asked.

Bucky nodded. "Think so."

"Great. Let's do that." Clint glanced over at Natasha. "If I die, Phil gets my PJ pants, not you."

"He'll probably let me take a pair." Natasha shrugged.

A few minutes later, Clint retreated from the ring with the heel of his hand pressed to a fat lip. "So, Steve was right... That was ill-advised."

"Sorry," Bucky offered sheepishly.

Clint waved him off dismissively. "I asked for it. Beside's Natasha's done me worse."

"Yes I have." Natasha carded her fingers through her hair. "Have fun explaining the bruises I know you just got to Phil."

Clint cringed. He went through a nearby door to the gym utility room where the refrigerator was and came back with several coldpacks. He affixed two to his shins, held one to his ribs and a small one to his lip.
"Not sure when the last time I did something this stupid was," Sam said, taking his place in the ring. "Judo?"

Bucky nodded once and settle into a left handed stance.

"Okay, now that makes me nervous." Sam took a right handed stance. "Thought you were right-handed."

"Ambidextrous." Bucky shrugged. "At least, now."

"Shut up and fight!" Natasha called gleefully.

In one motion, Bucky threw Sam over his shoulder and pinned him on his back to the mat. Winded, Sam tapped on Buck's shoulder, signaling surrender. "Now I know how my car felt..."

"That's it?" Clint sounded disappointed.

"That took, what, three seconds?" Sam shook his head. "I could try again, but I'm choosing self-preservation over pride."

Natasha grinned, said, "Good call," and positively bounced up into the ring. "No weapons, but past that anything that doesn't land us in the hospital goes, last fighter standing wins."

Bucky smiled. "This should be interesting."

"Yes it should." Without warning, she darted forward and caught him in the ribs with her bare foot.

He just managed to grab her ankle, but when he tried to toss her across the ring, she turned it into a graceful cartwheel. Clint gestured at the ring. "See, this is the kind of shit they ought to run on T.V."

Natasha consistently used her small size and speed to elude Bucky's blows. At most, he caught her with glancing clips. When he did, she used his size and momentum against him. She also used her stature and speed to get inside his defensive range and land her own blows. She was often too close for him to get much velocity behind a strike. They wound up in a couple of clenches until he pushed her away. After a while, Natasha ducked a punch, leaving Bucky destabilized by the momentum of his heavy metal arm, then she kicked his legs out from under him. He landed hard on his back and didn't move for a second. "Ow."

He got up on an elbow. "You are like an Amur Leopard Cat—small, Russian, and deadly." He grinned up at her. "And pretty."

She arched a brow.

"What?" he said. "They're beautiful cats!"

She rolled her eyes. He raised his chin and considered her so hard he was almost staring.

"What?" she said.

He shook his head. "You remind me of someone."

She held her hand out. After a moment of hesitation, he took it, and she helped him up.

Natasha raised both hands above her head. "Let's drink toasts to my victory."
"Sounds good to me." Clint stood.

After a few texts and at least one Snapchat, most of the tower's residents were gathered in the common room, including Pepper. Tony pulled wine, beer, and champagne from the bar and put them in a large tub of ice. He also brought out a bottle of Japanese single malt whiskey.

Pepper came out of the bar carrying frozen mango daiquiris for herself and Natasha. "It's not even three o'clock and I am so mentally done for the day."

Tony took a deep drink of his single malt. "I know what you mean. We've made no progress in identifying those gremlins and it worries me."

Coulson strode in carrying a handful of files. Catching sight of Clint, he paused then went over and brushed his thumb against the archer's lip. Clint winced. Coulson said, "How'd you get a split lip?"

"Oh, you know." Clint shrugged. "Sparring in the gym. Steve and Bucky, and me, Sam, and Nat."

Coulson raised his eyebrows. "Natasha did that to you?"

"Uh, no. Bucky. We were Muay Thai boxing."

"You were—? Why did you think that was a good idea?"

"I didn't." Clint stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"And you did it anyway?" Coulson frowned.

"Well, yeah. It was fun."

Coulson sighed.

Clint looked up. "Natasha won."

Natasha raised her daiquiri. "That's why we're here—we're celebrating my victory!"

Tony raised his glass of whiskey to Natasha. "How'd you beat him?" He gestured at Bucky.

Natasha smiled fiercely. "I fight like a girl!"

Pepper and Jemma laughed. Pepper said, "Girl power!"

Jemma added, "Hear, hear!"

Bucky leaned forward and bumped fists with Natasha. "You're quite the worthy opponent."

She smirked. "I might say the same of you."

He laughed in an easy, charming manner, gray eyes lit up and face relaxed so that it looked almost like the handsome youthful visage from decades ago.

"She's not even mean," Sam said.
"At least not to him," Clint said darkly.

Sitting next to Clint and pouring himself a glass of wine, Coulson rolled his eyes.

Sam drank his beer and elbowed Steve. "My need for that scorecard keeps growing."

Steve drank his beer and nodded. "Mine too."

"So, Natasha and him?"

"Don't know." Steve shook his head. "Women always loved James Barnes."

"Must've made it hard to be friends with him at times."

"Not really." Steve slugged back some beer as though it wasn't an empty gesture. "It was easy for anyone to...like...James Barnes."

Sam gave him a look but then nodded.

Tony gestured at Sam and Bruce. "When you two visit those prosthetics teams, the true nature of this project can't be revealed."

"Well, no," Bruce said. "We don't want it known that Barnes is alive."

"We'll keep it on the down low," Sam said.

"Say I'm looking into a charity project or something," Tony said.

Bucky looked at Steve. "Told you I'm a charity project."

Tony laughed. "Only temporarily. At the end of this road, working with you will further my interests in terms of the Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D, or my financial interests, or both."

Pepper raised her glass. "Tony is a genius at monetizing his ideas."

Tony poured himself another glass of whiskey, neat. "And Pepper is a genius at following through on those ideas."

She leaned against him. "Makes us a good team."

"The best," Tony agreed.

Bucky looked confused. Tony leaned forward and tapped him on his arm. "Once we have enough information, I'm going to invent things to help you. Inventions get patented. Patents can be used to make money." He took a long drink of whiskey.

The sergeant frowned. "That isn't why you helped me."

Tony leaned back and chuckled. "At first I helped you because Steve insisted. Later, I saw that it was the right thing to do. Now I'm pretty sure that doing right will become more than its own reward."

Pepper gestured at Coulson and Clint. "Friday night of next week, you have a reservation at a bed and breakfast in Pennsylvania so you can easily get to the Coulson family home Saturday morning."
Coulson choked on his wine and began coughing. Clint thumped him on the back and then stood. "No more wine for you," he said. "I'm going to make a pot of tea."

"I'll just have water," Coulson rasped, "until you get back."

Clint nodded and headed toward the stairwell to the kitchen. He returned twenty minutes later with a tray laden with a teapot, several cups, sugar, and milk, to find Tony sprawled across Pepper's lap. She was combing her fingers through his dark wavy hair.

Steve frowned at Tony. "Are you drunk?"

"No." The billionaire downed the rest of his drink and set his glass on the nearest flat surface. "Just not sober. None of you have seen me drunk." He waved a hand. "Except Pepper and Bruce."

Clint set the tray down and snorted. "Is drunk Tony terrifying?" He sat before pouring tea for himself and Coulson. He looked up at Bruce, who nodded. Clint poured another cup of tea and handed it to the doctor.

"No," Bruce chuckled, "he's funny. The aftermath is sometimes terrifying though."

"IQ stays up, common sense takes its leave, I start ill-advisedly modding household appliances and toys."

"And you dance," Pepper and Bruce added in unison.

"And I dance." Tony nodded.

"Must be a family trait." Steve chuckled to himself.

"What?" Tony sat up to look at him.

"The dancing. And the tinkering." Steve shrugged. "Howard did that too."

"When the hell did you have the chance to find that out?"

"France." Steve leaned back in his seat. "Everybody got drunk in France."

Bucky snorted. "Sorry I missed that."

"You mean everybody but you got drunk in France, right?" Jemma asked.

"Right. I mean I drank but..." Steve shrugged. "Nothing."

"It saddens me that we'll never get to know what kind of drunk Captain America is," Tony said as he sank onto the couch.

"A sappy clingy one who loves everybody," Bucky provided without missing a beat.

Steve blushed and ducked his head. Tony laughed. Clint grinned. "I can see it."

"Me too." Pepper put a hand to her mouth. "I'm sorry Steve, but that's adorable."

Steve rolled his eyes and pointed at Buck. "He gets—got—stupid and show-offish."

"I like attention!" Bucky laughed. Everyone else laughed too.

"Hey, I show off too. Don't worry about it," Sam said. "I start telling people to hold my beer and
"watch this, then I make really bad decisions."

"Me and Jemma both just fall asleep," Fitz said.

"I get giggly, then I fall asleep," Jemma corrected.

"I do that too." Pepper nodded sagely then grinned.

"I'm not a fun drunk." Clint's forehead creased. "I'm morose and volatile."

"That's you sober," Coulson said dryly. Clint pulled a kooshball out of his pocket and tossed it at his partner. Coulson looked at the projectile once it had fallen into his lap. "Why the hell are you carrying a kooshball around?"

Clint shrugged. "I found it."

"Agent!" Tony called. "How are you drunk?"

"You've all seen him as drunk as he gets." Clint rolled his eyes. "He talks too much, he kisses even better than usual, and his foreign language proficiency goes up. That's about it. Any more than that and he passes out."

"Huh." Tony considered the Director. "That's kinda anticlimactic."

"Sorry to disappoint." Coulson smirked.

"Romanoff?" Bucky said with a distinctly Russian lilt.

Natasha looked up from the game she was playing on Clint's phone. "Hm?"

"What are you like?"

"I get even blunter than normal, then I get horny, then I get combative, and if I'm stupid enough to keep drinking past that I get sick."

The room went quiet, looking at her. She went back to her game, disinterested. Clint cleared his throat. "Uh, Bruce?"

"I don't drink," Bruce said quickly, then added musingly, "and it might not matter anymore."

"Gonna go way out on a limb here," Tony said, "and guess you'd be an angry drunk."

"Tony!" Pepper said sharply.

"No, he's right." Bruce fiddled with the bottom button of his shirt. "My father was a nasty mean drunk," he said thinly, "and by all accounts my grandfather was too. And that's why I don't drink."

"Oh..." Clint looked like he felt guilty for asking.

Tony frowned. "I always thought it was a religious thing."

Bruce looked up. "I'm not religious."

"You're Buddhist."

"And that's not a religion." Bruce rolled his eyes. "It's a philosophy."
"It's a philosophy that acts like a religion." Tony picked up one of the smaller couch pillows and whapped Bruce with it.

"Hey!" Bruce warded the pillow off with his forearm. "That is not a good idea."

Tony brandished the small cushion. "It's a pillow. I regularly poke you with screwdrivers."

Bruce gritted his teeth. "Not. A. Good. Idea.'

Tony leaned away, grumbling to himself. He started playing with his phone.

"He regularly pokes you with screwdrivers?" Clint asked.

"Yeah." Bruce shrugged. "Especially when we spend long hours in the lab."

"Does he have a death wish?" Clint was agog.

"Not really," Bruce said. "He isn't actually trying to make me mad. More like being funny."

"You know." Steve held a hand up. "Food. We should order food. Drinking on an empty stomach is not good for people."

"I agree." Pepper jumped at the change of subject. "Jarvis, project the menu from the new bistro in the lobby so we can all look at it."

"Good idea, Ms. Potts." The A.I. projected two extra large copies of the bistro menu on the nearest windows. Everyone but Tony got up to look them over.

"The sliders look good," Sam said.

Natasha tapped a fingernail against her wine glass. "I like the looks of the shrimp and avocado salad."

"Venetian chicken," Clint said.

"Ooh, look." Pepper pointed. "They have platters. Mediterranean platter. Burger platt—" She turned her head toward a mechanical sound. Everyone else turned to follow her gaze. "Dum-E?" she said. "Butterfingers?"

Tony jumped up and rushed toward the hallway that the robots were trundling down.

"Wait." Bruce was horrified. "What are they carrying?"

"All the extra pillows from the linen closets!" Tony chortled. He grabbed the floppiest looking feather pillow and gently bopped Bruce's shoulder.

Bruce's mouth dropped open. He grabbed a pillow from Butterfingers and thumped Tony in the side with it. Tony whooped, thumped Bruce with his pillow and ran. Bruce went after him. Pepper laughed.

With a mischievous grin, Natasha thumped Clint with a pillow. He retaliated.

"Bet I can beat you in a pillow fight now, jerk." Steve walloped Bucky with a firm down-filled pillow.

Buck laughed, the sound unconstrained and happy. "No you can't, punk." He grabbed a pillow and
enthusiastically bludgeoned Steve with it.

Within minutes, everyone in the room was swinging a pillow, chasing someone, running, and laughing. They all were mindful to stay away from the end tables and coffee tables where the mugs and drink glasses were, so they tended to be clustered in front of the windows and in the open area near the elevator. Pepper had kicked her heels off and was swinging a pillow as she chased a cackling Tony, Bruce chased a giggling Jemma, Sam, Fitz, and Clint were whaling on each other with a pillow in each hand, and Natasha chased an objecting Coulson, while Steve and Bucky went after each other with pillows and gasped with laughter.

Bucky and Steve's pillow-fight wound up with them in front of the elevator. Bucky got in a good solid smack against Steve's back. With a hoot of laughter, Steve swung his pillow at Bucky who thrust his left arm upward to deflect the blow. His metal hand caught the pillow just as the elevator dinged, and the pillow exploded.

Erin Mockta walked out of the elevator and into a cloud of floating feathers. She walked through the pale billyvog fog of down into the suddenly halted pillow fight. The mass of combatants were snickering and tittering though no longer swinging pillows. Mockta looked around. "I see you started the stress reduction exercises without me."

A delighted grin lit Bucky's face. "Hey, General."

She smiled back. "Hey, Sergeant. I'll meet you in your room."

"Sure thing." Bucky grabbed Steve's arm and they headed down the hall.

Clint handed a cup of tea to Mockta. She accepted it. "Thank you."

"Can we"—he gestured toward Coulson—"see you after you talk with Barnes?"

She considered him. "This is my last appointment of the day and James' sessions aren't running way over right now so, yes, I can work you in."

"Phil's office in an hour?"

She nodded and turned. She walked down the hall where Steve and Bucky had gone.

Eyebrows raised, Coulson gazed at Clint.
Chapter 27

Clint alternately paced the length of Phil's office, juggled three kooshballs, and bounced three bouncy balls. Phil sat at his desk restlessly reviewing files.

Mockta stood in the doorway for a moment and watched. "I'm not late."

"No." Phil stood. "You're right on time."

Phil and Mockta got their chairs positioned. Clint continued pacing. When he heard the sound of Mockta's pen tapping against her notebook, he paused and turned toward her. "Natasha talked to Pepper who had Maria make reservations so we are definitely going to see Phil's grave next week and neither one of us is ready."

Phil got up out of his chair and faced Clint. "Is that what this is about?"

Clint gestured at him with a kooshball. "You also haven't contacted your family. I am going with you, and I'm not looking forward to going in there cold."

"Sit down, gentlemen." Mockta didn't look up from making notes.

Phil resumed sitting. Clint perched on the desk with a huff.

She looked up. "Let me commend you for making headway on this difficult homework assignment. Getting assistance was a good idea."

Phil tapped his fingers together. "Not our idea."

She pointed with her pen. "Clint's idea. My guess is he told Natasha about your plans, and I gather that Natasha feels quite comfortable meddling in a gentle way and you both already know that."

Phil looked startled. "No we don't."

Mockta smiled. "You took Clint's note from her."

Phil blinked.

Clint smiled crookedly. "Good point. Didn't do it on purpose but I did talk to Nat."

Phil stared at him.

Mockta said, "You didn't do it consciously, but I daresay you did it on purpose."

"Clint!" Phil's tone was shocked.

Clint tilted his head and studied Phil. "I don't really know what I was thinking, but what I feel right now is let's get this over with."

Mockta made a note. "Excellent progress."

"Look," Clint said, "I know you shrinks don't like to tell us maggots what to do but I think we're at a point, and in a time crunch, where we need you to just tell us what to do. There isn't a whole lot of time for you to lead us into figuring this out for ourselves."
"Maggots?" She laughed softly. "That's an evil sysadmin term. You are my clients."

"Whatever," Clint said. "Just help us out here."

"The answer to what you've asked is simple. Doing it will seem hard." She leaned forward slightly and looked Phil in the eye. "You must contact your family this week."

The older man blanched. Clint flopped back on the desk in relief.

"You probably don't have time for old-fashioned snail mail," Mockta said. "I don't recommend texting or IMing. Your best bet is either a phone call or an email. Perhaps both."

"I can't." Phil's voice was an agony of breath.

"You must." Mockta was firm. "What you must *not* do is show up at your parent's house unannounced. They're old enough that you might give one of them an actual heart attack. You don't need another traumatic event piled on top of the ones the two of you are already dealing with."

"Your sisters," Clint said from his position on the desk. "Start with one of your sisters."

Phil looked at him. "Are you laying on my files?"

"Yup. They're more comfortable than the stapler."

"Which sister are you closest to?" Mockta asked.

"Uh, I don't know." Phil shrugged. "We were all pretty close growing up but then obviously I haven't seen them in a few years and before that because of my work I didn't see them very often."

Mockta couldn't hide the exasperation that drove her sigh. "Which sister *were* you closest to?"

Clint bit his lip so he wouldn't laugh.

Phil frowned in thought. "Probably my younger sister, Shannon."

"So get into contact with her," Mockta said simply.

"I don't know what to say to her either." Phil sounded panicked.

Clint got up from the desk and crouched down beside, and partly in front of, Phil. "I'll help you. I know what it's like to be on the other side of that electronic communication. When S.H.I.E.L.D. fell and I was stranded in Argentina with bricked up electronics, I didn't know that month of being out of touch had a small silver lining—very tiny mind you—but when Tony got me back into a working phone and ported over my info and I saw twenty six unanswered calls from you, well, I knew it wasn't a fluke. I thought I'd lost my mind for a minute but then I thought, hoped, that had to be you." He reached up and clasped Phil's arm. "I'm not over all that yet, but at that moment I knew I'd gotten something real."

Phil was bewildered. "So I should email Shannon twenty six times?"

"No," Clint grinned. "Tell her something that helps her know it's really you."

Phil shook his head. "I have no idea."

"We'll figure it out."
"Great idea," Mockta said. "It's fine if it takes you a few days to craft the email but I'm giving you a deadline of Sunday so we can discuss it Monday."

Clint gave Phil's arm a squeeze and then stood. Phil put his hands over his face. Clint perched on the desk and juggled kooshballs.

Mockta made notes in the relative silence. The scratching of her pen stopped. "I've noticed," she said, "that you don't say 'I love you' to each other."

Clint caught his kooshballs and then crossed his arms. "Unspoken rule of Phil's."

Phil folded his hands into his lap. "Love is a luxury for agents."

Mockta responded in a tone that was dry and unimpressed. "Love happens anyway."

Clint snorted. "It's really because Phil's a commitment phobe."

Holding her pad and pen, Mockta waited while Phil thought that over. "To some degree," he said. "But there was nothing simple about having this relationship—ever. Death was always a very real possibility for both of us. I thought long and hard before letting my guard down with Clint and letting a relationship start."

Clint made a sound and rolled his eyes.

Phil looked at him. "That wasn't necessarily the moment I would have chosen, no, but I thought about it, weighed the risks. I knew long before that moment that I was in love with Clint but I also knew the stakes were high. Hawkeye was a S.H.I.E.L.D. asset and I was just a guy."

Mockta made a note. "I'm also giving you an assignment to practice saying 'I love you' to one another."

"It won't be a problem," Clint said. "Phil is right about how dicey that was. I was reckless enough for two. Better that he, at least, was cautious. Besides, he's caring, just overcontrolled."

"Words matter." Mockta was insistent. "I want you to keep a record of how often you say 'I love you' to each other over the next week. In those words. Not this indirect stuff you both do."

Clint chuckled. "Phil and I managed to have a relationship for years on smaller crumbs than he just gave me."

With a smile in his eyes, Phil watched Clint. When the archer glanced over at him, they held each other's eyes for a long moment and a look of understanding passed between them. *It's okay* Clint signed. A heartbeat later, he signed *I love you* to Phil.

"That counts," Mockta said. "The two of you are much better than average at reading one another's faces and body language but that doesn't mean you can read each other's minds. You must communicate in words, spoken, signed, or written."

Phil dropped his head into his hands.

Clint mumbled, "Okay." while he rolled a kooshball in one hand and stared out the window. Mockta watched him. The silence dragged on long enough that Phil lifted his head. He looked at her then followed her gaze to Clint. He drew his eyebrows together.

"I usually hate therapists," Clint's eyes remained on some distant point out the window. "But you're
different.” He turned toward Mockta and grinned crookedly. "Even if you are evil sometimes."

Her eyebrow ticked up. "Evil?"

"The no sex rule."

"Ah." She grinned.

"So, can I see you." Kooshball clutched in each hand, Clint crossed his arms and looked down. "Just me. After we get back from Phil's grave." He took a breath. "You might actually be able to help me with—with the whole Loki thing."

"I can work you into my schedule," she said, "only because I had a patient graduate recently."

"Thank you." Clint looked at her. "In some ways, I'm not that different from Bucky." He stared out the window again. "I was made to do things and watch from the back of my mind as they happened. It's much worse than justified deaths, worse than being an assassin. Most of those assignments never caused me a sleepless night. Under Loki's control, I may have been responsible for fewer deaths than Barnes, but they were people close to me." He exhaled heavily. "Including Phil." The blood drained from his face.

Mockta nodded thoughtfully. "I can help with that. I've seen lot of veterans and know that killing and trauma isn't just a numbers game. For example, one soldier might have killed hundreds, but they were all clearly enemy combatants intent on killing him and his platoon, and he or she never gets PTSD. Another soldier may have killed one person and be crippled by PTSD because they had no choice but to kill an armed child."

"Thanks." Clint nodded. "Phil once pointed out I need to forgive myself as well as him. That's all tangled up together."

"Understandable. Of course, Phil, you'll wind up dealing with this outside of his individual sessions."

"I'm willing to do that," Phil said. "I'd do anything for Clint."

"Even tell me that you love me?"

Phil's grin was lopsided. "You really know how to push my buttons."

"Good thing too, or we might never have gotten together."

"And I would have missed the best thing in my life."

Clint was agitated. "See that, right there, it's stuff like that that would always make me forgive you, no matter how pissed you made me or how much you sometimes pushed me away."

Phil was puzzled. "And that's a bad thing?"

Clint put his fists to his temples. "It's more like 'can't live with you, can't live without you.'"

Phil sighed. "I understand that."

Clint looked stricken. "Is that why you stayed away for so long? You went with the 'can't live with you' side of that?"

Phil went over and put both his hands around one of Clint's. "No." He shook his head. "No."
"Because, up until that, even if you made me crazy, you always made it clear that you wanted to be with me. You never went looking to be with someone else."

"And I didn't then." He grimaced. "Well, Audrey."

"Doesn't count. Fractured brain stand-in for me. S.H.I.E.L.D's a bigger threat."

Mockta quirked a brow and made a note.

"Clint, how can you not know how special you are?"

Clint leaned forward. "Because you don't tell me directly, at least not often enough. Even with what you just said you didn't say 'how special you are to me.'"

Mockta's watch beeped. "And that would summarize what we were just talking about, and is the point of your assignment." She smiled at Clint. "Giving you permission to ask for what you need has had a swift and profound impact on you."

Clint's mouth quirked into a half-smile. "Turned me into a monster, huh?"

She considered him. "I'd say you started out as more of a monster, and not because of the Loki trauma. Feeling more comfortable speaking out has made you less likely to act out. As I said, words matter." She looked at Phil. "You're an interesting case too, you seem relentlessly reserved but when you get started you're eloquent and unexpectedly open. I'm surprised you don't write poetry."

"At first," she continued, "I thought you"—she indicated Phil—"were the alpha in this relationship. But I observed that dominance between you and Clint is fluid; you can swap it over the course of a sentence. I'm not surprised that Clint started out in the alpha position but your relationship survived the transitioning to you being in an alpha position. I conclude that you're both gammas, which means neither alpha nor beta. Your relationship dynamic is flexible and more complex, but ultimately more resilient if you can work it out between yourselves, which obviously you did. But that got derailed."

"Now we need to get it back on track," Clint said.

Mockta nodded. "You're both working hard on that, including going to see Phil's grave and his family." She ended the session.

As they walked out of Phil's office together, Clint said, "I'm pretty sure Steve and Bucky have that alpha-beta dynamic."

"Sure." Phil nodded. "Steve was Bucky's commanding officer."

"But Bucky's the alpha. On a commanding officer level, Steve would have been a first-rate beta for the higher level officers he reported to. On a personal level, Steve's kind of lost right now because he's a beta whose alpha is too broken to give him direction."

"Huh. That makes a lot of sense."

Clint put his hands in his pockets. "I should talk to Steve," he muttered.

Behind them, still sitting in the office, Mockta raised her eyebrows. She flipped to a fresh sheet of paper and made notes.
Pepper smiled at Erin Mockta. "I'm glad you could join us for dinner. I promise we'll try not to make you work." She gestured into the kitchen. "As I said, we've taken to having mostly casual meals at the kitchen island. Luckily it's big enough for all of us."

"Thank you." Mockta walked into the kitchen. "I'm comfortable at this island. I've become quite familiar with it from our morning sessions."

Bucky came over and took Mockta's arm. "We saved a seat for you. We hoped you could join us. What would you like to drink?" He escorted her to her seat.

"Wine with fruit juice," she said. "Preferably cherry."

"I love that too," Jemma said. "I'll fix it."

Bucky leaned toward Mockta just a little. "Thank you for letting me be in the pressure chamber for just nine hours after today."

She smiled. "You're doing great."

He grinned and went to his seat next to Steve. Steve brushed a few still lingering feathers out of Bucky's hair.

Mockta nodded at the man sitting to the other side of Steve. "Good to see you, Sam."

"Likewise, Erin," Sam said. "I should have known you were the wizard behind the curtain of Barnes' remarkable progress."

Mockta smiled. "Thank you."

Pepper sat next to Tony and lightly slapped his hand away from a french fry that was still on a serving dish. "Use the serving tongs."

He rolled his eyes and grabbed the tongs.

Pepper gestured at the platters piled high with food in the center of the island. "Help yourselves. We ordered several catering platters from the new bistro downstairs. So we're kind of grazing."

"I see all my favorites," Sam said.

"Me too," Tony said.

"I'm glad someone else cooked it." Clint grinned.

"I'm glad you're no longer cooking because you're upset." Phil put chicken and an assortment of vegetables on his plate. "I like it better when you cook because you're happy."

Clint gave him a startled look. "I can't remember the last time I did that."

"I do." Phil poured wine for Clint. "At least I think it was the last time. You made organic
pancakes. I made coffee."

Clint nodded. "More than three years ago."

"Thought you didn't remember."

"Not until you mentioned it."

Phil rested his hand lightly against Clint's back. The archer visibly relaxed.

"I do that too." Bucky picked a slider up. "Not remember until something reminds me. Sometimes it's good, sometimes not."

Mockta's gaze rested on the sergeant. "You are more than the dark chapter in your life."

"It's such a long chapter." Bucky exhaled. "And there's so much ugly in it."

"You do a good job with compartmentalizing that." She picked up her glass of cherry juice laced wine. "And then dealing with it a little bit at a time."

Sam waved a bite of steak. "That's the only way to deal with a lot of this stuff."

"I agree." Natasha toyed with a slice of avocado.

"Hey, Erin." Tony gestured with his wine glass.

She quirked a brow at him.

"You're already seeing three and a half of my houseguests," he said. "Bet Natasha would be an interesting case too."

"No," Clint and Natasha said in unison.

Clint frowned. "You get to say no? That's not fair. You helped Phil drag me to see Dr. Mockta."

Natasha's eyebrows arched. "You just said 'no' too."

"That's different! I said 'no' on your behalf."

Natasha rolled her eyes. Mockta put a hand over her grin. Sam leaned toward Steve. "You sure they aren't seeing each other?"

Steve chuckled. "I'm sure."

"I'm sorry I missed the sparring," Fitz said.

"Oh," Clint said. "Would you have taken a turn?"

Fitz grinned. "No."

Jemma nodded. "I'd have liked to watch too." In answer to Clint's questioning look, she said, "I don't really have an adequate fighting skill. Pretty sure Tai Chi doesn't count."

Clint addressed Bruce. "You do Tai Chi?"

Bruce shook his head. "No, I do yoga. And some martial arts."
Steve frowned. "You do martial arts?"

"Mhm." Bruce shrugged. "I'm pretty good actually, not real formal though."

"I've never seen you spar with anybody." The Captain still looked confused.

"I don't spar. Can't."

Tony leaned an elbow on the island, grinning. "Then how do you know if you're any good?"

"There are other ways to measure proficiency, Tony." Bruce rolled his eyes.

"Yes, there are." Steve let his fork dangle from his fingers. "But sparring is really the only way to practice practical skills."

"If I'm in a fight where lack of practical practice would make a difference, it's going to stop mattering real fast." Bruce crossed his arms. "Besides, there's no one I could safely spar with."

Steve lifted one shoulder. "There's always me. Or Natasha."

"Lack of volunteers isn't really the issue. Also," Bruce laughed bitterly, "I don't think the Other Guy likes Natasha very much."

"Correction," Tony said then pointed at Bruce, "you don't like Natasha very much when you're pissed. Honestly, I don't think anybody particularly likes Natasha when they're angry, she's not very cathartic."

Natasha grinned into her wine.

"It's not me—"

"Bruce." Tony cut him off, arms folded, unusually serious. "As the child of two alcoholics and arguably one myself, just because you're not yourself and you do things, horrible things, you ordinarily wouldn't, that doesn't mean it's not still you. Just means you wish it weren't."

Bruce flattened his hand on the countertop.

Mockta watched the exchange with interest.

Pepper served herself a slice of cheesecake with raspberries. "I'm so grateful to you for helping me and then Bucky as well as Clint and Coulson. Sam is right. You're like a wizard."

Mockta grinned. "Thank you."

After dessert, the group cleaned the kitchen up together. Most of the group, other than Clint and Coulson, lingered over coffee and wine. Jemma and Fitz left soon afterwards because it was his night in the hyperbaric chamber. When Steve said, "I'll be right back," and ducked out, Natasha followed him. She caught him at the end of the hall.

"You know he compliments me because it's safe."

"Odd, but I'd never describe you as safe." Steve eyed Natasha. "He compliments you because you're beautiful."

She exhaled with evident impatience. "He's recovering his ability to be comfortably charming but don't you see that he's practicing it rather carefully? There are a lot of beautiful women around here"
"Not yet." He crossed his arms. "Or maybe he isn't interested in all of them."

She rolled her eyes. "He isn't interested in any of us." She clasped Steve's arm. "I'm not trying to usurp your place but it should help him if I let him be more normal, more how he used to be, I hope."

Steve blinked. "What are you talking about?"

Her eyebrow ticked up. "You know what I mean."

"No I don't."

She let his arm go and held her hands up. "I never thought I'd ever meet someone worse than Coulson."

"Worse than Coulson about what?"

She stalked off muttering about drinking something vodka based.

In Clint's room, Phil sat on the edge of the bed, leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. His jacket, gun, and tie had already been put away and his shoes were off. Casual and barefoot, Clint sat on the floor in front of Phil, legs stretched out and leaning back on his hands. Phil stumbled over words that refused to come out of his mouth. Clint waited. By God, he was going to do this patience thing, even if it made him want to scream.

Phil took a breath. "I don't know how to do this." He ran a hand over his face. "Doesn't mean I don't want to." He raised his eyes to Clint. "I've loved you for years. I—" His voice choked off.

"I know." Clint pinned him with a look. "I've always known, even when you were being the most maddening about it, and that's why I could forgive you over and over for your reticence and your unwillingness to acknowledge your commitment because, face it Philip, you are committed."

Phil nodded.

"But this last stunt of insane denial"—Clint sat up straight so he could gesture—"whether it's counted as one year or three, was over the top, and I'm not over that yet. I'm better and I'm working on it, but I'm not there. And that part, the denial and the commitment phobia, that's what you won't admit to when we talk about this, and subconsciously I knew that, and that's a big part of what I need you to work out with me."

Phil winced. "I'm working on it too."

Clint crossed his arms.

Phil leaned forward far enough to put a hand on Clint's shoulder. "I'm devoted to you." He hesitated then straightened up so he could sign I love you.

Clint softened. He got up onto his knees and put his hands on Phil's knees. "That'll do."
Phil kissed him.
Chapter 28

Bruce snatched the vial out of Fitz's hand. "Don't touch that!"

"I'm sorry!" Fitz held up his palms as though about to be arrested. "I'm sorry, I was just—it's just blood, isn't it? Yes, blood can be a biohazard, but I do know how to properly—"

"It's my blood." Bruce banged his fist on the bench, froze, closed his eyes, and took several deep breaths. He heard Fitz take a step back. He ran a hand through his hair. "I'm okay, Fitz. I'm okay. Just this," he held up the vial, "does not have nearly enough biohazard stickers on it. Treat it like it's made of botulinum toxin, mercury, lye, Ebola, and HIV, okay? It can and will hospitalize you."

Fitz nodded, still clearly anxious. "Right. And that's in you?"

"About five point four liters." Bruce put the vial in a case of other vials.

"How are you not dead?"

"Good question, don't know the answer. That's why I'm still testing my own blood." Bruce exhaled. "Let's put everything back into cold storage and get cleaned up for lunch."

---

Tony ate the last bite from his plate. He gestured with his fork. "And now I'm going to have to spend all afternoon interviewing chef's candidates."

Clint rolled his eyes. "You're fortunate to have any chef's candidates to interview. I called in quite a few markers to get this set up for you."

"Which I appreciate." Tony drained his tea. "But it's Friday, and I already spent all morning interviewing chef's candidates."

Steve gave Tony a disbelieving look. "You didn't have to schedule all the interviews for the same day."

Pepper tittered.

Tony made an agitated gesture. "I didn't!"

Pepper grinned. "Maria set up the interviews."

"I—" Tony started and Pepper put her hand over his mouth.

"Quit whining," she said. "Get yourself back into boss mode and go on or you'll be late for the next interview."

Tony glared at Pepper but kissed her when she removed her hand from his mouth. They left together.

"Well," Natasha said, "I guess it's time to clean up."
Bruce grunted his assent.

Over the past day and a half, Phil had figured out how to make an unobtrusive one handed sign of *I love you* to Clint work for him. Clint looked up from putting leftovers in containers for the refrigerator. After checking to see that no one else was looking, Phil signed *I love you*. Clint looked down and smiled but was also a little disgruntled. Clint was keeping track on his phone of their instances of saying I love you and, if you were keeping score—and the older man almost certainly was—Phil was ahead. Still, Clint dutifully added a tick to Phil's *I love you* tally on his phone app.

Clint slipped out of the kitchen before Phil and headed to the Director's office. He hurriedly wrote three post it notes that said, "Philip, I love you. — Clint." He opened up Phil's laptop, stuck one to the screen, then closed it again. He put the other two notes in prominent places in the desk's center drawer and upper right hand drawer. These were all places where, Clint knew, Phil would find all the notes quickly after he sat down.

The archer added three ticks to his *I love you* tally on his phone app while standing just behind the closed office door. When Phil walked in a few moments later, Clint grabbed him, which earned him Phil's pistol aimed at his face. Clint's adrenalin levels spiked. Phil's too, no doubt. The only reason the archer didn't get shot was that Phil had quick reflexes, exquisite self control, and was a well trained professional.

Heart still pounding with that adrenalin rush, Clint grabbed Phil's tie and pulled him close. "I love it when you show me your gun," he breathed.

A smile flit across Phil's features and Clint gave him a kiss that was deep and soft and already breathless from the lingering effect of the fight-or-flight response. Phil pulled him close and responded in kind, then hissed in his ear, "This isn't a good time. I have a conference call in fifteen minutes."

"Put it on mute."

"Not a good call for that. People will be in my office."

Clint slipped his hands under Phil's jacket and pressed him intimately close. He nibbled the soft place beside Phil's jaw that always got a reaction. Phil pulled away far enough to give him a questioning look.

"I want you to think of me all during your call," Clint said.

Phil cupped Clint's jaw with one hand. "I can't help but think of you when I'm in this office. There's the place on the desk where you sat and threw makeshift projectiles into the wall. The place where you stood and stared at the bookcase while talking about Loki. And the place on the floor where you slept beside me."

"Good." Clint tugged on Phil's tie to bring his face close. "And Phil"—for emphasis he pressed a not quite lip-crushing kiss on him before saying—"I love you."

He caught a glimpse of Phil's grin as he relinquished his tie, stepped away, and then walked out the door. When he was out of sight, he stopped and added a tick to his *I love you* tally.
Bucky shifted restlessly. Steve put his sketchbook down and went over to Bucky. "How about we go to the dojo?" Steve put a hand on Bucky's shoulder.

Bucky's face was contorted when he looked at Steve and snarled, "Geh weg von mir."

Steve snatched his hand back in shock. "It's been a while since you've done this."

"Ich hab', geh weg" gesagt."

"This isn't like the subway where you were just mumbling in another language."

Bucky lunged forward with his left hand but then grabbed his metal wrist with his right hand and spun away from Steve. Still clutching his left wrist, he turned a panicked face to Steve. "Hilfe. Help. Hilf mir."

Steve took a cautious step forward and Bucky lunged at him. Heart racing, Steve raised one fist and one open hand, ready to fight while trying not to hurt Bucky. The sergeant's forward momentum carried him right into Steve. He flung his arms around Steve's neck, clutching his right hand into the back of Steve's shirt. Startled at first, Steve took a few breaths to calm his nerves, then put his arms around his friend and patted his back. "It's all right, Bucky," he murmured. "It'll be all right."

Bucky clung to his best source of rescue and stability and Steve murmured soothing words. This kind of grab at comfort and help, Steve understood and had seen many adults do in situations of duress and rescue, and he'd held many of those people himself.

After a couple of minutes Bucky relaxed, which Steve was glad to see. Bucky's right hand flattened against Steve's neck and slid outward toward his shoulder. Bucky lay his head on Steve's shoulder and whispered, "Steve."

The embrace had veered into uncertain territory. Too aware of the firm muscular body nestled in his arms, Steve kept patting Bucky's shoulder.

He wrestled with his desires for a moment and came down firmly into the one place where he knew he wouldn't jeopardize anything between them, the point of love that had always been accepted—friendship and brotherhood. He'd walk across sharp shards of glass to not lose Bucky again, so he took a step back and another until he was holding Bucky at arm's length. Bucky looked at him with dark, confused eyes and it was like an obsidian knife twisting through Steve's middle.

"Let's...go to the kitchen." Steve's words were soft, calm.

Bucky frowned. "Food is not what I need."

"Maybe tea then." Steve gave him a small smile. "Alcohol won't do us any good."

Buck hesitated before nodding. Steve clasped his upper arm and Bucky slumped just a little as he let out a long breath.

"I understand your frustration," Steve said.

Bucky's head snapped up. "Do you?"

"Sure. It must feel like a setback every time you have an episode like this."
"Episode?"

"Like now, or on the train, where you still get stuck in the programming Hydra forced on to you."

"Yeah." Bucky stared at Steve. "That's—that's part of it."

"But everything's better," Steve said. "You can't expect these episodes to suddenly go completely away. They happen a lot less often and are much shorter now."

"Don't think I'd say that everything is better," Bucky grumbled.

"You're doing so much better." Steve put his arm around Bucky's shoulder and squeezed lightly. Bucky leaned into him. "You're doing amazingly well. Even Mockta says so."

Steve gave Bucky a little push. The brunet was reluctant to move so Steve wrapped his fingers around Bucky's arm and pulled just a little. Bucky sighed like a recalcitrant teenager and took a step forward. They headed to the kitchen.

At six o'clock, Clint brought Phil a tray with dinner that he'd made. Just something quick and easy—steak, a baked potato, and salad. And a glass of wine, in a water glass because that was more stable on a tray than a stemmed glass. With his phone, Clint took photos of his handiwork.

Phil looked up when the archer walked into his office. "Clint, I'm sorry." He picked up a loose stack of decoded communiques and waved them. "I still need to work for a while. Maybe an hour."

"I figured. That's why I brought you dinner."

Phil raised his eyebrows. He looked down at his plate and burst out laughing when he spotted the chives neatly arranged on the baked potato to spell out I -<3- U. Mushrooms and onions were similarly arranged on the steak, and the tomatoes were carefully sliced and arranged on the salad to spell out the same sentiment. Phil hadn't spotted it yet, but I love you was written on the paper napkin and on a note under the wine glass.

Thank you, Phil signed. I love you. Which he signed with the full body gestures that looked like a hug in the middle. When he signed the message that way it made Clint's heart stutter.

He spun Phil's task chair so they faced each other, leaned down, grabbed the armrests, and then—face almost touching Phil's—said, "I love you." He kissed the Director who placed his hands around the archer's shoulders then slowly slid them up, over his neck and into his hair, sending a shiver down his spine. Good thing he had the armrests to hold onto. His knees might not have held him up otherwise.

Phil prolonged the kiss. When he finally let the archer pull away, Clint said, "That's kinda cruel, you know, when you're just going to send me away."

Grinning, Phil pulled him close again. Nuzzling Clint's neck, he murmured, "Consider that a downpayment for later."

Oh yeah, their relationship must be veering back toward the rails it had jumped, because this was a familiar kind of Phil-dispensed torment. Clint must be a masochist because he loved it and, over
the years, had learned to dish some out too.

"Don't you forget it," Clint breathed against Phil's neck.

Phil's fingers clamped down on Clint's arms just enough to make him wince. "No," the older man growled.

Hearing the note of distress, Clint said, "That's not what I mean."

They pulled away far enough to look at each other. Clint released one armrest. *It's okay* he signed as he said, "We're okay here, you and me."

Phil nodded. He slid his hand down Clint's arm as the younger man touched his face.

Clint left the office. Out in the hall, he updated the *I love you* tally—one tick for Phil and six for himself. Now he was only eleven behind in the communication of affection arms race.

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Somehow, Phil managed to eat his steak, get through the communiques, and still leave his office at five after seven. When he opened the door to Clint's room, the shower started. A dozen large index cards in various colors had been cut into arrow shapes and arranged across the floor so that they led to the bathroom door. Each arrow had *I love you* written on it.

Smiling, Phil hung his jacket and shoulder holster on a hook and headed to the bathroom. So this is how it was going to be—pranks and competition—a welcome change. His mental calculations told him that Clint was now one ahead in the tell-you-that-I-love-you competition. Easy enough to fix.

He opened the door into the steam filled bathroom. He removed an index card that was taped to the shower door. *Phil,* it said, *Turn the shower off. I love you.* — *Clint*

He turned the empty shower off. Another index card, sealed in a plastic bag, hung from the shower head. The note read *I love you. I'm in the dojo.*

Okay, Clint was three ahead. Still smiling, he got a folded blanket out of the closet, supplies out of the nightstand drawer, and then walked to the dojo.

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Barefoot and outfitted with his sharpshooting archery paraphernalia, Clint was lining up another shot when Phil quietly eased through the door of the dojo, jacketless, and carrying his shoes and socks, and some items obscured by a blanket. Then he locked the door. The archer noticed this without turning his head. The fact that Phil was barefoot made him catch his breath.

The professional in Clint gave nothing away. He took a couple of steadying breaths, then shot. He heard the whiz of the arrow more than saw it before it sliced into one that was already in the target, neatly splitting it. In one smooth motion, he removed an arrow from his quiver, nocked it, fired, then got another arrow and split the one he'd just shot.

Meanwhile, behind him, Phil spread the blanket out. A moment later, his hand was around Clint's
wrist. "Astonishing," he hissed into the younger man's ear before gently extracting the bow from his hand and removing the quiver from his hip. "Stay there."

With loving care, Phil lay the weapon and ammunition aside. From behind the marksman, he reached around, pulled the velcro open on Clint's archery glove then teased it off his hand, one finger at a time. He reached for Clint's left arm. With slow deliberation, he unfastened the bracer and slid it off. By feel, he opened the buckles and zipper of the flak vest and then slid it off his shoulders.

Right about then, Clint's nerves were as taut as a tightly strung bow. Being stripped of his weaponry and protective equipment was a more personal act than having his clothes removed. He shifted on the ball of his foot, intending to turn around, but Phil stopped him.

Clint stilled. In the early days of their relationship, he went still like a hunter not wanting to spook a skittish animal when Phil administered tender attentions at unexpected times. In those days, he hardly dared breathe much less make a sound. That eased up over time so, like now, he didn't move but he let his breath hitch. He paid attention to the rhythm of their interaction, almost dance-like. He'd heard somewhere—probably from Natasha—that most dance was just symbolized sex. The two sure seemed related.

Phil nuzzled the archer's neck as his hands came around to Clint's chest and his finger's lightly played up and then down Clint's torso. "What you do is super human," he whispered, "only more impressive because you're unenhanced. Like an Olympic athlete, you're at a pinnacle because of sheer discipline and practice." He pulled Clint's Tshirt off and kissed his shoulder.

"Everything that you are, you paid for with focus and pain." He unfastened Clint's jeans, let them drop away. Clint had dispensed with undergarments, so Phil just pulled him close.

It was so much easier to be undressed when you didn't wear shoes.

"You're a self-made work of art." Phil murmured the words warmly against Clint's skin. Clint leaned back and sucked in a breath as Phil paused to nip and kiss his neck. Suddenly, the room was too hot, but Phil's breath was hotter in the curve of his shoulder. "I've always found it hard to believe you could be mine."

Clint turned around. Phil's pupils were blown out and his skin was flushed right down from his face to his neck. Clint knew that the red spread down across his sternum. "I've always been yours," he said softly which caused Phil to choke on a breath.

He loosened Phil's tie and slid it out from his shirt collar. He kissed his lover while he unbuttoned his shirt. Phil's eyes widened in surprise as Clint's hands grazed Phil's skin when he pushed the garment off his shoulders. Clint let his fingers drift to the hated scars bisecting Phil's chest, long angry lines that were impossible to ignore, and then stroked the coordinating set of scars on his back. Clint dropped a line of kisses along the scars he'd spent the past many weeks avoiding, and listened as the older man hissed a breath in and then out.

With practiced fingers, he unfastened Phil's belt, then his slacks. He removed those, then the boxers, and then found himself locked in a heated embrace with Phil's hand lightly stroking his spine.

Remarkable, how much of this dance could be done standing up with sliding fingers and hands, soft kisses and gentle teeth, before the inevitable drift downward to the blanket and the long, slow exploration before the intimate engagement of their most personal spaces followed by the white-blind convulsive release, one after the other, then the shifting so they could hold each other face to
face. The world slowed as they came down from their mutual high.

Clint listened to Phil breathe as he waited and his skin cooled. Then Phil's hand slid with caressing grace down his spine. That was almost always one of the first and last moves of the dance. He buried his face in Phil's shoulder.

Phil held him close. "I get so lost in you sometimes."

Clint sighed. "A glimpse of heaven." He fondled the prominent scars marring Phil's chest. "Hell's never far enough away though."

Phil rested his hand on top of Clint's, so their two hands were sandwiched over his scars. "So, no shirt's okay now?"

"Never liked having them in the way, I just—" He shifted their hands away from the scars.

"I hope you're finally accepting those."

"Accept?" Clint frowned. "Don't know that I'll ever accept them. If I think about them too hard, it chokes me up." He placed a lingering kiss against a scar. "Wish I could kiss them and make them better."

"Everything's better when you kiss me."

Clint tilted his head up and caught Phil's mouth in a slow lingering kiss.

Phil sighed at the end of the kiss and whispered, "The scars are a part of me now."

"Can't tell you how much I hate that fact."

Phil stroked Clint's face. "I can't change it."

"I hate that too." He smiled just a little as he slid his fingers up over his lover's neck. "But I love you."

Phil grinned crookedly and wrapped his arms around his archer.

Dressing each other was not as intense but was sweeter than undressing each other had been. They put the targets away, then carried Clint's weaponry and protective gear back to his room.

They took their delayed shower and made ready for bed. Lying in bed face to face with Phil, comfortable in his loose embrace, Clint felt warmer and safer than he had not just in recent weeks but in years.

"You seem relaxed," Phil murmured.

"More like at peace," Clint mumbled, half asleep. "Sometimes I still can't believe you're really here." He slid his fingers up Phil's chest, lingering over a scar, caressing and rubbing as though he might somehow burnish the offending mark away. "I can't believe you're"—he pushed his hand upward to Phil's face—"alive." His fingers contacting Phil's face was like the closing of an electric circuit, with a shock that slammed into his throat and burned his eyes.

And the tears came, an unexpected and unwanted surprise that was as wrenching as the worst depths of grief, with tears that were hot and hard, and sobs that were torn from someplace beyond the lungs. He'd had no idea that accepting his relief would be as grueling as life-rending sorrow.
He hated this—hated it—but was helpless in its grip.

Phil continued to hold him loosely, providing comfort while allowing space for Clint to pour out some of the poison that had twisted up his insides. When the jolt of emotional outpouring was over, without leaving the bed, Phil came up with tissues from someplace. He got up, dampened a cloth with cold water, then returned to bed. He pressed the cold cloth to Clint's eyes, one at a time.

Clint's breath was still shaky. Phil gave him a gentle openmouthed kiss that left plenty of room to breathe.

When the kiss ended, Clint's fingers crept across Phil's face. "You're alive," he whispered.

Phil moved Clint's hand and pressed it flat against his sternum, right over the hated scars. "I'm alive. And so are you."

Clint nodded. "I think it seems real now."

As Clint drifted, he thought that the words didn't always need to be said—though sometimes they did—that Phil had been communicating I love you through touch after touch, action after action, all evening. Clint had no idea how to count that in his tally though.

The last thing Clint was aware of before falling asleep was Phil's arm around him.

The first thing Clint was aware of in the morning was Phil's hand rubbing his shoulder. When Clint turned over, Phil spoke softly. "Hey. Can I make you some coffee?"

Clint mumbled his assent. He listened while Phil got up, turned a small light on, got water for the Keurig. He listened to the muted roar of the Keurig heating water. A few moments later, Phil presented him with a paper cup filled with sweet steaming coffee. Clint took a sip, then said, "Phil, don't make your cup too full."

Phil shrugged. Clint listened to the characteristic set of sounds of a second cup of coffee being made. He quietly reached for what he needed.

Phil turned with his coffee in his hand. One of Clint's thinnest arrows flew through the stiff paper just below the lip of the cup before sticking in the wall with a thunk. Phil was startled for a moment, then he raised the cup and laughed.

Sitting crosslegged on his bed, holding his bow, Clint laughed too.

Maybe things could be right with the world after all.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

So, this is one of my favorite chapters, and a large portion of it was actually already written way back when the chapter numbers were still in the early teens. Hope you all like it as much as I do!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"All I know about poptarts is that Thor likes them." Steve said between bites of oatmeal. "A lot."

"I like them." Fitz shrugged.

"I won't touch them." Jemma made a face. "Not in this country at least."

"Why not?" Bucky's curiosity was evident.

"They're full of high fructose corn syrup, which is horrible for you. There are laws in Europe that restrict its use so it's much easier to avoid there than in the U.S. The laws are in place for economic reasons, not public health reasons, but the end result is the same. Europeans consume less of it than Americans, which is good."

"Fructose is a kind of sugar, right?" Steve asked. "So what's the problem?"

"The body processes it differently, especially HFCS." Jemma sighed. "HFCS is a chemically and biologically novel substance that's pretty much cancer fuel. Not a very scientific way to explain it, but accurate."

"Have you gotten the biochemist started about American sodas?" Coulson asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"Poptarts, but same spiel." Jemma straightened up with an air of superiority.

Coulson set his mostly empty paper coffee cup on the island and went to poke at the now more versatilely used coffee machine.

Jemma noticed the starburst perforations near the lip of the cup and frowned. "He shot your coffee again?"

Coulson smiled fondly. "Yes."

Jemma gave Fitz a can you believe this? look. Fitz shrugged. "I was already pretty sure he's a little bit crazy."

Bucky yawned. "Think I'll go back to bed." He finished his juice and set the cup on the counter. "I, uh, didn't sleep very well."

Steve watched him leave and then finished drinking his orange juice. He got up with the intent of following Bucky.
"Sergeant Barnes'll be fine." Coulson's voice was mild and he didn't look up from spraying whipped cream on his coffee.

"I agree," Fitz said. "He's not a"—his eyes darted to Jemma and then back to Steve—"baby."

Steve paused before shrugging. "Think I'll shower and go to the gym." He walked out.

He puttered in his room for almost an hour, fretting about Bucky, before he managed to drag himself into the shower. On the way to the gym, he stopped at Bucky's door. Hearing nothing but silence, he continued to the gym. Maybe Bucky had gone there already.

Steve stopped as soon as he got through the door. The far corner of the gym had a wooden floor that typically had yoga paraphernalia scattered over it. The yoga stuff had all been shoved aside and—in the middle of the big square of gleaming wood—his eye was caught by the sleek muscular woman dressed in a black sportsbra and shorts and red satin shoes, her hair pulled up into a tight bun from which a few strands escaped.

Natasha was dancing. He couldn't tear his eyes away.

Music was playing—something in Japanese that sounded like an old, creepy music box—and Natasha moved with ghost-like grace to the melody, pivoting on one foot like she was on a music box too, every line of her body hard and smooth like she was carved from ivory. Steve took a couple of quiet steps into the room and leaned against a weight rack to watch. The music changed to something more upbeat. Natasha took a deer-like leap halfway across the floor, spotted Steve, and stopped, standing with the heel of one foot to the toes of the other. She crossed her arms. "Jarvis, cut the music." The A.I. did as bade.

Steve walked toward Natasha. "I didn't know you danced."

"Yes, you did. I've mentioned it." She shrugged and slid easily down into a split, reaching to grab her feet in a stretch before crossing her legs. "We all have things we do to deal with our lives. You box, Clint shoots things and reads fanfic, Coulson collects vintage crap with your face on it—" she grinned as Steve rolled his eyes "—and I dance pointe."

"You're very good."

"Thank you." Natasha let out a short, cold laugh and stood again. "I've had a lot of practice."

"How much practice?" Steve asked conversationally.

"Been dancing longer than I've been killing." She bounced up onto her toes and looked down at her feet, smiling in a way that, if she were anyone other than Natasha, Steve would have called wistful. "I got to go to the ballet once when I was little, before everything." She dropped back to the flats of her feet. "The show we saw was based on The Red Shoes, I was amazed, and I decided right then I wanted to do that. It's hard enough to find red pointe shoes, and they're pretty popular, but red little girl's ballet shoes pretty much don't exist, especially not in lower class Russia back then. I was so mad. My mother dyed a pair for me. Clint got me this pair last Christmas." She sighed. "I have no idea why I'm telling you this."

"I'm your friend, everybody's been going through their pasts recently, Tony has a twenty-four-seven open bar policy." Steve held his arms open. "You've got plenty of reasons to choose from."

Natasha snickered. "Good point. Come here, dance with me."

"What?"
"Dance with me." She held out her hands.

"I don't dance."

"Neither does Clint but by now he could be in the damn Nutcracker just from working with me." She rolled her eyes, strode forward, grabbed his arm and pulled him onto the floor. "Jarvis, have you got AFI's 'Love Like Winter'?"

Without bothering with a verbal response, the A.I. started the track. Steve looked at Natasha. "I really don't have much say in this, do I?"

"None whatsoever." She grinned and leaned into an arabesque, one hand on Steve's chest to balance herself. He held out a hand for her to use instead. She righted herself. "Now, I know for a fact you can pick me up."

"I don't think this is a good idea."

She punched his shoulder, "Coward," and pranced lightly away from him, sweeping her toe in an arc across the floor. The next thing Steve knew, a hundred and twenty-odd pounds of Russian were flying through the air toward him. On instinct, he caught her. She laughed, swung herself around to his back, hooked one knee over his shoulder, and leaned around to face him, more hair escaping from her bun. "Dancing's not that hard, y'know."

She unhooked her knee and slid to the floor then stepped around to stand in front of him. "Formal ballet, yeah, that's hard. Just dancing—" She shook her head. "All you have to do is feel the music, let it talk to you, then talk back."

"I draw, Natasha. Dancing was always more Buck's thing."

She arched an eyebrow. "So get him in here. Dancing is expressive and fun, it'd do him good."

"He went back to bed."

"When he wakes up then." Natasha stretched her arms up elegantly over her head. "I have plans to be here all day."

"Maybe. If he wants to."

"You know how to swing dance?"

"Barely." Steve shrugged. "I'm no good."

"You can't be that bad." She dropped to the floor and started untangling her shoes.

"You and Clint have far too much confidence in the assumption that I'm not a klutz."

"You're not a klutz." She walked over to drop her shoes on top of a duffel bag and pulled on a pair of heels. "I've seen you fight; you're not a klutz." She pulled the band out of her hair, letting it fall out of its bun.

"I will step on your feet."

"I'll kick you if you do." She smirked and held her hands out to him. "It's Saturday, the world isn't trying to end right now, Coulson's got his minions dealing with what's left of the last mess, so for now we Avengers have some down time. We had best take advantage of it before there's another alien invasion or something. You're allowed to have fun, Steve."
He rolled his eyes and took her hands. "Alright."

"Jarvis, Blair Crimmons, please."

As the song started and Natasha pulled at Steve's hands, giving him little choice but to dance with her, he asked, "Who is this?"

"Modern day swing band, Blair Crimmons and the Hookers."

"Okay." He chuckled and twirled her. He concentrated for a moment trying to remember what to do, which made him stumble. He gave up and simply followed Natasha as they stepped forward and back and rocked on their toes in time to the lively song. He was pretty sure she was back-leading because she was easy to dance with, light on her feet but firm with her hands. Gradually, she added more twirls. Now he knew she was back-leading but he got through the moves without a problem. She was beautiful, reverent look on her face and red hair flying as she spun.

When the song ended, Natasha laughed. "You are not that bad." She punched Steve in the chest for emphasis.

"Hey, hey!" He warded her off but he was smiling. "Do you hit all your friends?"

"Only the ones I know can take it." She playfully kicked his hip then tipped over into a back walkover which she landed easily in her pumps. "Fuck it, I'm calling a spontaneous dance party. Jarvis, invite everybody."

"At once, Miss Romanoff."

Steve raised his eyebrows at her. She shrugged. "Like I said, we all have some downtime. and dancing is fun."

No more than a minute later, Fitz walked in, Jemma trailing behind him. "Jarvis said you wanted us here?" he asked.

"I've decided we're having a dance party, just because we can." Natasha smiled.

Jemma brightened. "Great idea. You do ballet don't you?"

"Only my entire life."

"I don't really dance." Fitz stared at his feet as he shifted them. "I'm just—I don't really dance."

"Fine, stand awkwardly next to Steve and I'll dance with Simmons." Natasha grabbed Jemma's hand and twirled her, making the younger woman laugh.

The two of them were happily waltzing around to the Kelly Clarkson song "Breakaway" as the men watched in amused incredulity when Clint and Coulson walked in. Coulson frowned. "This is what you wanted us for?"

"Agent Romanoff has decided we're having a dance party," Fitz said.

Clint shot him a look. "You don't look like you're dancing."

"I'm not."

"She'll make you eventually."
"I'll get to him." Natasha released Jemma and grabbed Clint instead. Clint laughed and fell into step with her.

"C'mon, Fitz," Jemma chided, tugging him by the shirtsleeve. He relented and uncertainly started to dance with her.

"Director?" Steve asked.

"Yes?" Coulson watched the two assassins waltz with a look of resigned consternation.

"Does Natasha ever stop being contradictory and confusing?"

"Never."

"Just checking."

Clint spun Natasha away until their fingers just touched then pulled her back in. He spun her away so they broke apart. He grabbed a startled Phil by the front of his jacket. Natasha grabbed Steve.

There was a lot of laughing and singing along as the two women and four men danced to Sara Bareilles's "Brave." The song was nearing its end when Sam, Tony, and Bruce walked in.

"We left the lab for this?" Tony made a broad gesture. "Jarvis, next time you are totally going to have to show me the security feed first."

"Oh come on." Sam pushed on Tony's shoulder. "Looks like fun."

Tony glowered as some Lady Gaga started up.

Bruce faintly said, "Think I'll—get some hot tea." He turned around and nearly bumped into Maria and Pepper as they hurried through the gymnasium door.

"No you don't." Maria caught his arm. "We were doing some catch up work in Pepper's office and I am not being dragged back there today if my other option is a dance party."

Bruce blanched.

Pepper laughed. "I'm with you on that." She grabbed Tony, who rolled his eyes but followed Pepper to the wood square that had become a dance floor for the day.

Steve was reminded of high school, people dancing on a wooden floor in the gym. So far, this was more fun though.

Hair pulled back in a low pony tail and still damp from showering, Bucky paused in the doorway. Clearly uncomfortable, he crossed his arms and watched the other tower residents. Steve caught his eyes and held them as a giggling Jemma held a hand out to Bruce. "Care to dance?"

Bruce hesitated, glancing from her hand to her expectant expression. "I don't know that—"

"What's the worst that could happen?" She grinned. He started to answer but she preempted him. "Actually, what's the worst that's likely to happen?"

"Likely? I mean—"

"Oh, c'mon." She grabbed his arm and dragged him onto the floor.
Steve closed the distance between himself and Bucky. Fingers light and coaxing, he wrapped them around Bucky's arm. "You were always a good dancer."

Bucky's eyes darted to him. "I don't know how long it's been since I've done any dancing."

"Don't know how long it's been for me either." Steve shrugged.

Bucky smirked. "You mean, since I danced and you tried."

Steve laughed and dragged him toward the dance floor where Clint was getting acrobatic with Natasha, swinging her between his legs and up into the air.

"Showoffs," Tony grumbled, earning himself a smack on the arm from Pepper.

Clint stuck his tongue out at the billionaire, relinquished his hold on Natasha, and slipped deftly in between Maria and Coulson to reclaim the Director as his partner. Natasha made her way to the edge of the floor and held a hand out to Bucky. "Dance with me?"

He shot a quick glance at Steve then offered her a crooked smile. "How could I say no to a doll like you?"

He took her hand and stepped onto the floor with her.

"I can't tell if he's smooth, or cheesy as fuck," Sam said from behind Steve, making the Captain jump. He hadn't noticed the pilot walk up.

"Smooth, at least according to all the girls we grew up with." Steve let out a breath. "Women love him, always have."

"Yeah, you ain't exactly invisible, yourself, Cap."

"Anymore."

"Whatever." Sam shoved him toward Maria. "The lady needs somebody to dance with, man."

Maria caught Steve's hands just as another song started. "Oh, I know this one. 'Candy Man,' Christina Aguilera, I think. Good for swing dancing."

"I think Jarvis is doing that on purpose." He twirled her. "But I warn you, Bucky is a better dancer than me."

"Yeah, no," Maria made a face, "I know better than to mess with Tasha's playthings." She laughed.

On the other side of the floor, Natasha slid her fingers down the cool metal of Barnes's arm. He seized her hand in his, turned her, then pulled her closer than was strictly necessary, eyes roaming the room. She easily corrected the distance between them and lightly kicked his shin to refocus him. "You're distracted."

He huffed, swung her up over his shoulder, set her back on her feet well inside his personal space, and said quietly, "I can't help but know I can kill them, six, seven different ways."

"I know." She pressed close to his chest for a moment before using a twirl to move away again. "Me too."

"How do you live thinking those things about your friends?"
She met his eyes. "I know I can kill them, but I choose not to. Having that choice, making that choice not to, that way I win. I'm more than what I was trained to be."

He pushed her into another twirl without a word.

A few rounds of partner swapping ended up with Steve dancing with Clint, of all people, by the time the music changed again.

"C'mon, Captain," Clint laughed at the discomfort writ on Steve's face. "Don't make this weird; I know guys'd dance together in officer's clubs."

"I'm not making this weird." Steve glanced around. "But why is Coulson dancing with Bruce?"

"We don't have enough women to start with and Pepper and Maria are bonding. Fitz's dancing with the new guy too." Clint back-led Steve through a pass so he could see behind him where, sure enough, Fitz and Sam were dancing together.

"That's not what I meant." Steve turned them back around.

"Phil's dancing with Bruce and I'm dancing with you," Clint smirked and let Steve exasperatedly push him through a turn, "because if Phil were dancing with you he might swoon from fanboy nirvana overload. He's a little bit in love with you."

"Yeah, I know about the trading cards." Steve rolled his eyes. "And that's still not what I meant."

"The trading cards aren't even the half of it."

"Why aren't you dancing with him?"

Clint shrugged. "I was, now I'm not."

The archer glanced to the side, grinned devilishly, and stole Natasha from Bucky, leaving the two men-out-of-time to dance together. They stalled awkwardly for a beat, then Bucky shook his head and took Steve's hands. "I'm leading."

"Uh, okay." Steve stumbled a little. "It's hard to do this backward."

"You should try it in heels!" Natasha called at him around Clint.

Steve rolled his eyes, nearly tripped, but managed to keep his balance. "You remember the last time we did this?"

"Yeah, actually." Bucky grinned. Steve had to duck as Bucky turned him. "You were Natasha's height."

Steve frowned. "I thought she was taller than that."

"She's just intimidating, it makes her seem bigger." He snorted and looked around at the others. "Bruce dances better when he's not paying attention."

"What?" Steve asked, disoriented by the change of topic.

"Tony's distracting him." Bucky maneuvered them so Steve could see where the two science bros were now dancing together. Tony was saying something that prompted Bruce to roll his eyes; then he got a hand free to mess with the collar of the doctor's shirt, only to be batted away.
"Huh," Steve said. "So he is. Are me and Fitz the only ones who can't dance?"

"I dunno, I think he'd be okay if there were more blood going to his brain. It's all stuck in his face."

"He's blushing?"

"Hard." Bucky turned them again.

Fitz, face red, was still dancing with Sam, who was wearing the kind of grin that accompanies a lewd comment.

"Sam seems to be giving him a hard time..."

"Ha. He's an easy target." Bucky pushed Steve into another twirl.

After a few more songs, the entire party devolved into a mass of soldiers, spies, and superheroes laying or sitting on the floor passing around water bottles, and chatting.

Natasha tossed her third water bottle skillfully into the trash. Bucky had been staring at her for a while by then, frowning. She arched an eyebrow at him. "What?"

"I met you before."

"Uh, yeah. In March. You tried to bomb me, I electrocuted you, you shot me, I fired a grenade at you. Fun times."

"No, before that." Bucky ran his hands over his face then grabbed the front of his hair, pressing the heels of his hands to his forehead.

Jemma looked at Natasha with an expression of dawning comprehension and impending horror. "Were you Hydra?"

"No," she said at the exact same moment as Bucky. She quieted and looked to him.

He carded his fingers through his hair. "It was the eighties, maybe? Could have been the seventies. Or the nineties. I'm not sure. But Hydra had struck a deal with the USSR and I was on loan to RedRoom for a little while. Everyone kept talking about, they'd recruited a child, an orphan. They kept saying how she was showing such promise. That she never cried." He shook his head. "She was so little. And young. And she was sitting on the floor with her hair in braids and a doll in her lap. Looked like a Christmas card in that red jumper except she was cutting the doll's hair with a hunting knife. I said something to her, called her Natalia because they'd told me that was her name. But she said only people in charge of her could call her—"

"Sasha." Natasha had gone pale, her jaw tight. Without another word she got up and strode from the room.

Clint scrambled to his feet to go after her. "Nat!"

Chapter End Notes
The song Natasha is dancing to when Steve walks in is "Still Doll" by Kanon Wakeshima.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Just a heads up: Brace for uncomfortable discussion of sexuality.

Clint paused in the hallway to look at his phone when it vibrated. He gave the small screen and its brief text a wry smile. Phil hadn't wasted any time after Clint bolted from the gym in re-engaging in the communication of affection arms race. Clint quickly sent an I love you too text then updated the I love you tally—one tick for Phil and one for himself. For good measure, he sent another I love you text to Phil and added one more tick to the tally for himself. He was now twenty two ahead in their little competition and there was no point in making it a rout. He was faster than Phil at texting and could send a text with emoticons or an embedded photo in addition to the words in the time it took Phil to send a simple text with the words I love you.

Right now, Natasha was the most important thing anyway. Clint strode up the hall and knocked on her door. He didn't really expect an answer but waited about a minute. Hearing nothing, he walked in. The door not being locked was as good as an invitation he figured.

Natasha didn't spare him a glance, just buckled her utility belt on over her black tac suit then strapped a holster to her thigh.

Clint raised his eyebrows. "You don't really need to suit up to kill him."

Her eyes flickered to Clint but didn't linger. She hoisted her weapons case to the desk then opened it.

"I'll help you," Clint said. "But I think Rogers will take exception. Also, Barnes has value alive."

Natasha kept checking her weapons. Clint knew better than to touch her so he crossed his arms. "Give me a minute," he said. "I'll get my stuff ready and go to the range with you."

She looked at him then, her hands stilling and her eyes meeting his and staying there. "Would you have let me go to the range with you last weekend?"

"No."

She finished checking her weapons, flipped the custom soft-sided case closed and then settled the broad flat strap over her shoulder. Clint adjusted the strap's placement so that the built-in cushion was in the best position over her collarbone and shoulder. She allowed it when he let his fingers linger then stroke comfortingly over her back.

Natasha stepped away. She opened the door and held it for him. Out in the hallway, he said, "I'll be here when you get back."

She watched him for a moment, then nodded and left. He put his hands in his pockets and walked down the hall. As he expected, Phil was waiting just out of sight at the end of the corridor.

"She all right?" Phil asked.
"Going to the range," Clint said. "She's doing a 'we don't talk about Russian boarding school fight club.'"

Phil nodded. "Can I take you to lunch? Then for a run in the park?"

Clint smiled. "Yeah," he breathed. He knew that Phil was trying to keep him occupied and distracted while Natasha was out. "Thanks," he added.

Phil put a hand on his shoulder. Then they went and changed. Mostly, Phil changed. Clint put on running shoes. They ate at the deli across the street from the tower before heading to the park. They wound up having supper at a diner. Almost six hours passed between the time they left the tower and returned to it. Natasha was still out.

After they showered, Phil went to his office. Clint paced in his room. About five minutes into pacing, he realized that neither he nor Phil had looked at their phones the entire time they were out. He paused and pulled his phone out of his pocket. Maybe he had a text from Nat. He didn't. He didn't have any texts from Phil either. Maybe he had an email from her. His phone wasn't set to vibrate when an email came in. He didn't get those nearly as often as texts.

When he switched to his email app, he nearly dropped his phone. He had eighty nine emails waiting, none from Natasha. Eight six of them were I love you emails from Phil.

Clint frowned. The emails from Phil were timestamped as being five minutes apart all day from just before lunch. They must have been programmed to be sent automatically.

He rolled his eyes and programmed a similar email to automatically be sent to Phil at one minute intervals. Clint was sixty four—make that sixty five—behind in the I love you tally but, with the emails going out, he'd be caught up in an hour or so, especially if he sent a bunch of texts to help balance things out.

Within a few minutes, he'd fired off thirty I love you texts to Phil, all with different emoticons to accompany the sentiment. He headed to the kitchen which was, mercifully, empty. He made himself a cup of dolce cocoa coffee before checking the refrigerator, freezer, and pantry,

Satisfied, he nodded to himself. He had the ingredients to make a treat for Nat. She'd need it when she finally got home.

He stirred the modest amount of whipped cream into his coffee to make it easier to drink and took a sip before checking his phone. Still no texts. He switched to his email app.

"Asshole," he muttered as he set his coffee down.

Phil had changed the automatic interval of his emails to thirty seconds. Clint changed his to get sent every fifteen seconds and then fired off a bunch of texts. He grabbed his coffee and headed to the Director's office. By the time he got there, he'd figured out that he was more hurt than mad.

The door to the office was closed. He hesitated then pushed his way in. Phil looked up. Clint went over and sat on the desk.

"Can we stop doing this?" He stared into his coffee. "Automatic emails, they feel more like spam than anything personal. Kind of feels like the opposite of caring." He sighed as he listened to the other man typing on his laptop. "I know you're competitive, most people don't realize how much, but—" He stopped and took a breath because Phil had moved to stand in front of him and put a hand on his shoulder.
"I already stopped them," Phil murmured.

Clint handed his coffee to Phil and pulled his phone out. A few keystrokes later, he said, "Mine are stopped too." He looked up. "Have some coffee."

Phil smiled and took a long drink. "Thanks. Tastes extra good for some reason." He handed the coffee back and frowned. "I didn't really mean for this to turn into one-upmanship." He crossed his arms. "Let's call a truce, at least as far as electronic communications." He signed *I love you.*

Clint softened and set his coffee down. "That one counts." He stood up right against Phil and kissed him.

"You taste extra good too," Phil muttered during a break in the kissing.

"Coffee addict," Clint said.

"Hawkeye addict," Phil said. That set off another round of kissing.

Clint finally stepped away. He gestured vaguely in the direction of the kitchen. "I'm a go cook for Natasha. I'm sure she'll be hungry whenever she gets home. You want to come up in about an hour and help me do quality control testing?" Which, of course, meant eat some of it to make sure it tasted fabulous enough for Clint's exacting standards.

"Be happy to." Phil grinned. "Leave me the coffee?"

"Sure, babe." He pressed a brief kiss to Phil's lips, said, "I love you," then marched out.

Behind him, Phil laughed.

Out in the corridor, Clint took a few minutes to completely update the *I love you* tally. He breathed a sigh of relief when he was finished adding in the electronic *I love you* messages. At the end of it all, Phil was ahead by five.

"Agent Barton, Miss Romanoff just stepped into the limited access elevator."

"Thank you, Jarvis." Clint threw his tablet aside and hurried to the elevator. When Natasha stepped out of the gleaming box and into the tower's common room, he said, "It's almost ten o'clock."

"I didn't know I had a curfew." Her eyes showed the smile she didn't allow her mouth to make.

"You don't." He grinned. "But the stroganoff I made for you would have been just a little better about an hour ago."

"Stroganoff?" Her eyebrows went up. "So, we're going to the kitchen?"

He nodded. "I also made grilled vegetables."

In a matter of minutes, he had pots on the stove to gently reheat a modest portion of the feast he'd made on Natasha's behalf. She didn't look as bedraggled as he had the week before but he could tell from the way she moved that she was in pain.
Her weapons case leaned against one end of the kitchen island. After she lowered herself onto a stool, he began kneading her shoulders.

"Don't make me poteryaye moy razum," she snarled.

He massaged less gently and she relaxed. "Better," she said.

"Was he your lover?" Clint tried to sound nonchalant.

"No."

"Did you want him to be?"

She chuckled. "No."

"He seems pretty interested now."

"He isn't."

"Seems to be."

"You're looking without seeing."

"Maybe," he said.

He pounded on her back then rubbed her arms firmly before serving her a plate of stroganoff and vegetables. He added a generous spoonful of organic sour cream.

"Mmm," she said around a mouthful. "It's a great bribe but I'm still not telling you anything."

He laughed. "If I was really trying to coax you into talking, I'd have gone for vodka not food."

She grinned and it was wonderful to see her face relax. "Don't underestimate your stroganoff."

"I'll take that as a compliment," he said.

"You should." She exhaled. "I'll tell you when I'm ready, but not everything."

He snorted. "You never tell me everything."

"True."

"Wine?"

She took another bite and thought for a moment before speaking. "Just one glass."

He got up and came back a moment later with a goblet of red wine. "This is some of that organic wine Pepper ordered from California. Almost no sulfites so less chance of a headache."

She took a sip. "It's very clean tasting."

He nodded. "That's a good description."

She curled her fingers around his forearm. "Thank you."
Bucky frowned as he folded over a newspaper—an honest to God ink and newsprint hefty Sunday morning paper—that he and Steve had come back from their run with. "I wish the media would stop referring to me as the Winter Soldier."

"None of us have much say in what the media calls us." Bruce said sourly between bites of whole grain pancake. Bucky gave him a questioning look. Bruce set his fork down and reached for the carafe of orange juice. "One word, starts with H. Do you really think that was my idea?"

"Hell, I didn't come up with Iron Man myself," Tony added. "That was the news outlets. I just kind of adopted it because it's actually pretty cool. And a good song. Media likes to name shit, makes it easier to talk about. Watergate, Hydragate—"

"Even Captain America," Steve said as he took the seat next to Bucky and set down a mountain of eggs, breakfast meats, potatoes, and pancakes.

Bucky stole a pancake off Steve's plate without bothering to find his fork. "Oh yeah, that was some PR grunt's doing, wasn't it?" He glanced toward the kitchen door.

"Yup." Steve stole half his pancake back. "Thought it would make a good bond selling ploy." He rolled his eyes and ate the half pancake.

Unnoticed, Clint watched Steve and Bucky intently.

"In the PR grunt's defense," Pepper said with a small laugh, "it worked."

"But so your codename was—is?—the Winter Soldier." Clint gestured toward Bucky with his fork. "That's public knowledge since Nat's little stunt, but it's still under wraps that that's you. Regardless of your less than stellar humanitarian reputation under that alias, it's a damn cool sounding name, of course the media have latched onto it. They've been cherry picking the best stories out of the file dump since March. Honestly, I'm surprised they haven't been having more of a field day than they have. Phil says he hasn't really been riding damage control."

"Yeah, that was me." Tony tipped chocolate milk into his coffee. Everyone looked around at him. He shrugged. "C'mon, you all know I've had Jarvis tapped into S.H.I.E.L.D's lower security network since I was asked to join up. He knew the second Natasha hit upload, started trying to filter out and take down as much sensitive shit as he could without being noticed before it got reposted anywhere. That's exactly what I told him to do when he told me what was going down but he was already on it." Tony grinned like a proud parent.

Clint sent a spoon whizzing past his head. "And you never mentioned this?!!"

"At first, it seemed best not to." Tony shrugged, remarkably unfazed by the flying tableware. "To not implicate anyone else or open any possibility of leaking that info. Then everyone was scattered. Then I forgot about it."

"Forgot?" Clint's eyebrows went up. "How could you forget?"

Pepper grinned. "Oh, he's capable of forgetting pretty much anything. Speaking of which, how's the hiring process going for the chef?"

"HR should finish doing reference checks next week," Tony said. "I'm sort of drawn to a couple of candidates that have interesting side talents, like being a martial arts expert."
"You and me." Clint gestured between himself and Tony. "We need to talk about the ones you're most interested in and why."

Tony raised an eyebrow. "Sort of a special reference check."

Clint nodded. "Something like that."

Pepper gave Clint a shrewd look. "Thank you."

"Anytime." Clint directed a dazzling smile at her.

"Let's talk about it over dinner," Tony said. "Pepper and I are going to Nitehawk Cinema for lunch."

"Ooh, I wanna go." Sam grinned.

"Yeah, not sharing any of Pepper's time," Tony said.

"Didn't we walk past that place when we went to Brooklyn?" Bucky frowned.

"Sure did," Steve said.

Bucky's eyes flicked to the kitchen door for at least the fifth time that morning.

"If you're looking for Natasha," Clint said, "she went down in the other elevator as you were coming up from your run. Pretty sure she's avoiding you."

Bucky nodded and stared at his plate with more intensity than needed as he cut a bite of pancake.

"Care to clue us in as to what all that's about?" Tony said.

"Not sure that's any of our business," Jemma said.

"I figure she used to be his girlfriend," Fitz said.

"I figure she wasn't," Sam said, "but he wanted her to be and that's why he's been so busy flirting with her."

Bucky and Steve both raised their eyebrows.

Clint waved one hand. "No. They didn't date and they didn't want to. That much is clear from when I talked to Natasha last night."

Sam's eyebrows reached toward his hairline.

"I made stroganoff for her."

"That doesn't sound any less romantic," Sam said.

"The stroganoff was excellent," Coulson growled.

"Oh," Sam said. "So, you were there for the big talk."

"No. I knew better than to be there for his talk with Natasha." Coulson grinned. "I was there for the romantic part of taste-testing the stroganoff."

"They were feeding each other." Tony shuddered. "And we walked in on that."
"It was perfectly sweet." Pepper shoved on his shoulder. "Don't be an ingrate. They shared with us and it was delicious."

"Stroganoff?" Bucky sat up straighter. "Made by Clint? Is there any left?"

"There's a lot left." With a big smile, Clint went to the refrigerator and hauled the stroganoff out. "What about the vegetables I made?"

"Yes." Steve stood up. "Anything you made, let's heat it up. How can I help?"

Pepper leaned close to Tony. "I'm still tempted to make him the tower chef."

"No," Clint and Coulson said simultaneously.

Clint wound up not talking with Tony and Pepper about the candidates for tower chef until after dinner, and it took quite a while. When they were through, he went looking for Phil and found him in his office.

Within ten minutes, Clint started pacing the length of the spacious office like a caged leopard while Phil stared at his laptop. He went from the desk to the corner of the office and back, and then to the other corner over and over. After several minutes of that, he paced the width of the office, from one corner of the window to the middle of the opposite wall and then to the other corner of the window.

After half an hour, Phil scowled at him. "I can't think when you do that."

Clint shrugged, moved away, and then took small bouncy balls out of a pocket and juggled them.

"Or that," Phil snapped.

Reaching deep inside to bypass the impulse to snap back, or scream, or throw a ball at Phil's forehead, Clint took a long slow breath. "Darts?" he asked.

"No," Phil snarled.

Clint walked over and turned Phil's task chair away from his computer. He crouched down in front of Phil. "You have to do this."

"I know." Phil spat the words.

Clint stood and pulled Phil up with him. He held Phil's face between his hands and kissed him slow and sweet. Phil tensed at first, almost jerking away from the kiss, but then relaxed into it. Clint punctuated the kiss with small interludes of words. "If you hadn't called me," he murmured and then reacquired Phil's mouth for a moment. "We wouldn't be here." Another press of lips. "Together." Their mouths merged. "Then you risked rushing over in the quinjet." An interlude of kissing. "And it's been difficult and wonderful and confusing and sometimes terrible. And, damn, am I glad to have you back."

He looked into Phil's stress-etched face. "Your family will be glad too."

"Some of this"—Phil sighed—"has been like getting dragged over a bed of nails. Now I'm facing
Clint smiled. "So get it over with."

"I'm trying."

"How about I just go for an hour," Clint said. "Give you some space to think."

Phil nodded.

Clint slipped his hands down Phil's neck and across his shoulders. "I'll go drink coffee and watch T.V. or something. When you have a draft or two, come get me. We'll look at them together before you hit send."

Phil wrapped his arms around Clint and pressed him close. "Thank you."

"Any time, babe."

When Clint got to the kitchen, he found Steve there, alone, coffee cup in hand, staring out the window, probably not really seeing the twinkling lights of the city at night. On instinct, Clint closed the kitchen door rather than leaving it in its usual open position. He padded over and poured himself some coffee from the carafe Steve had apparently just made. Steve continued staring into the distance. Clint took his time stirring sugar into the hot fragrant liquid in his cup before settling onto a stool at the island.

"Need another cup?" Clint said.

"What?" Steve looked around as if only just then registering that he was no longer alone.

"Refill on your coffee." Clint gestured.

"No." Steve walked over.

"So," Clint sipped his coffee, "you and Barnes."

"What about us?" Steve seated himself opposite the archer.

"So you are an us, huh?" Clint grinned.

Steve blinked at him. "What? Oh. No. No we're not."

"I find that distinctly hard to believe." Clint set his mug down and folded his arms. "Tony is oblivious, Natasha's being courteous, new guy's got no clue what's up with anybody, and everyone else isn't paying attention, but let me say, from one blond bisexual soldier with a heart of gold to another, that you are doing Disney movie levels of pining."

Steve cringed. "I think I like you better when you're self absorbed and moody." He dropped his face into one palm.

Clint reached across the island to cuff the Captain's shoulder. "I will graciously not take offense at that." He settled back in his chair. "Where is Barnes anyway? I'm pretty sure it's Fitz in the hyperbaric chamber tonight."

"Yeah, Fitz is in the goldfish bowl. Bucky's asleep. He still tires out easily."

Clint grinned at Steve's description of the chamber, then said, "But you and Barnes, 'cause you're
not denying being bi."

Steve looked at Clint. "We don't have the kind of relationship you're implying."

"Well obviously you don't. If you did, you wouldn't be pining." Clint sipped his coffee.

"That's not what I meant, I don't want that," Steve insisted.

Clint smirked into his coffee. "Pining," he singsonged.

"Not pining. Not interested. Not...anything."

"Are you trying to convince me or you?"

"You. Why would I need to convince me?"

"Because you, sir, are in denial up to your very shapely eyebrows, and denial sucks. Not good for emotional stability, so says your boyfie's—and my—shrink." Clint got up, poured himself more coffee and held out a new mug of coffee to Steve.

"Has it occurred to you that this might be an extremely uncomfortable conversation for me?" Steve snapped, snatching the mug from Clint with enough ferocity to slosh coffee over his hand.

"Whoa, hey, okay, sorry." Clint held up his coffeeless hand in defense. "Simmer down, Cap, didn't mean to push. Well, meant to push, but not like that. Shit, it's easy to forget with you there's a generation gap issue."

"Yeah, well, there is."

"You're not weird about this stuff, though. Me and Phil, fuck, far as I can tell you think we're adorable, Fitz coming out, Natasha's not so subtle 'lady love' references. You are not weird about stuff."

Steve sopped up his spilled coffee with a kitchen cloth. "I don't give a shit what people do in their own bedrooms and minds." He chucked the cloth at the sink. "But I don't appreciate the wheedling interrogation."

"Sorry, man, I didn't—" Clint set his mug down. "Look, it's your business, I get that. I shouldn't pry. But, I mean, my guy has a massive dopey hero crush on you and I'm totally okay with that, seriously, I cannot tell you how cool you and me are. You can talk to me about anything, you know that, right? Stuff you don't want the others—even Mockta—to know. Stuff you don't think you can tell Barnes. You can talk to me."

"No, I can't." Seeing hurt flash across Clint's face, Steve amended. "Not because I don't trust you. I do. And I do think of you as a friend. It's that"—he shook his head—"this is something I am not capable of talking about."

Clint frowned. "I don't understand."

"And I doubt I can explain."

"Can you try?" Clint asked gently. Steve shot him a look and he shrugged. "The whole world's been expecting—demanding—that you catch up to us. I'm more than willing to meet you halfway back but you've gotta give me directions. My parents were closer in age to Tony than to you and I never knew my grandparents; all my reference points for the world you knew before you got thawed out
come from you or BBC period dramas."

Steve studied him a moment. "You really do watch a lot of television, don't you?"

"Yes I do." Clint leaned forward on his elbows and met the Captain's gaze. "Can you tell me what is going on in this conversation?"

With a heavy puff of breath, Steve pulled open one of the many drawers, grabbed a sketchbook and pencil out of it, and started drawing. Clint gaped. "Does everyone but me have stuff stashed all over the tower?"

Steve didn't respond. He didn't say a word until the corner of Greenwich Avenue and Bank Street had taken form on his paper. "You're a spy."

"Yeah," Clint said slowly.

"There are things you know not to say. Maybe you and Natasha or you and Phil or all three of you know what it is but none of you ever say it because no one else needs to know and if you're dealing with each other there's no need to say it because you know anyway. Right?"

"Uh, yeah. Right."

Steve looked up at him, pinning him in place with his stare. "You know what I'm talking about."

"Absolutely." Clint nodded.

"If I asked you to put one of those things you never say into words, could you?"

The question took Clint somewhat aback. He tried for a minute to mold one of those kinds of things into a sentence. The attempt produced nothing but some abortive hand flapping. He shook his head. "No. I can't."

"Neither can I," Steve murmured to his graphite street corner. It had become recognizably night time on the page, pools of light spilling from streetlights and shopfronts and the headlights of a lonely taxi onto smooth pavement.

Clint watched and, as if by magic, the scene was populated by quick twitches of Steve's hand that turned into a waitress, a few guys standing around smoking, a boy in a feather boa bending down to pet a scruffy dog, and a drunk-looking businessman trying to hail the taxi. Steve flipped the page, leaving the corner of Greenwich and Bank sketchy and rough. In a few lines, the inside of a bar began to materialize.

"Things like you and Phil happened. Whether any given person knew things like that happened depended on how and where they grew up. Me? Scrappy, dirt broke, working class, orphaned Irish Catholic Jew, I was at the bottom of the social ladder. Some girls I knew in grade school were turning tricks by the time I'd graduated just so their little brothers and sisters'd have food to eat. Kids like us, we knew. We saw." Steve's normally subtle accent had asserted itself and the figure he'd been penciling-in, slumped on a bar stool, feet dangling, had turned—he realized with an uncertain feeling—into him. Skinny, teenaged, mal-wardrobed him. He dropped his pencil on the countertop with a clatter and stood to pace, unnerved by his own agitation and wishing he could just shut the fuck up.

"The way you can just offhandedly call yourself bisexual, Fitz telling all of us he is, Tony saying that he's 'pansexual'—that sort of thing did not happen. I don't even know what Tony means by that, and yes I've looked it up. Those words didn't exist. Even if they did, no one announced that to"
Clint sipped from his cooling coffee mostly to give himself something to do. The direction Steve's rant was taking was curling sticky, cold fingers into the archer's belly.

"People think differently now," Steve was saying to the skyline. "I don't mean being okay with it or not. That's part of it. But there's more than that. I don't know." He shook his head and shut his eyes. He took a breath. "When you say that you're bisexual, you mean that is a part of who and what you are as a person, right? It's part of your identity."

"Right."

"That's not how that works in my mind." He turned to face Clint and leaned against the cool glass of the window. "To me, to pretty much anyone of my generation, it's not something you are, it's something you do, and it's not normal. You don't announce it to your coworkers because you don't announce to your coworkers that you're a pervert."

Clint watched the Captain duck his head to look at the floor and cross his arms protectively over his chest and saw the movements of a much smaller man.

"Until I woke up," Steve said in little more than a whisper, "every standard I knew of called it a perversion. I've never cared what people do. Figure as long as I'm not in the room when it happens it doesn't concern me. Only thing that's my business is me. And I knew what I could get away with, what I could say and what I couldn't and to whom. Then I woke up and nothing I know holds true."

Clint nodded slowly. He'd slipped his phone out of his pocket and was scrolling through a page of depression and war era slang. Insults at least hadn't changed much in seventy years. "Tell you one thing I bet you know that's still true: pretty sure nobody wants to be called a faggot."

Steve flinched bodily. It was a very small flinch but it was definitely a flinch.

"Cap?"

"What?"

"You're not a pervert."

Steve looked slightly panicked. "I didn't say I—"

"Honestly, Steve, by this point, do you really expect I don't know what you're not saying?" Clint pulled himself up to sit cross-legged on the counter. "You've as good as told me I was right from the start. Oh well. I'm starting to think no one in this damn tower is straight. Jury's still out on Pepper, Jemma, Banner, and Barnes. None of us are perverts," he said sternly. "Except maybe Tony, but hey he's with a chick so that's beside the point of this conversation."

"Please—"

"I won't tell a soul." Clint smiled warmly. "And neither will Jarvis, will you Jarvis?"

"The only definitive determination I could possibly report from this conversation," the A.I. said coolly, "is the status of Sir as the only potential pervert in residence."

Steve almost grinned. Instead, he let out a puff of air.
Clint and Steve both looked toward a fumbling sound at the closed kitchen door. Phil pushed his way into the kitchen.

"Thought I smelled coffee." Phil's smile was small and tense.

"Pour you a cup?" Steve asked.

Phil shook his head. "Clint, I, um, I have a draft. Just one."

"That's a start." Clint poured the remains of his coffee out and put the cup in the dishwasher. "Talk to you later, Cap."

Steve fingered his sketchbook and nodded.

Clint and Phil returned to the Director's office. Clint turned the laptop around and read:

Shannon,

I don't know how to do this, but I need help, sort of like getting glass out of a foot.

I don't even know where to start, because I was dead. Through extraordinary means, I was brought back at high price. The consequences included amnesia.

I don't know how to get back to my life and my family.

Regards,

Phil

"Sounds good," Clint said. "Does the glass in the foot reference mean anything?"

Phil shifted. "I was home from college the summer I turned eighteen. Shannon was eleven. She came home one afternoon when I was the only one at the house and one of her flip flops was such a bloody mess she rang the doorbell." He took a breath and looked down at his feet. "I got the hose and rinsed her foot off while she blubbered and told me she'd gone walking in the creek and cut her foot. The creek was more than a mile away and she wasn't supposed to go there alone. I got tweezers and pulled a jagged piece of glass out of her foot. I got her cleaned up, put iodine on the cut, and bandaged it as tight as I could. Then I rinsed the bloody footprints off the porch, the driveway, and even the street. By the time the rest of the family came home from shopping, there was no evidence of what happened."

Clint grinned. "You were born to do covert ops."

Phil's eyebrows were arched when he looked up.

"It's good." Clint clapped him on the shoulder. "A great story and a good thing to mention that'll help her know it's you." He gestured toward the laptop. "Even though it's been a while, you should say 'Love, Phil.'"

Phil shook his head. "She'll think it's not from me."

Clint blinked. "Do you just not say 'I love you' to anyone?"

Phil put his hands in his pockets and stared at the floor. "Pretty much."
"That cannot be good for you. We are talking to Mockta about that." Clint typed four words into the last sentence then turned the laptop screen toward Phil, who read:

Shannon,

I don't know how to do this, but I need help, sort of like getting glass out of a foot.

I don't even know where to start, because I was dead. Through extraordinary means, I was brought back at high price. The consequences included amnesia.

I don't know how to get back to my life and my family, but I want to.

Regards,

Phil

Phil nodded. "Yeah, that sounds good. That's true."

"Thought so," Clint said.

Phil's hand hovered over the laptop keyboard. With a trembling finger, he hit send.

Chapter End Notes

Everything Steve talks about is as accurate as I know to make it and is informed by research I did for writing a WWII play the main characters of which are a gay couple. If you're at all interested in the era of the '30s and '40s I highly suggest reading "More Man Than You" by Mikey (mikes_grrl) on this site. It's a well written historically accurate canon compliant Cap fic and is, in large part, what inspired me to write a WWII play.
Chapter 31

Phil's cell phone buzzed. He turned the bedside table light on and looked at Clint. They'd just settled into bed.

"Better check it," Clint said.

Phil nodded and picked his phone up off the charging pad where it lay next to Clint's. He thumbed over the screen, entered his password, then thumbed over the screen again.

The phone tumbled from his hand and onto the sheet. Clint picked it up. The email on the screen said:

WTF Phil.

Call me right now. I don't care that it's nearly midnight.

– Shannon

She included her cell phone number below her name.

Phil put his hand over his face. "I didn't think she'd answer in less than twenty minutes."

"But she did." Clint tapped his finger against Shannon's number.

"What are you doing?" Phil said, alarmed.

Clint pressed the phone into Phil's hand and to his ear. Less than a minute later, the ringing cell phone at the other end was answered.

A woman's voice said, "Philip Josiah Coulson, that better be you!"

"Uh, Shannon?" Phil's heart pounded in his ears so hard he was surprised he could hear.

"What was the name of our first dog?"

"What?" Phil blinked. "Our first dog was a mutt named Shadow but the first one you'd remember was a collie named Lady. When you were three, she used to herd you and your friends out of the street and back into the yard."

"Phil?" Shannon's voice was suddenly high and uncertain.

"Shannon," he breathed.

"Is that really you?"

"Mostly."

Shannon made a choking sound. "I can't believe it."

"Sometimes I can't either." Phil closed his eyes and pictured his little sister with her mop of light honey brown curls that turned blond so easily in the summer sun. She'd be forty three soon.

"I need your help, sis," he said as he listened to her snuffle. "I want to—I hope I'll be allowed to—to visit."
Shannon began sobbing in earnest.

Clint put a supportive arm around Phil's shoulder.

"It's subtle," Jemma said, "but I can tell that the additional hyperbaric chamber treatments are doing some good. You're improving in meaningful ways."

Fitz swallowed a bit of pancake. He flexed his right hand. "You're right. A few more treatments would probably be worthwhile."

Bucky shuddered. He appreciated the healing effects of the chamber but he still hated getting in it. It had gotten easier but crawling into it was an act of will every time. He patted the chamber controller where it sat near his plate.

He glanced toward the kitchen door. He hadn't even seen Sasha since everyone had danced and they recognized each other. Filling this hole in his memory was eating another hole into his heart. He wondered if that might be filled if she would at least speak with him.

Sam nudged Bruce. "You and Maria are going shopping this morning."

Bruce nodded. "She should be here at nine thirty."

"Lab supplies and stuff," Sam said. "For the project to update old man Winter's arm there?"

Tony looked up. "Damn, I wish I'd thought of that one."

Bucky turned his head smoothly and affixed an assassin's glare on Sam. Sam didn't look his way and the effort would have been wasted except Clint saw it and gave him a thumbs up. He smiled at his fellow marksman.

"Among other projects." Bruce's words were careful and he didn't look at anyone as he spoke.

"Can I go with you?" Sam asked.

"Sure," Bruce said. "I'd bet Pepper would like that."

"I would." Pepper gestured with her cappuccino.

"You took our blood," Bucky said. He knew that this was the project Bruce was avoiding discussing but he didn't know why.

Bruce looked at him before nodding. "The other main project"—Bruce's voice became hoarse and he coughed before continuing—"involves stabilizing volatile blood products."

Tony cackled. "That's one way to put it."

"It's accurate," Bruce said.

"And incomplete," Tony said.

"Fine." Bruce's voice was deadly calm. "Stabilizing the results of the volatile blood is the larger
goal.”

"Y’know, since that one time you broke Harlem—"

"I phrased it that way one time!” Bruce snapped.

Tony shrugged. "It's good phrasing. Anyway, your bodily fluids are less volatile now than they were then."

"Huh," Fitz said. "But still quite dangerous."

Buried in that discussion was the why, Bucky thought. Knowing how uncomfortable it was to face the monster within, he cast a sympathetic glance toward Bruce.

"You look tired," Steve said.

Coulson's head came up. "You mean me?"

Steve nodded.

"I heard from my sister." Coulson took a sip of coffee. "We talked late into the night."

"That's wonderful, Phil." Pepper put a hand on his arm.

"We'll talk again this afternoon." Phil smiled at her. "Work out some of the details of my visiting the family."

The Director and the willowy CEO continued talking while Bucky stared at the kitchen door as he ate. At a lull in the conversation, he looked at Clint. "Is she still avoiding me?"

Steve winced.

"I don't know," the archer said.

"Really," Sam said, "if you two didn't date, what's going on there?"

"She was a child when I knew her," Bucky said.

Surprise, then understanding, passed over Clint's face. "The last time you saw her, she was still a child."

Bucky nodded.

"You mean you were both children," Sam said.

Bucky shook his head. "I was an adult."

Sam's eyebrows jumped up. "But you're the same age."

"She's older than me now," Bucky said.

Sam pressed his fingers to his forehead. Steve clasped his shoulder. "Our realities are hard to reconcile, and Bucky's situation is more complicated than mine."

"Her hair is not red. She had those long brown braids and big green eyes.” Bucky tapped his fingers on the island countertop with a rolling pattern of metallic clicking sounds. "I should've recognized her eyes."
"When you first saw her," Clint said, "you weren't in a good position to be observant about small
details, like eyes."

Bucky stared at him. "You mean here at the tower? Or March?"

He shrugged. "Either."

"If you related to her as a child," Sam persisted, "what was with all that flirting?"

"I didn't recognize her." Bucky smirked. "And what's sexier than a woman who can kick your ass
with enthusiasm and grace? Besides, I'm a flirt."

Tony pointed a fork at him. "I haven't seen you flirt with Pepper, Jemma, or Maria."

Bucky blinked. "You and Pepper belong together. It's so obvious that you love each other. I
wouldn't disrespect that." He leaned forward. "Of course, I can see why you love her. She's a
strong, intelligent, beautiful woman. And I'll bet she can kick your ass." He was aware of Steve's
stiff posture beside him, was sure that the blond wished he'd stop talking. Bucky wished so too but
he couldn't.

Pepper smothered a giggle.

"Don't start, Barnes." Tony scowled. "You're right, she's mine."

Bucky shook his head. He desperately wanted to not make Steve uncomfortable but the truth he
saw spilled out of his mouth anyway. "Not yours. You belong together. But she could walk away
easier than you."

Pepper and Clint both laughed. Tony's mouth dropped open; he was speechless.

"I'd say that's true," Coulson muttered into his coffee.

Jemma played with her food and snuck glances at Bucky. He tilted his head and looked at her.
"You're not too young for me but you wouldn't understand. You're confused."

Clint and Coulson shared a look.

Jemma leveled her gaze at Barnes. "I don't know what you mean."

"I know." Bucky shrugged. "And I know you're accomplished."

"I understand how the world works." She bristled. "I assessed you, have even treated you—"

"I know." He looked at her. "I also know you'd like it if emotions were logical. To treat emotions
that way is to stumble toward failure."

Jemma, Fitz, Steve, and Coulson all stared at the sergeant.

Bucky looked at Coulson. "My training, and Sasha's. You can't manipulate smoothly if you don't
understand how emotion, and body language, works. I wasn't responsible for training the children
in that but I did assess them when they applied it. She was the best."

Coulson nodded. "You were too, I'm sure."

"Huh." Tony picked his coffee up. "How do we know if you're ever sincere?"
"He's damaged, Tony." Sam spoke mildly. "He doesn't have the layers of control to put us on. The man I've seen in the past few days doesn't always know what he's doing but is always sincere."

"Yes," Bucky said. "You're a smart man."

"We know for sure that I can't kick your ass." Sam chuckled. "So no hope of dating you."

Bucky laughed. Steve raised his eyebrows.

"What about Maria?" Fitz asked.

"I hardly ever see her." He smirked. "She is one fine woman." Inwardly, he cringed. He easily fell into this old pattern of behavior and said these words almost without thought, but the things he wanted to say to Steve got stuck in his throat. He knew how to read body language; even now, most of the time. He knew he was making Steve unhappy but he couldn't stop. He scooped up the pressure chamber controller and cradled it against his solar plexus.

Steve's face was neutral but pale. Clint put a hand on his shoulder. "He's just making observations."

Steve didn't react.

Bucky gave Clint a grateful look. The archer studied him and then turned toward Steve whose shoulder he still clutched. "Steve," Clint said.

"Yakov."

Bucky's head snapped around at the brusk call.

Clad in a black leotard with red point shoes draped over one shoulder, Natasha stood in the kitchen doorway. Something small and black rested in the redhead's palm. She flicked it open, revealing it to be a dark bladed knife. She tossed it at Barnes. The hyperbaric chamber controller clattered to the floor as he caught the blade between the fingers of his left hand. The room was still.

"That's yours." Natasha nodded at the knife and crossed her arms.

"Mine...?" He examined the plain, utilitarian weapon.

"You gave it to me." Natasha's face was a determined mask. "You broke mine to prove a point to the other kids. Later, you gave me that one."

"And you kept it?" he asked quietly.

She shrugged. "Nicest thing anyone ever did for me in Red Room."

"I don't remember that."

"You were our teacher. For a few months." Natasha's voice was clipped and she seemed to be actively ignoring everyone else in the room.

Bucky was troubled. "I was— And in March, you didn't recognize me?"

"Of course I recognized you, I knew I'd seen you before. When Steve said you were his friend I assumed—reasonably—that I recognized you from his file or those old newsreels or the photos at the museum." She tossed her hair and stalked a few paces into the room. "I was very young, it's a time I do not reminisce over, I never saw your arm—which, let's face it, is your most recognizable feature—and the man I knew as Yakov was dirty blond. I never knew him as the Winter Soldier, I
never knew him as you."

Bucky stood. He rolled the knife handle in his right hand as he walked around the kitchen island to stand in front of her. He folded the knife closed before he pocketed it. His eyes lingered on the redhead's face.

"Sasha," he said.

She flinched, just slightly, even though his voice was soft.

"You lived," he said. "You made it."

She raised an eyebrow.

"You were so much better than they realized." Bucky's words rolled with a slight Russian accent. "They looked at you through such a narrow lens."

Natasha took a small hitching breath.

"Look at you." Bucky took her hand. He twirled her once and she let him, warily. "All grown up. Beautiful and strong. I knew you would be, if you lived," He smiled. "I didn't imagine red hair though."

"Yakov." Her voice was harsh.

"I wouldn't punish you," he said. "I wouldn't let them either." He tilted his head and frowned, trying to remember. Through fog and a blunted memory of pain, it came to him. "So they froze me again."

"Uchitel'." She stumbled back. "Years later, they froze me too. I saw you down there—"

"They"—he felt the blood drain from his face—"froze you? Most don't survive. How did you—" He saw black spots.

Steve put an arm around Bucky's waist and he sagged against the big man. "Sasha," he said.

"Don't call me that," Natasha snarled just as Clint put an arm around her shoulder.

The archer turned her toward the door and spoke in a soothing tone. "Let's go to the gym. Phil will bring breakfast and coffee for you. No one will bother us." Clint led her away.

Steve took an agitated Bucky to his room. Bucky clutched his fingers in his hair so tight, and tugged so hard, that Steve feared the sergeant would yank a hunk of it out.

He put his hand over Bucky's.

"I can't remember." Bucky's frustration showed in his voice.

Steve coaxed him into sitting down on his mattress. He sat down beside Bucky and worked at uncurling the brunet's fingers from their punishing grip on his hair.
"I have just a few flashes of Sasha." He slumped forward. "I don't really know what happened. Maybe I deserve her wrath."

"Your mind was being wiped," Steve said. "Red Room made sure you didn't remember. I don't think Natasha remembers everything either."

Bucky put his hands over his face. The contrast in metal and flesh struck Steve as particularly cruel at that moment. "Just two days ago, we were friends," Bucky said. "She danced with me."

"Clint will get her calmed down. Later, you can ask her what she remembers. Maybe compare notes."

Bucky went still. "The things with the women." He looked at Steve through his fingers. "The things I say. That's just how I once was. I don't even think about it."

"Sure." Steve patted the other man's shoulder. "You're just letting thing's get back to normal for you. You were a flirt, and women loved—uh, love—you." Natasha had said it a few days ago, it was good for Bucky to get back to who he was. During his and Clint's talk late the night before, the archer had said the jury was still out on Bucky, but that wasn't true. James Barnes had always loved women.

Bucky made fists and pressed them against his forehead. "There's so much I don't remember."

"When we shared an apartment, you had lots of girlfriends." Steve shrugged. "A lot of dates, anyway."

"I only remember that in bits and pieces." Bucky stared at him. "You were there for so many years of my life, childhood, and the apartment, and the army."

"Sure, Buck."

"You remember it."

"As much as anyone ever remembers." Steve shrugged. "But, yeah, it's pretty clear." And some moments were frozen in his memory, so sharp and complete he could play them back like a film. Or sit and paint them from memory alone. Bucky's face, a mask of light and shadow, as he looked out of the apartment window early in the morning. Bucky, radiant with a boxing victory, muscles glistening with sweat. Bucky laughing. Bucky, handsome in his uniform, women swooning at his feet more than ever...

"I need you to tell me." Bucky grabbed Steve's arms. "Context for the broken pieces in my mind. How they fit together."

"Uh." Steve's mind raced. Of course! How could he not see it? Why didn't Mockta tell him? He could tell Bucky his memories, even draw a timeline, help Bucky make sense of things. Bucky shook him slightly. "What were we?"

"We were friends. You know that." Steve smiled and hoped he didn't also look sad. "We were good friends, the best. Neighbors, then flatmates. You were never, uh, inappropriate. Well, maybe some of your jokes were. Always looked out for me. Fixed me up with dates even when it hurt your chances with a girl."

Bucky made a frustrated sound and clutched at his hair.
"Sergeant Barnes," Jarvis said. "Captain Rogers. Betty Ross is here to collect your blood."

Bucky looked up, confused.

"She sent us that text last night." Steve stood and held his hand out to Bucky. The other man took it and let Steve help him up.

Bucky stood still and closed his eyes while Steve finger-combed his hair until it was smoothed out, even when Steve stroked through the brunet strands a few times more than necessary.

Everything was all right. No different than it ever was. Steve could do this. He always had. He was in a position now to be a better friend than he'd ever been when they were young. And that's what he'd do. Everything else was the same. Even if he could kick Bucky's ass now, nothing had changed, just like nothing had changed in nineteen forty three.

Nothing on the inside, anyway.

"Good thing Pepper's not here." Tony eyed the stack of delivery pizza boxes. "With HR still checking references, and the travel scheduled for so many of us, it'll be next week before I can get a chef hired."

"Seems soon enough." Steve continued putting pizza slices on two large plates. When they were heaped up enough, he carried them to the table where he put one at his spot and one in front of Bucky, who was quiet in a way that he hadn't been in days. Steve wasn't sure whether he was furious with Natasha or not.

"I like pizza," Fitz said. His plate was pretty heaped up too.

"The one's we get here are good," Jemma said. "Whole grain crust, sometimes gluten free. All kinds of healthy toppings." She looked at Fitz then gave Bucky a sideways unhappy glance that ended with her looking confused.

Coulson picked his plate up. "I'm eating in my office."

"Where's Clint?" Steve said.

Coulson sighed. "Still with Natasha." He walked out.

Bucky looked up and then glared at his plate. He took a bite of pizza that was festooned with slices of old world pepperoni.

Deep in conversation, Sam and Bruce walked in. "I had no idea blood could be that dangerous," Sam said.

"Your blood's a little more dangerous than average," Bruce said. "Why?"

Ignoring the question, Bucky took a bite of pizza and chewed deliberately. Clint walked in, looking bedraggled, and dropped into the chair to Steve's other side. Steve slid a pizza box toward the archer then addressed Bruce. "Betty came by earlier, took a pint from each of us."
"She what?"

Bruce whipped his phone out and took a picture of a startled looking Steve and a sullen looking Bucky then fired off a Snapchat to Betty.

"You, uh," Fitz said, "you didn't type any text."

Bruce frowned at his phone. "Oh yeah." The phone vibrated in his hands. Sam looked over his shoulder and grinned.

"Care to share with the class?" Tony said.

"No," Bruce said and began typing.

Sam talked right over him. "She said, 'No thanks. I already had lunch.'"

"Ooh." Sam again read over Bruce's shoulder. "Harsh."

"Well?" Clint said.

"He said, 'Did you feast on their blood? Because why else would you need two pints?'"

Clint and Tony laughed. Steve and Jemma dropped their faces into their hands.

Bruce nearly dropped his phone when it rang. He scowled at the number then answered it with, "You had no right—"

"Excuse me?" Betty was so loud everyone heard her. They also stopped talking and otherwise became as quiet as possible,

"—sneaking in behind my back—" Bruce continued.

Clint dusted pizza crumbs off his hands on his pants and stood while Bruce squawked indignantly. Tony watched the archer head for the door. "Where are you going?"

"I'll be right back."

"That's not an answer to my—" Tony sighed; Clint was already gone.

Betty interrupted Bruce's ongoing rant. "I did not sneak." She was indignant. "You just happened to be out, you presumptuous, ungrateful jackass. Which, by the way, means, I'm going to have to come back to draw your blood!"

Steve stopped eating and watched Bruce carefully. He especially watched the scientist's eyes for any signs of green. Puzzled, he glanced at Tony who was grinning like a maniac and looked perfectly relaxed as he continued eating.

"My blood?" Bruce was incredulous. "What do you need with my—never mind, I'm not giving you any. You couldn't even be bothered to tell me that you were going to do an experiment."

"You hypocritical asshole!" Betty had become even more vehement. "You think it's okay for you to say nothing to me but you think I'm obligated to what? Ask your permission or something?"

Bruce clenched one arm around his middle. "I told you. The night we went to the theater. I told you I was going to investigate this."
Sam's eyebrows went up.

"And I told you I wanted to work with you," she snapped.

Clint came back, bow and quiver in hand. He set the quiver on the table and drew out a pair of tranq-dart-tipped arrows. Bruce noticed and glared at him. Clint shrugged, arms open, eyebrows raised. Bruce huffed irritatedly and turned away. "I'm not some ninth-grade bio student, I can do my own damn research."

"Experimentation is invalid unless the results can be recreated by one's peers," Betty quipped righteously.

"That—" Bruce paused then sighed. "I can't argue with that."

"I'd like you to help me fill out the Institutional Review Board paperwork."

"You're going through an IRB?"

There was a moment of silence. "We may not be able to publish what you're doing but we'll be able to publish what I'm doing." Betty's voice had leveled out.

"We?" Bruce said weakly.

"We," Betty said firmly. "Now, when can I get your blood?"

Bruce put one hand over his eyes. "Sam and I are leaving this afternoon. Flying to Boston, D.C, and then Atlanta for a different project. We'll be gone a week."

"So, I can get your blood next week?" she said. "After you get back."

"Sure. Maybe Wednesday." Bruce took a breath. "I can help you with the IRB paperwork before that though—still available by email and phone."

"I appreciate that."

"Uh, Betty?" Bruce choked on his next words.

"It's all right, Banner." Betty's voice was deadpan. "I already knew you were a jackass."

"Thanks," Bruce said sincerely.

"Don't mention it," she said. "I'll see you Wednesday."

"Wednesday." He hung up.

"So, you still dating her," Sam asked, "or she your ex?"

Bruce shot him a look, then turned on Clint and gestured at the quiver on the table. "Was that really necessary?"

"I was hoping it wouldn't be," Clint said cheerfully

"I need to pack..." Bruce grumbled and walked out.

"She's his ex," Tony provided. "And that, right there, my friends, is proof he's not as dangerous as he thinks he is."
Sam nodded and heaped pizza onto two plates. "Don't think he's getting lunch unless I bring it to him."

"We'll still send a loaded tranq pistol with you," Tony said.

Sam studied Tony then looked at Clint. "If you think that's necessary." Clint nodded and Sam acknowledged him. Sam picked up a stack of napkins and the two heaping plates then he left.

Bucky flinched when Natasha walked in. She barely glanced at him but spent a minute taking in the quiver, bow, and tranq darts.

"Phone call from Betty," Clint said.

"Verbal foreplay," Tony said.

Natasha raised an eyebrow. "The argument was that bad, huh?"

Tony's grin was all teeth.

Natasha shrugged as she made herself a salad. She selected two slices of pizza and sat across from Clint.

Bucky stared at her. She glared at him.

"Dr. Banner needs to learn how to send better Snapchats," Fitz said.

Natasha smiled at him. "He really does have bad social media etiquette."

"That one message," Jemma said, "was poor etiquette regardless of media."

"Oh?" Natasha said. She continued eating. Bucky continued to stare so intently he was no longer eating.

"Basically accused Betty of being a vampire," Steve said.

"Oh, that one!" Tony laughed.

"Stop looking at me like that," Natasha spat at Bucky.

"Izvinitye."

"If you breathe another single goddamn word of Russian I'm gonna find out exactly how much electricity you can take through that arm before you start to feel it."

Steve tensed up and felt Clint beside him do the same. He was grateful for the sensation of backup and exchanged a glance with Clint that indicated the archer felt the same.

"I'm sorry." For a long moment Bucky didn't say anything. When he spoke, his words were soft. "I can't tell if I'm proud of you or sorry for you."

"You've no right to be either."

"Now that I remember you as a child, remember being your teacher, seeing what you've grown up to be— It's terrifying, but impressive."

"I am not Natalia and you are not Yakov."
"Except we are."

"Not anymore."

"But we were."

She shot him a hard look. "I'd rather not remember that."

"You can only say that because you do remember it," Barnes said sternly. "You forget everything, and then come tell me you'd rather not remember."

For a moment, they argued silently with their eyes. Bucky stood. Natasha narrowed her eyes at him. He walked around the island. Steve's muscles coiled. He was ready to launch himself across the island if necessary.

Bucky stood in front of Natasha. He lifted his right hand toward her but didn't touch her. "If I'm a sleeper, you'll stop me?" he whispered.

She blinked before searching his face. She nodded.

He dropped his hand and stared at the floor. "We need to remember. Hell, I need you to help me remember. But we live in the now. Here and now? I'm the weak one."

Her eyes widened. She slid gracelessly off the stool, muttered, "I need a drink," and walked out.

Clint jumped up off his stool, scooping up his bow and quiver as he went. Tony looped a hand around his arm and stopped him. "I'll go."

Clint studied the older man's face. "She won't talk to you."

"I don't need her to talk to me and she doesn't need that either. She just needs someone to drink with her."

"I can do that."

"Pretty sure she needs more than a couple of drinks," Tony said. "She'll drink you under the table too fast."

Clint bristled. "I'm not a lightweight."

"No, but her capacity's unusually high. The only others here that could match her shot for shot today are the supersoldiers." Tony glanced at Steve. "Pretty sure she doesn't want to see either one of them right now."

"Gotta agree with you there," Steve said.

"Okay." Clint sighed and straightened up. "Tell me what she says."

"I will." Tony headed to the tower bar.

Clint caught Steve's eye. He made a small gesture toward Bucky, still standing beside Natasha's stool looking lost.

Steve turned his hands up in a what? gesture.

Clint began signing. Steve shook his head and tried to indicate he didn't understand. Clint rolled his
eyes. Fitz's eyes went from one man to the other as though he were watching a ping pong match. Jemma giggled.

Clint pressed his lips together, widened his eyes, and gestured toward Bucky with his head.

Steve was baffled, which must have showed on his face.

Clint closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Mockta won't be here for another two hours."

Bucky recoiled. He turned desperate eyes on Steve. "Can I sleep until she gets here?"

Steve scrambled up. How could Clint see this when he'd missed it? He went around the island and curled his hand around Bucky's right arm. The brunet sagged into him and Steve wound up putting his arm around his friend's shoulder.

"Sure you can," Steve muttered.

He lead Bucky to his room. Bucky needed him. Right now, that was the most important thing. Steve could just set aside his needs and selfish thoughts for the time being.

Once Steve got Bucky settled, he sat on the floor and drew him. Bucky's face in repose was achingly vulnerable. When that got to be too much, Steve drew page after page of Bucky as he remembered him. He pulled out his pastels and colored pencils so he could tint Bucky's gray eyes with the fires of triumph, fierceness, passion, and happiness.
Tony pulled himself onto a bar stool opposite Natasha. He poured two fingers of whiskey into an old-fashioned glass. As an afterthought, he added three cubes of ice. "So, wow. You. Rattled. That's new."

She glowered at him. "You still got a bottle of vodka back there?"

He checked. "The only one left is mango flavored."

"That'll do." She held out a hand.

He gave her the bottle. "Should I get you a glass?"

"Don't bother." She pulled the stopper out and took a long swig.

"So I don't do touchy feely shit, but you don't do touchy feely shit, so I think that's probably okay." He poured himself another glass of his poison of choice. "Are you okay? 'Cause I know what drinking-to-get-drunk-'cause-you-can't-stand-to-think-sober-anymore looks like, and this is it."

She set the bottle down with a heavy clink and glanced at his whiskey. "You too?"

"No, I'm drinking to get stupid so I can do a thing without overthinking it way too much. Been meaning to, you just gave me a fantastic excuse to do it now."

"Huh." She took another draught.

"Why exactly are you chugging straight vodka?"

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Because the fucking Fight Club type bullshit with Barnes. Did you miss all that somehow? 'Cause you were there."

"Yeah, I was there but I'm not about to assume anything is ever what it looks like with you, Miss Clairol."

She rolled her eyes.

For a while they drank in silence that was at least more companionable than it was hostile. Reading the back of a bottle of flavored syrup in one hand, her steadily dwindling supply of vodka in the other, and a frown on her face, Natasha asked, "Are you stupid yet?"

"Eh, debatable." Tony sighed and swirled his ice, cheek propped on his hand. "You look slightly less like you're gonna murder."

She snorted and put the bottle of syrup back, took a drink, then a breath. "I don't like that Barnes knew me."

"Okay, look." Tony set his glass aside and leaned on his elbows, hands on the bar top folded like he was praying. "These guys, dealing with them, it can be weird, 'cause they're old enough to be more than one person in your life, and you just gotta roll with that. Captain America was one of my dad's best friends—don't think Steve even knows that but my father, he sucked even worse than me at the whole friends thing. He had his butler and he had Captain America. And then Captain America died and he just had his butler—which is lame."
"You're dating your former personal assistant."

"I made her CEO first," Tony said with a dismissive hand wave.

"And there's your computer butler—"

Tony cut her off. "But so I grew up in Captain America's shadow, he was the ghost of the perfect older brother I never had and I could never live up to him, and Dad would never think I was as good, and I hated him for being so fucking perfect and making it so I was always second best no matter what I did. I hated him. Still hate Captain America for that. But then I work with Steve, saved the fucking world with him, let him live in my tower, play Scrabble with him. He's my friend. He's both. Or he was one and now he's the other. 'Cause he's old." He refilled his drink again. "By their nineties I doubt anybody's quite the same person they were in their twenties, these jackasses just look the same still."

Natasha fiddled with her bottle. "I know about being different people," she muttered. "That's the problem."

"Oh, keep drinking. That's how I worked through the My Cap vs. Dad's Cap snarl."

"That's how you work through everything, you drunkard." Nevertheless she took another swig.

Where was he? Not cold. Familiar voices in the hall. Soft pillows all around him.

The tower. He was at this place that had somehow become a refuge.

Still groggy, Bucky opened his eyes. The blackout curtains were slightly open, just as they had been when he went to sleep. Sunlight spilled through the gap and illuminated the room. He pushed some of the sleep disheveled hair out of his eyes and went to the door. He opened it onto Steve and Erin Mockta. He'd heard their familiar voices in the room and could easily have understood their words but paid no attention. Even now their words didn't penetrate the fog of sleep and fractured memories, the ache of Sasha/Natasha and the conflict there that he didn't quite understand from her very first moments at the tower when she'd challenged him with her commands and lack of trust.

"Those drawings are stunning," Mockta said.

Pink cheeked, Steve smiled. "Thank you."

"I can't believe you did all those in two hours," she said.

"Less," he said with a note of pride.

Bucky took a step forward and fell into Mockta's arms. The tall slender woman looked surprised but caught him easily without losing her grip on her notepad. He felt the strength of her back beneath her suit jacket.

The look on Steve's face was some combination of concerned and amused. "Guess it's good you were early."

"Guess so." Mockta put an arm around Bucky's shoulder. "I'll call you if I need you."
"Yes, ma'am," Steve said.

She guided Bucky into his room and coaxed him down into the nest of pillows on his mattress. She shifted a bean bag chair closer and curled up in it.

"I'm a mess." He took a deep breath.

"Not too much of one." She grinned. "Although it is the first time you've ever greeted me by collapsing against me."

"She pulled herself open to me so I'd know I could too, and I still don't know her. Now she's drinking with Stark. And Steve doesn't pay attention."

Mockta tapped her pen on her notebook. "Who?"

"Sasha."

"You mean Natasha?"

"Both."

"Are you talking about two women?"

Bucky shook his head. "Sasha was a child."

"James, look at me."

Movements slow and deliberate, Bucky raised his head. He looked into Mockta's eyes.

"Good," she said. "Remember, you have to make description pictures for me so I know what you mean. I wasn't there when these things happened, so I don't know unless you tell me."

He scooted deeper into the pillows so he could rest his head against the wall. "When Natasha danced two days ago, I'd never seen quite that look on her face. Not even when she bested me at sparring. She looked happy, but more. She had us all come and dance and she danced with me. I thought she reminded me of someone after we sparred. When we all sat on the floor after dancing, I realized she reminded me of herself, as a child. That little girl's name was Sasha."

"You knew Natasha when she was a child?"

"Yakov knew her."

"Yakov?" Mockta frowned. "I haven't heard that name before."

"He—I—" Bucky froze with uncertainty.

"Yakov is one of the personalities programmed into you."

Bucky nodded. "When I was Yakov, I was her teacher."

"How old was she?"

"Seven. She had long brown braids."

"Sounds cute," Mockta said.

punished me. They froze me again."

Mockta made a note. "It's remarkable that you're sane with all that's been done to you."

"Sane?" Bucky sat up straight. "But I'm a mess."

"I don't deny that you're a mess." Mockta grinned. "But underneath the layers of damage, you—James Buchanan Barnes—are sane."

"I'm damaged but sane," Bucky said to himself.

"I've had clients with simpler cases of PTSD have far more frequent and violent flashback episodes. In addition, you have overlaid personalities that were designed to be psychopaths, mind wipes, cryofreezing, time distortion, brainwashing, physical damage—and, wow, even I didn't know how far I could bring you back or how many years it would take."

He raised his eyebrows.

She laughed. "Not that many years, apparently. It's wonderful that you have Steve. He's been a stalwart supporter from the beginning."

"Steve." Bucky rubbed a hand over his face. "It's the others, too, though, once I got to know them. Everyone here has something—inner monsters, endured torture, killed, been seriously injured, escaped, suffered unbearable losses. Almost makes me feel normal sometimes."

"In this group, you are normal." Mockta spoke with a straight face.

"Normal." He sighed. "But broken."

"And getting stronger at the broken places," she said.

"Stronger." He tapped his metal fingers against the blanket beneath him. It was almost silent. "I could see that it made Natasha feel"—he searched for a word—"vulnerable that I knew she was Sasha. I told her that, now, I'm the weak one."

"That's incredibly insightful." Mockta looked at him in surprise. "And brave."

"She went to the bar when I said that."

"Understandable." Mockta shrugged. "So, she was the weak one when she was seven, and she hates not feeling strong and in control."

"She was strong when she was seven." Bucky leaned forward. "In a way that no child should ever have to be."

"Why don't you tell her that?"

"If she'll let me."

"I think eventually she will," Mockta said.

"Okay." He smirked. "So tell me how I'm sane."

She put his hands against his chest. "Who me?" he asked in innocent tones.
She chuckled. "Glimpses like this of how you must have been back in the forties, before being subjected to so much evil, is part of how I know you're sane. Against tall odds, James Buchanan Barnes is intact in there." She pointed her pen at his chest.

He leaned back. "Intact might be an overstatement."

"Is it?" she asked. "Don't you know who you are?"

"I know who I am. I'm just not always sure who I was."

"Why?"

"Because I don't remember."

"None of us remembers everything. Sometimes that's a cosmic kindness."

"But I want to remember." Bucky exhaled in frustration.

"You're remembering more and more, at a phenomenal rate. For some things, you'll have to make new memories. We all wind up doing that sometimes."

Bucky just looked at her.

"Now," she said, "about you being sane. Not only do you know that you're James, you also realize that you're sort of other people they made you be, like Yakov, and sort of not. You don't seem confused by that even though it's pretty complicated."

"True, that doesn't confuse me."

"Also, not only do you know who you are but, the last few times you got lost in programming or a grafted on personality, you were aware that it was happening. That's amazing progress."

Bucky leaned forward. "I did know." He was almost breathless. "I even worked to overcome it."

She raised an eyebrow and made a note. "Tell me about it."

"Most recently, I got lost in the Stasi agent programming. I spoke German and lunged toward Steve but I stopped myself and asked for his help."

"James, wow. I don't know what to say. That is incredible progress."

Bucky grinned. He was ridiculously pleased with himself. "Back when I was Yakov, I remembered James Barnes. And I remembered Steve."

Mockta's expression was thoughtful as she watched him. "Tell me about that," she said softly.

###

Mockta sat down in Phil's office. She flipped to a fresh page in her notebook, wrote the date and time, then tapped her pen against the page. "So, how'd this week go with telling each other I love you?" Clint was at his usual perch on the desk. Phil was in a chair.

"Well, uh..." Clint scratched the back of his head and laughed awkwardly. "That might have gotten a little out of hand."

"Oh?"
The two men glanced at each other. Clint fished his phone out of his pocket and showed pictures of
the dinner he'd made Phil.

"That was actually sweet," Phil said. "Then it devolved into pranks."

Clint showed pictures of the card stock arrows and the note card in the shower. "And then it
devolved into automated emails..."

For a heartbeat, Mockta was quiet. Then she laughed. "That is not what I meant!"

Phil chuckled. "We figured that out, eventually."

"I guess I underestimated your competitive streaks." She shook her head. "So who won?"

Clint raised his eyebrows. "We both did."

"Huh." She studied the blond. "Maybe not as competitive as I thought."

"No." Phil raised his hand. "That would be me. I started the automated emails."

She grinned as she made a note. "Great progress. Self awareness, willing to reveal it."

"Maybe." Phil dropped his face into his hand. "The I love you arms race made it obvious, I guess,
when I didn't put 'love' at the end of my email to Shannon."

"Arms race?" She choked down another laugh.

"He doesn't say 'I love you' to anyone." Clint swung his feet.

"Repression," Mockta said. "Nothing new, of course. Thoughts on what's behind it?"

"Only boy in a family full of girls." He shrugged. "In the closet for a long time."

"Sounds valid." She made a note. "Did Shannon answer your email?"

"So fast I couldn't believe it."

"What did she say?"

"She sent her number," Clint said. "I dialed it and made him take the phone."

"Yeah." Phil exhaled. "She sobbed for five minutes before we could really talk last night. I talked
to her again this afternoon."

"And?" Mockta prompted.

Shocked looking and eyes wide, Phil looked at her. "I'm going to my parents' house."

Mockta smiled.

"Can this conversation wait?" Phil asked pointedly.
Clint rolled his eyes, shoved the rest of his brownie into his mouth, and started signing. "If you don't want them to hear, they don't have to."

"Clint."

"What?" He gestured at Bucky and Jemma. "They don't know ASL."

Phil set his cup down. "That isn't what I'm worried about."

"You lie better out loud."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just an observation."

Bucky paused to watch the conversation happening on the other side of the room, now silent but for the rustle of sleeves and the occasional faint smack of hand hitting hand. "Are the two of you arguing?"

"No," came the unanimous reply.

"Because you look like you're arguing."

Jemma nodded. "You do."

"We're not." Clint stood. "What time is it? Whatever. I'm making dinner."

"You just had a brownie," Phil pointed out.

"Yeah, and?" Clint pulled out pots and pans, several boxes of noodles, a bottle of wine, cloves of garlic, and a huge bag of frozen shrimp. "Anybody have any objections to me cooking?"

"None," Bucky responded quickly.

"Didn't think so."

The shrimp were simmering in a delicate wine-infused sauce by the time Steve arrived in the kitchen. "That smells good."

"Clint's making shrimp linguine," Bucky said brightly.

"Make salads," Clint said. "It's seven minutes to show time." He dumped noodles into two big pots of boiling water.

Steve and Jemma busied themselves with bowls and organic greens.

"Sam and Bruce are going to be sorry they missed this," Bucky said as he poured white wine into goblets.

"They're in Boston by now." Phil set the kitchen island with plates and flatware.

Ten minutes after Clint spoke, they were all seated, servings of salad and linguine in front of them.

Bucky pushed his salad toward the middle of the island and started right in on his shrimp linguine. His features softened into a mask of bliss. "Mmm," he said. His second bite elicited the same reaction.
"Judging by the obscene-sounding moans, I thought I'd made a wrong turn and wound up in a bedroom." Natasha's tone was dry and amused. Her shoulder leaned against the door frame.

"Clint cooked," Bucky said.

"That was my second guess."

"Nat!" Clint grinned. "Saved you a seat." He patted the stool between him and Bucky.

She hesitated just a second then sat. She took a bite of linguine. "That is good."

"Thanks," Clint said.

"I heard Tony went to drink with you." Phil looked at her. "Where is he?"

"Pepper came and got him about three hours ago." She shrugged. "To keep him from overdoing too much. When I got tired of drinking alone, I went to the gym for an hour."

"So you didn't drink that much?" Jemma asked.

"Oh. I did. Lots of vodka. Straight. Gin when that ran out."

Jemma frowned. "You don't seem affected."

"The effects wore off before I showered." Natasha took a sip of wine.

Fitz hovered at the kitchen entrance. Steve waved him over. "Clint cooked."

"No wonder it smells fantastic in here, and all the way down the hall." Fitz came over and sat beside Jemma.

"You were strong when you were seven." Bucky glanced at Natasha. "Stronger than a little girl should ever have to be."

She watched him for a moment before nodding.

"Talk to me about it sometime?" Bucky made it a question. "Help me remember?"

"I will." Natasha answered easily. "Not today."

"Okay." Bucky smiled.

Clint had two helpings of linguine and was still the first one finished eating. Bucky was finishing his third helping of linguine and had somehow managed to eat his salad in between.

Clint went over to Bucky, slid his fingers into the tips of the brunet's long hair, and tugged.

"Hey," Bucky said.

"That did not hurt," Clint said.

"No, but what are you doing?"

"Assessing the texture of your hair. It needs to be colored and cut."

Steve frowned. "Why?"
"You two are going to D.C. Visiting graves like the rest of us." Clint looked at Bucky's and Steve's blank faces and rolled his eyes. "You were seen in D.C. back in March," Clint said. "We can't have people recognizing you."

"Hydra still thinks you're dead," Phil said, "even though they're searching for your body. We want them to keep thinking you're dead."

"True." Steve blew out a breath. "Guess he needs a better disguise than a hat."

"Leave it to me." Clint pushed a startled looking Bucky out of his seat.

"I'm not done eating." Bucky protested.

"You are for now." Clint dragged the brunet out of the kitchen. "Nat," he called over his shoulder, "I'm using your hair dye."

"Not the red!" she called back.

"No ma'am." Even though he and Bucky were well down the hall, he knew Natasha heard him. For one thing, she wasn't right behind him preparing to kick his ass.

An hour and a half later, he returned to the now cleaned up kitchen with Bucky, and a stack of towels in his arms. And professional hair trimming tools and a blow-dryer. As he expected, the other tower residents wandered into the kitchen from the common room to watch. He spread towels on the floor, got Bucky positioned in a chair and began cutting his hair.

Clint had only made two snips when Tony walked in and stopped dead in his tracks.

"No," the inventor said. "You can't be blond."

"Sure he can." Clint was cheerful as he continued cutting Bucky's hair. "All it takes is peroxide and Natasha's hair dye."

Tony raised an eyebrow. "Then why isn't his hair red?"

"Natasha would have killed me if I'd taken her red hair dye."

"True," the Russian said.

Tony blinked. "You lightened his eyebrows."

"Great idea," Phil said. "It'll make him that much harder to recognize."

"My head was already hurting," Tony mumbled. He went to the cabinet with medicine and vitamins in it and fumbled around until he pulled out a bottle of ibuprofen. He considered the gelcaps for a couple of minutes before downing three.

Tony drank a second glass of water then sniffed the air. "Did someone order spaghetti for dinner?"

"No." Natasha was deadpan.

Tony put a hand to his head. "I don't want to hear from you." When she opened her mouth he added, "I know it's my fault. Still, hush."

She smirked.
"I heard that," he said.

Jemma pulled bowls out of the refrigerator. "Clint made shrimp linguine."

"Heat up enough for me," Bucky said. "Please."

"All of it then," Jemma said.

"I think so," Steve said. "Let me help."

By the time the food was reheated, Clint was finished cutting and blow-drying Bucky's hair into a shorter layered style that made use of the natural wave in the supersoldier's hair.

Tony frowned. "He looks like a girl."

"He really doesn't," Steve breathed.

"Beautiful though." Jemma grinned.

"Next stop, cover of GQ," Clint said. He handed Bucky a large hand mirror.

Bucky's eyebrows shot up. "I can't believe that's me."

"Me either," Tony grumbled. "Spare me from bottle blonds."
Chapter 33

Steve watched Bucky scrub both hands through his hair. Being mussed only made the new cut more attractive. Steve looked away and drank his coffee.

"I don't know," Bucky said. "When you did this Monday night, I didn't have time to think about it, much less really look at it. I went from this to the goldfish bowl." He sighed. "I don't want to be blond."

"Yeah, well, I don't like it," Tony muttered. Pepper patted his hand.

"It's a disguise," Clint pointed out reasonably. "And blond was the only real option. A different shade of brown wouldn't have been enough. Black might've been if I'd done something else too, like a perm."

Bucky grimaced.

Clint grinned. "I joke about taking Natasha's red hair dye but it would have been too noticeable. Your face turns heads as it is. Not only was it the best option for making a visible change to your looks but it makes you just another blond in our group, and you'll be standing next to Steve."

"That alone gives you cover," Natasha said. "People will say, 'you know, one of those good looking blond guys' and no one will know who they mean."

Steve, Pepper, Jemma, and Phil all chuckled.

Natasha eyed the newly blond supersoldier. "At least you don't look like Yakov."

He thought about that. "I don't, do I? At least that's something."

"At least." She nodded.

"You look kind of Swiss with the golden hair," Jemma said.

"Like you belong on a box of hot chocolate," Natasha said.

Bucky rolled his eyes.

Clint snorted. "Yeah, that's exactly the look I was going for—Hummel meets Madison Avenue."

"If that's the look you were going for," Phil said dryly, "you succeeded."

Clint cuffed his shoulder. "Not you, too."

Phil raised his eyebrows.

Bucky ate some of his eggs. "The best thing about the trip is that I won't have to get in the pressure chamber Friday night."

"You aren't looking forward to seeing your grave?" Fitz asked.

Bucky shook his head. "That'll just be weird."

Clint stood. "C'mon, Phil. Let's finish packing."
Steve looked up from his coffee. "That's right, you two are leaving today."

"Right after lunch," Phil said.

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Clint dropped his black soft-sided suitcase on the striped blue and off-white bedspread. He stretched before unpacking.

Phil eyed his pragmatic gray suit bag. "I overpacked."

Clint shrugged. "You packed for three trips."

"Three?"

"This one, going to visit graves Friday, and seeing your family."

"Yeah." Phil unpacked. "I brought different kinds of clothes for each of those. Still it's only four days."

Clint stretched some more. "Feels like we spent four days in the car. I can't believe the traffic." He tipped over into a backbend. "It took us more than five hours to get here and then we stopped for dinner so it was like yesterday that we left New York. Good thing we weren't headed into D.C. proper." He let himself collapse to the floor and sat up cross legged.

"That five hours included a stop." Phil spoke testily as he hung his suits up. "We changed drivers. Sure, the drive should have taken maybe three, three and a half hours—" His words died away when he looked over and saw Clint watching him.

Clint tilted his head. "You're nervous."

Phil sighed and finished unpacking. When the suitcases were stowed, Clint took his hand and tugged him toward the doors that led directly outside. "Let's take a walk."

"Okay," Phil said. "The forty five acres of gardens and trees are one of the attractions to this place."

They went up the stairs, walked past the Olympic size swimming pool and across an area of open lawn as Clint headed toward neat paths that disappeared into a wooded area. Phil barely registered the beauty of the summer blooms all around, hydrangeas, roses, wisteria, daylilies, and a multitude of annuals. It was almost eight o'clock but there was plenty of daylight left.

"Makes sense that you'd be nervous," Clint said.

"I am not nervous." Hearing the persisting snap in his own voice, Phil winced.

Clint snorted.

"Maybe anxious," Phil conceded.

"Okay." Clint glanced at him. Phil was aggravated by the slight amused smile on Clint's face. "Makes sense that you're anxious," Clint continued. "You've never been to your grave and you haven't seen your family in three years."
"Hmm." Phil wasn't sure whether he'd just made a sound of acquiescence or disagreement.

They slipped into the cool of the trees along a wide clear path.

"And you're sharing a room with me without having an office nearby to escape to."

Phil stopped. "You make it sound like I want to get away from you."

"Sometimes you do." Clint stroked his hand down Phil's indigo and silver silk tie. "Sometimes you need time to yourself." Clint glanced up from the tie and looked into Phil's eyes. "It's okay that you do."

Clint curled his fingers around Phil's upper arm. He turned them, then walked down a narrower woodland trail. "Did you notice," Clint said, "not only is there a sitting area in our incredibly fancy suite, but there's a daybed in the sitting area and a desk. You can get away to yourself, just not very far. You can also go out to the very private patio, or the grounds, or into the common areas of the hotel."

"You've...really thought about this."

"I always realized it, but I've had to think about it more over the past couple of months because we've never"—Clint took a breath—"spent quite so much time together before."

Phil walked beside Clint in silence before answering. "It's starting to seem strange that we didn't."

Clint stopped and looked at him.

"I know it was me." Phil slid his fingers along Clint's jaw then on around to the back of his neck and down into the top of his Tshirt until his fingers came to rest on the top of Clint's back. "I'm starting to not understand myself."

Clint curled his hands around Phil's shoulders. "Does that make it scary that a lot of the time I understand you?"

Phil nodded.

Clint leaned in and kissed him, a patient press of slightly parted lips, and waited for Phil to respond. Phil hesitated, but the bend in the trail through the twilight woods felt peaceful and private, and Clint felt solid and right. He coaxed Clint closer, until they were sandwiched together, clothes compressed into the thinnest possible barrier between them. His tongue gained entry to Clint's pliant mouth and then retreated as Clint kissed him deeply in return. This was all Phil wanted to do, stand here in the warm evening and kiss the lover he thought he'd lost. If they stayed here half the night, tasting and teasing, he was fine with that.

Ten minutes into the torrid kiss, Phil heard a footfall on the path. He stepped away as he ended the kiss and looked up to see an elegant silver-haired woman standing eight feet away. "Are you here to get married too?" she asked.

Phil shook his head.

"Tomorrow evening, my youngest son will marry his long time beau," she said. "I'm so glad they're finally able to, and I'm so looking forward to it. I suppose I'm being obsessive about it, checking out the bridge where they're going to say their vows."

"That's really sweet," Clint said. His hand fumbled forward, looking for Phil's. Phil folded his
fingers around the archer's calloused hand.

"Your mother would do the same for you," she said.

Clint dropped his eyes to the ground. "She's long gone."

"She's watching you from somewhere," the woman said, "and she's happy for you. Mothers rejoice in their children being happy and in love."

Phil stepped to the edge of the graveled walkway and tugged Clint to the side with him. "We can let you by."

"Thank you." She smiled. "This is a romantic place," she said as she walked past.

"Yes," Phil said. "I suppose we're getting reacquainted." He blinked. What had made him say that?

Just three feet past them, the woman turned around. "Reacquainted?"

"We dated for a few years but then"—Phil hesitated—"we were separated by war." It was the most accurate brief statement he could think of.

"He died but was brought back." Clint spoke softly but Phil still flinched and the woman noticed. "The scars are daunting," Clint added.

"I imagine you think you mean the physical scars," she said kindly. "But the scars we don't see are worse. Even though it's hard, don't let those stop you. The things we fight for are usually more precious than those that come easily."

"We'll keep that in mind," Phil said.

"You're about the age of my oldest son," the woman said. "And I hear your hesitation and maybe a little fear, but what I see is two people in love. You need to let yourself see too."

She looked right at Phil. He felt his face burn.

"Thank you," Clint said.

She smiled, broad and warm, then turned and walked back toward the mansion.

Phil and Clint walked deeper into the woods until they came across a gurgling creek with a wide pale stone bridge arched over it.

"I suppose she meant here." Clint leaned his crossed arms on the railing. "Nice place for a ceremony."

Phil looked at the clear area near the bridge. "The guest list must be sort of small."

"Sounds cozy to me," Clint said. "And the sound of the water is soothing."

Anxiety spiked in Phil's chest. He stepped off the bridge. Clint leaned on the rail for another minute, eyes closed, apparently listening. He straightened up and walked toward Phil and looped their arms together. They headed back the way they'd come.

"Commitment phobe." Clint sounded amused.

"I'm—" Phil's words were cut off by Clint's hand over his mouth.
"Don't say it." Clint said. "Don't say you're sorry."

"But—"

"Just keep struggling with it. You're the one who kept the mother of the groom there longer, talking to us."

Phil sighed.

"Well, you did," Clint said.

"Yeah, I did." Phil ruminated over why but he couldn't figure it out.

"Did you notice," Clint said, "that the knobs for the double jacuzzi are little brass swan heads and the faucet is a big curved swan head and neck?"

"I did," Phil said. "The bathroom floor is heated too."

"I have never seen a fancier bathroom outside of HGTV," Clint said. "I could've sworn fixtures like that were myths,"

Phil laughed.

Darkness had settled by the time they got back to the gently lit open lawn. The pool was brightly lit and served as a kind of beacon back to the stairs and the private patio outside their room. The bubbling of the small fountain attached to the patio wall was reminiscent of the creek they'd come across.

Phil unlocked one of the French doors and they stepped into the sitting area of their suite. Phil relocked the door then automatically made a sweep, making sure the rooms were secure. He found himself standing in the middle of the sitting room feeling paralyzed by the weight of expectation.

Clint closed the curtains before turning out all of the lights but one in the sitting room. He came up behind Phil, put his arms around his waist, and leaned his head against his shoulder. Phil put his hands over Clint's. They stood without speaking for a moment. Then Clint took his hand and led him to the king size four poster bed. The bedroom was dimly illuminated by the light that spilled in through the open doorway from the one lit lamp.

"You're always the one who approaches," Phil said.

"Not always." Clint's motions were slow but deft as he opened the knot of the necktie. "I love this tie. The color looks great on you." He slid the slick silk out from under Phil's collar. "After S.H.I.E.L.D. fell, you called me. Twenty six times."

"I was afraid you'd died."

"I grieved your death." Clint methodically opened the buttons on Phil's shirt.

Phil cringed. Clint kissed him, open-mouthed, comforting but not lingering, the forward motion smooth and automatic. Clint stepped back then pushed Phil's jacket off his shoulders.

"You took the quinjet to come see me." Clint untucked Phil's shirt.

"But," Phil said as he helped Clint dispense with his shirt, "I never would've done what you did."

"What is that?" Clint got Phil to sit. He knelt to remove Phil's shoes.
"You kissed me." Phil sighed. Clint got his socks off. "Then you dragged me to bed." Phil stood and started to unbuckle his belt. Clint slapped his hands away and removed the belt. Phil raised his eyebrows and continued talking. "I wouldn't have done any of that. I would've come to see you and I would've been awkward and tried to hide our relationship, and if you'd let me get away with that, I'd probably have left—"

Clint gave him a quick kiss which shut him up. "Good thing I'm affectionate then." Clint removed Phil's pants.

"It's more than that," Phil said as Clint got his boxers off. Clint opened the bed. Phil climbed in between the sheets. He said, "You embrace life, you reach out—uh—"

Phil went silent as he watched Clint undress. Clint climbed into the bed beside him. "You were saying?"

"You look amazing," Phil said.

"You do too." Clint squeezed his shoulder. "And that isn't what you were saying."

Phil pulled Clint close, close enough where he couldn't see Clint's face as he talked; he didn't think he could manage that. "I was saying," he murmured, "that you embrace life and reach out where I pull back. If you didn't do that, we'd never have had a relationship to begin with." He exhaled into Clint's hair. "And we would never have resumed it."

Clint's fingers tightened around Phil's arm. "Did you not want to?"

"I desperately wanted to." Phil tightened his arm around Clint's waist. "I must've been hoping you would—if it even was possible. So I showed up in person. I mean, you shocked me, revealing our relationship the way you did. But, deep down, I knew—you're the one that reaches out. You reach out to life with both hands." He sighed. "You put me to shame."

"No," Clint said. "It's okay for you to be cautious."

"That doesn't begin to cover it." Phil was silent for a moment. "I was so wrong." He tipped Clint's face up. "I did you wrong."

"You did," Clint agreed. He looked into Phil's eyes and Phil looked back.

"I don't know what I was thinking," Phil said. "You couldn't reach out when you didn't know there was anything to reach out to."

"That's part of why I was so upset," Clint said. "I was given no choices. If I'd known anything, been given any information at all, I'd have done something."

"I know. You're a doer. You kind of live by the Nike motto." Phil smiled briefly. "I see it every day."

Clint nodded. "Speaking of doing things"—he kissed Phil's jaw—"there's something I need to finish before going to your grave."

"Oh?"

"I need to do a complete inventory."

Phil was stumped, and he couldn't figure out why this was being brought up now. "Of what?"
"You." Clint grinned. "I've been taking inventory little by little all these weeks. I couldn't finish because I couldn't deal with your scars. Didn't realize that until after the night where I finally faced your scars and what they mean."

"Okay," Phil said. "Inventory."

"I need to relearn you." Clint ran his fingers through Phil's hair. "To imprint you as you are now." He traced fingertips over Phil's ears which made him shiver. "I need to know, really know, that you are really here." Clint slid two fingers from each hand down the line of Phil's jaw until they met at his chin. "Warm." He traced his fingers over Phil's face. "Alive." He kissed Phil's eyelids and the tip of his nose. "Damaged but whole." He felt and kissed his way down Phil's neck.

"And this." Clint ran one finger over the scars on Phil's chest. "No one could have survived this." He sat up and pressed his fingers firmly into the scars, shifting his hands, probing deeply, making a tactile catalog of deeper damage, tight scarred muscles and chipped bones. "And you didn't." He kissed the scars, tracing each one with his tongue from top to bottom. "Yet somehow," Clint whispered the hot words in a stream through Phil's chest hair and into his skin, "here you are."

"Like some kind of forbidden magic"—Clint traced fingers over Phil's collarbones then shoulders—"that no one should ever use much less endure." He felt all along Phil's arms and hands, one at a time. "I'm like that fella in Poe's poem pondering over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore." Clint kissed each fingertip.

"You mean The Raven?" Phil gasped out. Because, while Clint was neither hurrying nor going particularly slowly, and so far there had been no genital involvement, the exploration was sensuous. The focused loving attention sensitized his nerves, made him anticipate and react to every contact no matter how glancing or solid. The eloquence didn't hurt either.

"Yes. The Raven." Clint's fingers trailed along each of Phil's ribs one by one and he writhed from being touched, even firmly, in ticklish spots. "If it makes me damned that I'm glad to have you back no matter how dark and ugly the process, then I am damned." His hands slid and pressed over Phil's solar plexus and abdomen. "And if you suffered unspeakably in the arcane and evil process of being brought back to life, then I can't help but accept your suffering."

This was the only place where Phil stopped him. He pulled Clint up and kissed him. Clint's breath hitched and Phil kissed him until his breathing evened out. "Getting you back," Phil whispered, "is what finally made the suffering worth it. I'd do it again if it was the only way to find my way back to you."

"It was the only way," Clint breathed. "You have to be alive to make anything else possible. The good, the bad, the terrible, the wonderful, the enduring, the fighting, the loving, it all starts with you being alive."

Phil shuddered at the words. Clint kissed him before continuing his determined exploration.

Clint spent the better part of an hour finishing his inventory of Phil, from head to toe down the front, then from toe to head up the back. Much of it proceeded without talking until Clint got to the scars on Phil's back, the ones that created a matched set with the ones on his chest.

"I thought you were never going to accept those," Phil said.

"I don't." Clint's fingers continued probing the scars. "I just realize they're sort of a necessary evil. They can't be helped." He trailed a line of kisses down the longest scar. "They're a part of you whether I like them or not." He kissed the next scar over. "Just like you being traumatized, and
suffering, and shocked, and broken all couldn't be helped." He kissed another scar, then ran his hands over Phil's shoulder blades. "Thinking about it that way made me realize that you couldn't help how you were. If you were too much of a mess to break out of your mental prison and call your family, or me, then you just were." He caressed the top of Phil's back. "You were doing the best you could, and you didn't mean to hurt yourself or us. It just happened. The price is high and I may never stop counting the cost, but I'm willing to pay it. Right or wrong, I'm willing for you to pay it too."

"Because, damn it, I want you back." Clint kissed the nape of Phil's neck, his lips were tender even though his words were fierce. "I want you back."

Phil turned and tumbled the younger man onto the bed. Surprise showed in Clint's eyes just for a moment. Then he let Phil engulf him in a long ardent kiss, and then in so much more.

They panted like long distance runners as they held each other. The bonelessness and the afterglow lingered; recovery was slow. Phil felt broken open, insides exposed and raw and laid out for anyone to examine.

Phil combed his fingers through Clint's hair. "I wasn't really back at first," he whispered. "Wasn't all there."

"You were still pretty disconnected." Clint kissed his neck. "It was upsetting."

"The thing I wanted most in the world was you." Phil's eyes burned. "I had you back and could hardly believe it. I was so scared of losing you again, I almost ruined it." Heat streaked down his cheek. A moment passed before he registered it as a tear.

"I wasn't much better." Clint exhaled. "I was angry and frustrated and resistant to getting help."

Phil choked, then he relaxed into it and let himself cry. It was fine, mere tremors of sorrow. He felt safe and accepted in Clint's arms. "I was wrong," he gasped out. "I'm so sorry."

"Shh," Clint soothed. "It's all right, babe." Then he added in a whisper. "We're all right."

It was over in five minutes. Phil felt hollowed out but clear, as though something that had been clogging him up had gotten washed away.

"We need to get cleaned up," Phil said.

"There's a big jacuzzi in there with our name on it," Clint said.

"You just want to play with the brass swans."

"Yup. And it's more fun if I have someone else to play with."

Phil thought about it. "No splashing."

"I don't promise." Clint got out of bed. Phil laughed and let himself be tugged to his feet.

They managed to be asleep by midnight, pajama clad and curled up together face to face, arms around each other and legs threaded together. They never slept this way but it was the only way they could bear to be.

When Phil woke up in the morning, he was still face to face with Clint but less tangled together. He slipped out of bed. A few minutes later, he located the coffee maker in the sitting room. Fifteen
minutes after that, he was kissing Clint into wakefulness.

Half cross-eyed, the archer glanced at the clock and groaned. "Eight? Really? They aren't going to set up room service breakfast for another hour."

"I made coffee." Phil muttered against Clint's hair. "I enjoy it more when I can drink some of yours."

Clint buried his face in a pillow. Phil shrugged, made himself a mug of coffee, then went out to the patio. Ten minutes later, Clint came out in his purple argyle pajamas. He handed Phil his mug of coffee, sat in the nearest metal patio chair, then put his bare feet in Phil's lap. Phil took a sip of Clint's coffee before handing it to him.

Phil studied the bleary-eyed archer with his unkempt blond hair sticking out at all angles. Clint took a sip of his sweet coffee then looked up into Phil's eyes.

Clint raised his eyebrows. "Why are you grinning?"

"Oh." Phil raised his mug. "Just thinking you're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Clint tipped his head back and laughed. He scrubbed a hand through his hair to no avail. "Thing is, you mean that."

"It's true," Phil said.

Clint smiled at him. "How about you make up for waking me up so early by spending the day in bed with me?"

Phil looked at the man that he loved, vibrant in the morning light, felt the miracle of being with him in that moment despite all they had been through, and did the only thing he could. He grinned and said, "Sounds fair."

Bucky had pouted until he'd gotten his way. He wasn't even a little bit ashamed of that. Truth be told, he might be a little bit proud. He was certainly pleased with himself. Pepper was the one who'd finally given in. Natasha had not just rolled her eyes, she'd elbowed Pepper and hissed, "You're spoiling him."

"He's not a small child," Pepper had said.

Natasha'd snorted. "Right now he's acting like one."

So Bucky's grin was extra big when he got into the big black SUV. He proudly sat next to the window. Arguments had been made that, due to security concerns, he should sit in the middle of the middle seat. And he'd sulked. The windows were blacked out anyway, so how much difference could it make?

He leaned against the window and finally pressed his nose against the glass, which made Tony huff. "Small child? He's like a dog!"

Bucky didn't even react. He wouldn't have minded being a big puppy right then and having someone open the window so he could stick his head out and feel the wind rush through his fur.
He was tempted to open the window and stick his head out anyway, feel the wind in his hair. If he did that, he'd almost certainly be relegated to the middle seat. He couldn't do it in any case. The childproofing mechanisms had been engaged and the lock and window controller didn't work on his side.

Yeah, he'd checked.

So, here they were, Tony and Pepper in the first row of leather seats behind Happy, Bucky and Steve in the next set of seats, and Natasha sprawled in the very back seat by herself. No one was riding shotgun because Tony had turned away Pepper's suggestion of taking a bodyguard. "Because Avengers," he'd said and pointed to himself, Steve, and Natasha.

Bucky fingered the pressure chamber controller in his lap.

"I can't believe you brought that," Steve said.

"Seems harmless," Natasha said. "If he gets bored, he can play games on it."

Bucky kept looking out the window. He'd been watching the sights for an hour already as they drove, getting through the city faster than he expected. It wasn't until Tony tapped on the front seat and said, "Hey Happy, we to New Brunswick yet?" that the obvious made an impression on Bucky.

"You have a driver?" he said.

"Yeah." Tony eyed him. "He drove the limo when we went to the theatre."

Bucky waved the comment away with a dismissive gesture. That had been different—an event—and it had been a limo. Limo's always had drivers. But family cars, even big nice family cars, didn't.

"You really are rich," Bucky said, suddenly in awe. He knew Tony was wealthy. It was all around him every day. But it came across as normal, everyone accepted it, and it just hadn't jumped out.


"His Dad started the family fortune," Pepper said, "but Tony consolidated it and increased it exponentially."

Bucky studied Tony's face. His mother must have been pretty because there was a softness and beauty to the younger Stark that his father never had. "Howard would have been proud of you," Bucky said.

Tony's face went dark with a scowl and a rush of blood. He opened his mouth but Bucky cut him off before he could get a word out. "Don't start with me," the sergeant growled. "Howard was imperfect, as we all are. I don't doubt you have reasons for your feelings but he was your father and I knew him. I think you need to know it, he would have been proud of you. He would have been proud that for some of the things he valued most—your smarts, inventiveness, business skills, your relationship with Pepper—you outdid him. Hell"—Bucky leaned forward and tapped a finger on the arc reactor through Tony's Tshirt; Tony grabbed his wrist—"he'd have really been impressed by the nerve that led to that."

Bucky was buoyed up by the impressed approving look Steve gave him. It didn't hurt that Pepper had turned her head so she could smile and Tony couldn't see it as she looked out the window.

"I don't want to hear it," Tony snapped.
"You need to," Bucky snapped back.

"What gives you the right?"

"I knew your father." Bucky's voice was hard and cold. "We knew each other during wartime. War tends to bring people closer faster. I figure I'm about thirty three in terms of years of conscious breathing experience, but I'm also ninety-six. And I was a Stasi or Soviet or other inhuman assassin for a lot of those conscious years. Assassin years are like dog years, they age you faster than regular years. By that reckoning I'm somewhere in my late sixties. By more than one way of counting, I'm in your father's generation."

"Huh," Natasha mused. "By that reckoning, I'm in my eighties. At least."

Straining against the pull of the seat belt, Bucky leaned forward until his face was mere inches from Tony's. Tony glared. Bucky spoke. "Howard would be proud of you."

"Natasha," Tony snarled. "You have permission to kill him."

Natasha curled up, looking at her phone. "You're on your own with this fight, Stark."

"Traitor," Tony grumbled.

Natasha raised an eyebrow without looking away from her phone. "Quite a few Russians have said so."

"It's not true." Steve turned to look at her. "You know it's not true."

She shrugged but didn't look up.

Bucky watched the redhead. He recognized the shutting out behavior. He did it too. He leaned against the back of the seat. "C'mere a minute."

She glanced at him then went back to her game.

"Seriously," he said. "Sit up."

Natasha frowned but straightened up. He reached over the back of his seat and clasped her chin in his right hand. She jerked away but he held tight. He studied her features.

"Bet you'd be pretty with your natural brown hair," Bucky said. "Everyone sees that you're beautiful with red hair, and you demonstrated that you're an attractive blond."

Tony made a choking sound. Steve was uneasy as he looked from Natasha to Bucky and back.

Natasha glared at Bucky who continued talking. "Your coloring, and your features." He tilted her face. "They're in just the right zone for maximum flexibility, right down to the green eyes with hazel specks. That's what made you the Black Widow isn't it? You can look different every time. You'd even get described with different eye colors, I bet. And you're beautiful but still approachable. The perfect bait."

She did jerk away then. "You have no business," she spat, "assessing me now, Yakov."

"Yakov? No." He shook his head. "That was James Barnes assessing you. I've always had an appreciation for pretty people. I couldn't draw them like he can"—he indicated Steve—"but I could take their measure."
She glared daggers at him. "No matter who you are, stop."

"I'm Bucky Barnes. Those other identities are part of me but are not me. Just like Natalia and Sasha and all the things you were made to be are part of you"—he pointed at her and then his voice intensified—"but they are not you!"

Her eyes widened in surprise. She looked shattered for a split second before the default mask shuttered her expression again.

Steve's head snapped around to Bucky. "What the hell are you doing?"

Bucky shoved Steve's shoulder just firmly enough to half push him out of his seat. Luckily Steve understood the gesture. He unbuckled his seat belt and went around to Natasha. He put his arms around her. She went stiff then leaned against him.

Bucky stared out of the window he'd fought so hard to sit next to, barely registering that they were between cities at the moment. What was he doing? Returning a favor, he thought. And he shouldn't have to apologize for it. He didn't know how to make himself understood.

What weighed on him more was what Steve was doing. In his peripheral vision, Bucky saw that Steve was stroking Natasha's hair. Tony seemed confident about it when he ordered Steve and Natasha to kiss, as he had at the theatre. The photos had been convincing and there were quite a few of them.

What were they to each other? They said friends. Maybe they used to be more and were still friendly. Bucky leaned his forehead against the window and resolutely stared. None of his business. Whatever it was.

Happy announced, "We're in Trenton, Mr. Stark."

"Oh thank God," Pepper said. "I think we all need a pit stop."

"I need a drink," Tony muttered.

"Diet soda," Pepper said.

They glared at each other for a moment before Tony looked away. Pepper had clearly won their wordless argument.
I do not speak Russian. If you do and you notice that my Russian in this chapter (or anywhere else) doesn't make sense or doesn't mean what I'm trying to say, I'd greatly appreciate it if you'd help me fix it.

Tony all but leaped out of the vehicle. "Oh my God, that was the longest car ride ever."

"It was four hours," Pepper said. "With a long stop in Trenton."

Tony pointed an accusing finger at Bucky. "Being trapped with Mr. Unfiltered Mouth over there creates the worst kind of time dilation."

Pepper raised an eyebrow. "Seemed normal to me."

Tony blinked at her.

"You know," she said, "having no choice but to travel with someone who doesn't think before they speak."

"Are you comparing my tendency to be blunt with what he just did?" Tony snapped.

Pepper gave Tony a long suffering smile.

Despite feeling lightheaded, Bucky smiled at Tony's rant. He felt like a marionette with broken strings and half stumbled as he got out of the SUV. Steve climbed out after him instead of going out of the door on the other side.

"You're pale." Steve wrapped strong fingers around Bucky's upper arm. "You okay?"

"Glad we're not actually in D.C. but we're close. Too close." He looked at Steve then at the ground. "Where I tried to kill you." He stole a glance at Natasha standing to the side. "And her."

"And you didn't." Steve gestured at Pepper. "When's dinner?"

"You can sample this evening's wine and cheese while we check in," she said. "We'll leave right after that. We can unpack later. You and James are in the first floor apartment. We figured you two would need the kitchen so you can eat between meals. Groceries have already been delivered. The apartment has two bedrooms, each with a queen size bed." She smiled. "Also should make it easier for you to keep an eye on him."

Steve nodded. "Where's everyone else going to be?"

"Tony and I are in the Peacock Room on the third floor," Pepper said. "Happy is in the Newport Room on the third floor, and Natasha's on the second floor. We've rented the whole house though, for privacy."

Bucky didn't pay much attention to the check-in process, which went quickly. The big Victorian
house had a lot of nooks and crannies, which was somewhat overwhelming, but it was old fashioned and almost felt like something from his childhood, like someplace someone's grandmother might have lived back then. He followed Steve when they took their suitcases in.

Even with traffic, the drive to Baltimore's Inner Harbor took less than fifteen minutes. Tony talked the whole time they walked from the parking deck to a waterside restaurant called the Rusty Scupper. Bucky ordered the authentic Maryland crab cakes because Tony told him to. Tony was clearly in Gracious Host mode.

"What's the problem there, Bionic Man?" Tony looked concerned. "Don't like seafood?"

Bucky squirmed. Right now, he just wanted to be left alone. "I miss eating in the kitchen."

"The tower kitchen does have a great view of New York," Tony conceded, "but this place has a great view of the Inner Harbor, even if it is a little crowded with boats."

"When we eat in the kitchen—" Bucky fell silent. The words we're a family went through his mind but didn't make it out of his mouth.

"What about the kitchen?" Tony prompted.

"It's more comfortable," Bucky said.

Tony nodded. "It is. Sorry you have to wear gloves everywhere else."

Bucky nodded as though the thin, close-fitting, tan gloves were actually an issue. He stared out of the restaurant's window wall. The view of the long narrow, relentlessly built-up, harbor was engaging, but he didn't want to be here.

"Can I go to the Smithsonian again?" he asked.

"Again?" Steve said.

"I told you," Bucky said. "After I got you out of the water, I went someplace that showed you, and showed me as a soldier."

Steve's eyebrows went up. "That's what you meant, when you said that, the first time you went into the pressure chamber yourself, without being sedated or already asleep."

Bucky nodded.

"We're in Baltimore," Natasha said.

Most of the table looked puzzled but Bucky knew what she meant. He drank his citrus seltzer water.

"Not D.C." she explained.

"Too close," he said. "Makes me itch, like something's trying to crawl out through my skin."

"If the monster crawls out, Steve and I will handle it," she said.

He flexed his left hand. "Thank you."

"I don't understand you two," Tony said. "You spend the whole road trip fighting—I thought Natasha might kill you at one point—now she's got your back?"
Steve stared into his lemon-garnished seltzer water.

"Siblings," Pepper said.

Tony and Steve both stared at her. She shrugged. "You never had siblings. Siblings can fight like cats and dogs one minute then fight for each other the next."

"The Avengers do that too." Natasha smirked.

"Similar dynamic," Pepper agreed.

Tony drank some wine. "Smithsonian on Saturday."

Bucky met the inventor's expressive brown eyes. "Thank you."

After dinner, they walked along the extensive path that went all along the commercial area at the tip of the Inner Harbor. There was too much brick and concrete for it to seem like a park, but it was close. The breeze from the water made the walk pleasant even though the evening remained hot and humid.

From a distance most wouldn't register that Bucky had gloves on, but he felt compelled to hide his hands and kept them in his pockets. Which made him feel even hotter. He was the only one in the group wearing a shirt with long sleeves. He understood the necessity.

"You seem lost in thought," Steve said.

"Nothing complicated," Bucky said. "I hate my left arm."

Tony, who was in the lead, turned at that. "We're working on it."

"I know."

"Bruce and Sam—" Tony said.

"I know!" Bucky snapped. Chagrined, he took his right hand out of his pocket and extended it toward Tony.

Natasha snagged his wrist, stripped the glove off, then let him go. "Just keep your other hand in your pocket. This one's fine."

He blinked at her. She tucked the tan glove into the right hand pocket of his jeans. She gave his shoulder a shove. "Keep walking. Before the weekend's over, I'm pretty sure we'll have to take you and Steve to a gym somewhere. Too much pent up energy. We've got to run you like sheepdogs or something."

Tony set a brisk pace. They walked another twenty minutes before Tony phoned Happy to get the car.

As they headed through the buildings toward the curb, Bucky turned around. He stared wistfully at the water. "I want to stay here."

"Next time," Pepper said, "we'll stay at one of these hotels."

"Don't care about the hotels," Bucky said.

"They will not let you sleep on a bench." Tony was irritated.
"They wouldn't find me." Bucky was certain of this. As antiseptic as the touristic part of the harbor looked, it was quite complex with many potential hiding places. Further down, where the harbor became more industrial, it was a veritable maze.

"No they wouldn't," Natasha said. "But you need to stay with us."

"Bucky." Steve's voice was thick. "You aren't thinking of running away?"

"Thinking?" Bucky ruminated. Thinking didn't have anything to do with it.

"Some of us are always running," Natasha said. "No matter where we are."

Steve stared at her. "You don't look like you're running."

"Looks can be managed for the sake of other people," She glanced at Bucky. "Pretend whatever you need to, but you don't have to pretend with me."

Recognizing Yakov's words, Bucky's knees went weak. He clutched at Steve. Natasha's eyes went wide. He guessed that just then, she realized what she'd said but didn't realize what she'd done—she'd triggered something in his memory.

"Happy's here," Tony called.

Steve dragged Bucky to the SUV and strapped him into the middle set of seats next to the window. Natasha climbed into the other door and sat beside Bucky. Steve opened his mouth, closed it, and then went to the front and rode in the passenger seat beside Happy.

Natasha looked at Bucky. He looked out the window. "Those memories are distant," she said. "I wasn't aware, when I said it."

He knew it was an apology and he didn't want it. "Those memories were taken from me." He stared hard out of the window. "Your words brought one back. They always watched me and the children."

"You were careful about talking to me," Natasha said. "And careful about not making it long."

"Just a few words," he said, "as though they were part of the lesson."

"But it was a different lesson." The redhead looked at him askance. "Why'd you do it?"

"Talk to me, Sasha." He looked at her then. "So I remember."

The breath she sucked in was small and the action so subtle that most wouldn't have noticed it, but he did. She, in turn, saw the question in his face.

"Now you look like Yakov," she said.

He nodded.

She went silent and he wondered if he could coax her to talk. If he couldn't do it, maybe Steve could. Or Pepper. There were so many things he wished he could forget. He wasn't sure why he wanted to remember this, which only made him want it more, want it solved. How far would he go? He wondered this as he looked at her. Her face was closed, her eyes unreadable.

They were back at the Wilson House, less than ten minutes in the lighter traffic.
"Why?" she said as they stepped into the foyer of the grand old house.

He led her to the right and around the corner to a living room with a sink-into-it-soft couch. He sat in one corner of the overstuffed sofa and she sat in the other.

The others were not subtle. They settled into the chairs and the settee of the adjacent music room as though it were not fully open into the living room. The only one who hung back was Happy, and he was positioned where he could hear.

Bucky didn't care. He didn't even care about Steve's reaction.

Natasha kicked her shoes off and pulled her feet up. He leaned back at an angle, one leg half on the sofa seat, and watched her face. "This is a mystery." He gestured between them. "And I want the answer."

"What if you don't like the answer?"

"I doubt I'll hate it more than other things I didn't want to know but remembered."

Natasha nodded. "The first strange thing you said to me was after a field test. We were outside and you had us positioned so no one could read our lips. 'You're better than they think you are,' you said. 'Don't let them see that. Don't prove anything to them.'"

Bucky clutched his fingers into his hair. He felt pressure against the top of his skull and pressing down on his ribs. He couldn't breathe. Impressions flashed in his mind's eye and ear. He didn't want to hear the Russian. This must be how Natasha felt sometimes.

"I said that," he choked out, "about two weeks after I became your teacher."

"Yes."

"I'd already worked for Red Room for a year. It's the longest stretch I was ever thawed out. I began to hope it was permanent. I—I lied to them, did what they wanted, bided my time. I went to libraries, quietly read old papers, discovered Steve was dead." He released his hair and looked up, into Natasha's eyes. "I knew what I told you from boxing. Don't let them see how good you are. Beat them quietly. Let your opponent be overconfident. Put on a show." He took a breath. "I knew I was James Barnes."

One of her eyebrows jumped.

"Or at least," he said, "that I had been someone named James Barnes. I was Yakov and James at the same time."

"You had to hide that from them." Natasha spoke with a Russian accent.

He nodded. "It was a quick trip to death, or at least the freezer, if they suspected."

She frowned.

"I saw that you were different," he said. "Some of the testers, the scientists, feared you. They didn't understand you. I started looking at your files, the ones they didn't give me, started picking locks, searching. Never took anything. Looked and memorized."

"You dropped hints about what you found."

"About what I deduced," he corrected.
"You told me that I should pretend. That I could carefully lie to the scientists, and my teachers and handlers. That there was honor in it because I was worth preserving." She flashed her eyes up to his, held them there. "You said I was special, that I could get away someday and was one of the few that could."

"After that I quietly showed each child how to beat the system. Most, I couldn't tell directly. I modeled behaviors, said indirect things. Performance improved. There were fewer punishments."

"What did you see in my files?" Her voice was quiet.

He closed his eyes, visualizing the paper documents he'd accessed one at a time. "That your traits were inborn. They hadn't experimented on you directly. They hadn't experimented on your mother, so you weren't one of the stars they created in the womb. This worried them, that you must have mutations they didn't understand."

She nodded. "Makes sense. But no other teacher would have interpreted those files as you did. No one else would have said things."

"It wasn't just the files. It was you. Little, smart, strong. Full of crazy courage."

She raised her eyebrows. "Did I remind you of you? Or Steve?"

One side of his mouth ticked up. "The crazy courage was definitely Steve. And maybe the little."

Her features relaxed with satisfaction, as though she understood something new. "Then they began to suspect you."

"I made a mistake." He pushed his fingers through his blond hair. "Became unwilling to kill the children deemed unworthy." He sighed. "And I protected you."

"Without the encouragement you gave me for a few months when I was seven, I might never have escaped Red Room." Her eyes were steady. "It took me a lot of years to manage it."

"You managed by yourself. Remarkable that you did. But, then, I knew you were remarkable."

"And you told me so."

"If that helped at all, then I managed to do one small good thing as Bucky Barnes in the midst of the worst of the nightmare."

"It helped," she said. "I wasn't able to help you, though I tried."

"You overheard them, and you told me."

"I went to you and begged you to kill a child, me if necessary, or they were going to do something to you. And I cried. You lied when you said I never did."

"One tear, Sasha. That's all. One tear escaped your eye."

"When we heard them coming, you tossed me through the second floor window into the gym. You turned your back as though you hadn't heard them, and you walked. I knew what you were doing—leading them away from me. I was out of sight before they ever turned the corner. so many and so heavily armed, I thought they would kill you."

"I killed some of them." He shrugged as though the memory wasn't so terrible, that it wasn't the moment his spirit broke and his will to escape died.
"I know." She exhaled. "Even watching best I could while staying hidden, I wasn't sure they just captured you."

He leaned forward and rubbed his thumb over her cheek. "One tear, Sasha, is that all I ever get?"

She shifted forward and let him fold his arms around her. She sobbed quietly into his chest. He knew she was seven and he was Yakov.

The ten minutes that she cried felt too long and too short all at the same time. He simply cradled her. He didn't say soothing words, or stroke her hair. A few tears of his own fell into her red locks. He hadn't been able to protect her enough.

She became firm in his arms and dried her face on his shirt before she sat back. She was Natasha again, all grown up. His face was still wet and she noted it.

"You ever make me cry again," she growled, "I'll cut your heart out."

"I might need you to," he choked.

All predatory grace, she stood. She picked her shoes up. "Steve."

Steve was at her side so fast, it was like he materialized there by magic. She pushed him toward Bucky then turned around and climbed the stairs to the bedrooms as though they'd just been having after-dinner coffee. Steve looked confused as he reached for Bucky.

Bucky thought just go to her, but his mouth couldn't form the words and his vocal chords made a broken sound.

Steve pulled him up and led him toward their rooms. He treated Bucky gingerly, and Bucky moved as though he was injured. He caught a glimpse of the others. Tony looked shocked. Pepper's eyes were wet. Happy hung back in a shadowed area.

Steve got Bucky ready for bed as though he was an invalid. He should probably have felt humiliated that Steve got a cloth and washed his face but he found it soothing. It didn't take much for Steve to cajole him into brushing his teeth. Bucky's mother had him well trained in that from a young age. Finally, Steve got a fresh Tshirt and running shorts on Bucky and opened the queen size bed. Bucky let himself be coaxed under the covers. Steve turned the bedside lamp off.

Bucky grabbed his arm. "Don't leave me alone."

"Not going far, Buck. I'm in the other bedroom down here."

Bucky frowned. "I'm used to sleeping on the floor now."

"Don't think you'll fall out of this bed. It's plenty big. Remember how small our beds were back in the forties?"

Bucky snorted. "When we even had beds."

Steve's teeth shone white in the dim light when he grinned. "I'll get more pillows."

Steve left and returned quickly with three more pillows. He tucked them around Bucky along with the extra pillows already in the bed, and that was nice. Bucky yawned through the word, "Thanks."

Steve rubbed his hand through Bucky's hair and then left and closed the door. Having extra pillows was familiar but everything else felt wrong. Disjointed memories flickered behind his eyelids like
broken strips of film.

The next thing Bucky knew, Steve clutched his shoulder and woke him up. He was laying on a sofa in the dark facing a big wall unit.

"What are you doing up here?" Steve said.

"Where?" Bucky mumbled.

"You're on the second floor landing in the sitting area."

"Mmm." Bucky was sure that was meant to be something eloquent that just didn't come out right.

"Why'd you come here?"

"Don't remember leaving my bed." He brushed Steve's hand off his shoulder and snuggled more deeply into the sofa. "Lemme sleep."

"You can't just sleep out here."

Wearing a camisole and purple argyle pajama pants that were too long for her, Natasha appeared from the second floor corridor. "I'll take care of him."

"Thought you were going to cut his heart out."

"He isn't making me cry."

Bucky stumbled to his feet when Natasha tugged on his arm. He leaned on her and let her take him down the hall. The wallpaper in her big room was floral but didn't look too girly. He willingly followed her into her bed. They wrestled for a minute over who was going to spoon whom. She won. Having her curled around him wasn't too bad.

He was almost asleep when the thought hit him and he laughed bitterly.

"What?" she said.

"We'd both rather have Steve here."

"I really wouldn't." She combed her fingers through his hair. "You might be a poor substitute for Clint though."

"Mm hmm," he agreed. "Can't cook."

It was her turn to chuckle. He fell right to sleep.

He knew it was daylight before he opened his eyes.

"Wake up, sleepy head. You missed breakfast."

Bucky looked at Natasha. She carried orange juice and a plate laden with cheese, bacon, fruit, and waffles festooned with chocolate chips. He sat up and she thrust the plate into his hands. She set the orange juice on a coaster on the bedside table.

"Thanks." Bucky ate.

Natasha organized her belongings until the room looked more staged than occupied. She had
obviously already showered and was dressed for the day in a casual medium-gray suit and elegant white cotton top. Her pants were capris.

"Hurry," she said. "You need to shower and get dressed."

"S delicious." He rushed through his breakfast then got out of bed.

"Thanks," he said again.

"Don't mention it." She took his plate and shoved him toward the door.

He left and went to the apartment he was supposed to have slept in. Steve wasn't there. Bucky showered. He was almost dressed when he heard the door to the apartment open. He poked his head out of the bedroom then sighed. Not Steve.

"Come on Robospy," Tony said. "We're on a schedule."

"Okay." Bucky finished buttoning up his long sleeved linen shirt and put the tan gloves on.

Tony fidgeted but waited on him. Four minutes later they walked out the front door. Tony climbed in beside Pepper. Bucky climbed into the middle seat where he was by himself. Natasha was in the back seat. Steve sat in the front

"Happy," Natasha said., "before you get on the highway, stop at that convenience store we saw up that way."

"Convenience store?" Tony said.

"Six pack of water," Natasha said as though it made sense.

After buying the six pack of water, Natasha climbed into the back seat of the SUV. She settled in with her phone and Happy headed to the highway. Tony chattered. Pepper occasionally answered him. Steve stared out the window. Bucky couldn't figure out what was going on so he was quiet but hypervigilant. Mostly, he watched Steve.

Fifteen minutes into the drive, Pepper turned toward the back seat. "Tasha, why'd you bring him breakfast this morning?" She gestured toward Bucky.

Natasha didn't look up. "He was in my room."

Tony's attention was jerked to the redhead and his torso followed suit. "Your room?"

She rolled her eyes. "He was in the second floor landing, on that sofa. Apparently, he wanders in his sleep. Steve was bugging him. Bucky was uncooperative. They were loud as magpies. Another five minutes and they'd have woke the whole house up. I intervened."

Tony's gaze was steady on her. "You intervened."

"I'm the only one in a room on the second floor."

Tony persisted. "You didn't trust Cap to get him back down to the ground floor or something?"

"Not without sounding like a herd of elephants." Natasha continued playing a game on her phone. "My sleep was disrupted enough."

"So you slept with him," Tony said.
Steve turned around at that comment.

"Might be more accurate to say he slept with me." Natasha shrugged. "It was my room."

Tony turned his head just enough to look at Bucky. "So how was it?"

Pepper smacked Tony's shoulder.

"What?" He held his hands up. "We got to see the foreplay. I want to hear the rest of the story."

Steve made a choking sound.

Natasha muttered, "V nevedenii litsemer."

Bucky grinned at her statement, ignorant hypocrite, then leveled his eyes at Tony. "She's not a restless sleeper, and she was up and dressed before I woke up. Plus, she brought me breakfast in bed. How can I complain?"

Tony rolled his eyes.

Bucky turned toward the back seat. "Did I have nightmares, Natasha?"

"No. If you'd woken me with that kind of crap, I'd have dragged your ass back to Steve in a heartbeat. The whole point of my intervening was to get my beauty sleep."

"And it worked. You look especially beautiful today." Bucky turned back to Tony. "Between no nightmares and not waking up every hour or two, I'd have to say sleeping with Ms. Romanoff is the best sleep I've had in years, possibly decades."

Natasha cuffed his shoulder.

Bucky said, "What? It's a compliment," before he turned enough to see the small grin on her face.

Pepper cracked up.

Tony glared at her. "Why are you laughing?"

Steve looked perplexed as he continued to watch carefully. When he looked at Bucky, the sergeant winked at him. Steve looked even more confused.

With a sigh, Bucky turned to stare out the window.

The Wilson House was about an hour from Arlington. Happy got them to the Starbucks just down from the gate to Arlington National Cemetery three minutes early. At Pepper's behest, Bucky had just ordered the same thing as the CEO—a double chocolate chip skinny frappuccino—when Phil and Clint walked in. Both men were dressed casually but respectfully in black jeans and nice shirts—a blue polo for Phil and a black sleeveless button down for Clint.

Natasha and Pepper went over and hugged them. Natasha said, "You look more relaxed than I've seen you in years."

"Amazing what getting enough sleep will do for you," Phil said.

"And talking and pleasurable diversions," Clint smirked.

"That too," Phil agreed.
"Oh good." Pepper was pleased. "Looks like we did the right thing, sending you off by yourselves. How was Gramercy Mansion?"

"Perfect," Phil said.

"Breathtaking," Clint said. "The bathtub faucet is a brass swan's head and neck. There was a little fountain on the patio wall. The grounds are gorgeous."

Pepper beamed. "I'll tell Maria you liked it. She picked it."

"She has excellent taste," Phil said.

Natasha's name was called. She went over to pick her iced coffee up. Phil and Clint ordered hot coffee.

After ordering, Steve had located an isolated easy chair. When Bucky went over to talk to him, Steve barely acknowledged him. After a minute, he gave up and sat with Tony at one of the larger tables.

Natasha took a sip of her cold drink then walked past Steve and smacked him in the back of the head. "Bâlvan."

"Hey." Steve jerked around to her before rubbing the back of his head. "What was that for?"

Clint stepped up to stand next to Natasha. "Probably for being an idiot." He looked from Natasha to Steve to Bucky. His name was called and he picked his coffee up.

Natasha grabbed Clint's arm. She dragged him outside. They stood next to the outside table that was farthest away. Bucky glanced their way occasionally, enough to know that Natasha paced and then talked, but never sat down. Clint spoke with her and laughed twice.

Everyone in the group had gotten their drinks.

"Do you like your frapp?" Pepper asked.

Bucky nodded. "Tastes like a lightweight mocha milkshake."

A peeved looking Natasha came in and sat next to Phil.

Clint went around to Steve. "Come with me Cap."

Steve stood. "What's this about?"

"Pretty sure Natasha's assessment of you being an idiot's got merit."

Steve rolled his eyes but followed Clint outside.

Ten minutes later, they loaded up to go to the cemetery. Phil and Clint got in their low-key black sedan, borrowed from Tony's fleet. Everyone else piled into the SUV. Steve sat next to Bucky.

As Happy pulled out of the parking lot, Steve spoke to Bucky. "You nervous about seeing your grave?"

"No," Bucky said.

Steve fiddled with his nearly empty coffee cup, rotating it between his fingers.
Bucky watched for a moment then leaned on Steve's shoulder.

Natasha muttered under her breath.

Tony turned around and opened his mouth. Pepper elbowed him, hard. He exhaled with a whooshing sound and glared at Pepper. She glared back.

Tony faced front and crossed his arms.
Chapter 35

Steve and Bucky wanted to honor fallen friends while at Arlington, so the group backtracked a mile to a strip mall with a florist shop in it. The SUV trunk already had a basket filled with mini bottles of liquor. Within fifteen minutes, all eight of them came out of the florist shop carrying floral creations suitable for being left at graves. The entire group climbed into the SUV for the short trip to Arlington. Coulson sat in the front passenger seat. Clint sat with Natasha.

Just buying flowers made Steve feel like his skin was too tight. What right did he have to be doing this? He should be out there, mouldering with the other World War II veterans.

Tony had made arrangements for VIP parking. They picked up a code number and a special parking permit to display on the dash, then parked in the employee parking lot nearest the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Pepper went into the trunk and pulled out stylish brimmed straw hats for herself and Natasha, and caps for Coulson and Tony.

"You look sharp in that Ranger's cap," Pepper said.

"Thank you," Coulson said.

Clint leaned toward Phil. "Of course, you always look sharp."

Phil gave Clint a small fond smile.

Watching the exchange made Steve ache. The pain wasn't sharp and he'd been ignoring it successfully for months now. Until he'd had the talk with Clint during their late night in the kitchen. Had that only been a week ago? To be fair, Steve had been in the kitchen because he was failing to push the ache away, was having trouble ignoring his longing. Talking with Clint had helped and made things worse at the same time.

Clint had been right about one thing—Steve was an idiot for being so immature about Bucky and Natasha. Steve's feelings weren't Bucky's fault. Bucky had been the center of his world since they were children. They started growing up and having separate lives, different jobs, a few secrets from each other, and still they'd been friends—thick as thieves. Steve managed through persistence and extraordinary circumstances to follow Bucky into the military. Bucky had promised to follow Steve to hell and back. The two of them had gone through different kinds of hell. A good argument could be made that Bucky had gone to deeper levels of hell than Steve and hadn't made it back yet.

Steve was selfish and crazy for being jealous of Natasha. She was right, it was good for Bucky to return to how he used to be. He should be happy to see Bucky's ease at flirting with Natasha. It had always been like that, Bucky relaxed and comfortable as he flirted with, and slept with, pretty women. It was a sign of normalcy and healing, the very things he wanted most for Bucky.

Of course Natasha wouldn't usurp Steve's place. Steve would still be Bucky's best friend, just like always. Steve was wrong for taking his neediness out on Bucky, for wanting to make more of the closeness of the past three months than was really there. Bucky needed him—needed someone—and had been leaning on him, relying on him, and being more physical. The contact had been comforting and sometimes exhilarating. How selfish of him to yearn so deeply for that to be more, that he'd given Bucky the cold shoulder for sleeping with Natasha. Steve had never let one of Bucky's girls come between them before. He wouldn't do it again.

He'd turned his back on Peggy too, and that was wrong. He'd have to go see her. Steve wasn't one
for shallow infatuations. In a way, he wasn't that old, and he'd had two deep loves in his life. Surely there'd be another. Even if Natasha going to great pains to fix him up with someone was unlikely to be the way he'd meet them.

They went to the Tomb and melted into the substantial crowd that was there on this beautiful June day to watch the Changing of the Guard ritual. The impeccably uniformed and highly disciplined Tomb Guard sentinels were awe inspiring just standing at attention. The tableau became surreal when it went into motion, especially after the relief commander walked out, saluted, then turned to the spectators and asked them to stand and stay silent during the ceremony.

The crowd was so quiet it hardly seemed real. Steve stood at attention, as did Bucky, Coulson, and Clint. By the time it was over, and the reverent crowd began making hushed respectful sounds, Steve was fully in soldier mode, and it was a relief. Now he was sure he could get through this.

The walk back to the SUV was mercifully short. Tony was uncharacteristically silent. Pepper and Natasha spoke to each other and to Happy about the importance of tradition. Bucky, Coulson, and Clint were all quiet in a way that was to be expected.

What Steve didn't expect was how hard it was for him to watch Phil and Clint walk near each other without speaking, to note how the casual observer would see nothing but two hard-bodied men who looked likely to be veterans and acquaintances, walking away subdued from the ceremony. Knowing them, Steve saw more. He saw how they fell into step with one another, how they communicated without looking at one another, and how much they communicated with a wordless glance. If you knew to pay attention in just the right way, it was screamingly obvious how important they were to each other, how comfortable, and that they were more than just friends.

It hurt to look at them, so Steve looked away. He blinked in surprise when he unexpectedly glimpsed Bucky and wasn't prepared for the sight of him with blond hair. He might never get used to that.

Then Steve smiled at Bucky walking in step beside him. Bucky glanced up and gave him a reassuring smile, the one that he pulled out when they were heading into a fight—both childhood altercations and military combat—the one that meant *don't worry, I got your back*. For some reason, it made Steve's stomach lurch.

They got the flowers, basket of booze, and a heavy looking paper bag out of the SUV trunk then headed to Section Three where there were a lot of World War II era graves—and the Howling Commandos Memorial. Natasha brought her six pack of water along.

The walk was gorgeous but daunting—the vast green sward as far as the eye could see patterned with row upon row of headstones and dotted with majestic old trees—a sea of the dead. Arlington had many areas like this, a rolling landscape that felt endless, filled with dead and honored veterans. So many. Too many. From every war in American history.

They came upon the octagonal Howling Commandos Memorial that Steve had never seen in person. The eight Howling Commandos that weren't Steve or Bucky were laid out one each in the spokes of the octagon. Steve and Bucky's headstones were in the center of the octagon where there was also a spot reserved for Peggy Carter.

The path they were on brought them right up to the resting place of Jacques Dernier. Bucky knelt down and ran his fingers over the headstone. "Jacques," he murmured. "You charming son of a gun. When I didn't come back from that raid on Hydra I hope you remembered to kiss that blond girl for me. You know the one, from the Alsace-Lorraine, broad shoulders, kinda tall for a girl. You promised me you would." He placed a bouquet of flowers on the grave. "Hey, Stark, hand me
Tony put his hands in his pockets. "Howard's not here, Six Million Ruble Man."

"I know that, knucklehead." Bucky rolled his eyes. "Stark is still your name, Tony."

Pepper handed the small bottle of champagne to Bucky. He placed it on the grave with care. "You'll enjoy this, Jacques. Tony's got great taste in booze and he picked it out special for you when I told him how much you love wine and parties. You two would like each other."

The bottle of champagne had a handwritten note from Steve on it as did all the small bottles of liquor. They all said something similar. The one on the champagne said:

To: Members of Arlington Maintenance Patrol

Thank you for doing an incredible job day after day. Please have a drink on behalf of my friend Jacques Dernier. Wine was his favorite spirit and he had a particular soft spot for champagne.

Sincerely,

Captain Steve Rogers

The remaining seven in their group each picked a grave and left a small, tagged, specially selected bottle of liquor, as well as flowers, for each of the remaining Commandos: Dum Dum Dugan, Montgomery Falsworth, Gabriel Jones, Junior Juniper, Jim Morita, Pinky Pinkerton, Happy Sam Sawyer. Happy honored Happy, of course. Then Steve went and put an extra big bouquet and a full-sized bottle on the space reserved for Peggy before putting a full-sized bottle of Canadian Club and flowers on Bucky's empty grave.

Bucky studied his headstone. "Tell me again why you're putting remembrances there, including my favorite rye?"

Steve looked up. "Because Bucky Barnes is dead and others cannot suspect otherwise."

Bucky nodded. "When this stone was put in place, he was gone. I just hope no family was around to hurt over it."

Bucky walked over to Steve's headstone and stared at it.

Steve tried to figure out what Bucky might be thinking. In a way, he seemed fully present, in a way, he seemed to be mentally trapped in the 1940s. But was that so odd? Steve felt like he was straddling the present and the past at the same time. Being here at these graves felt so odd when another part of him felt like he ought to be able to call them up and ask them to go out drinking with him in person.

Tony pulled something heavy out of the paper bag Happy carried. Steve eyed him. "A twelve pack of beer?"

Tony grinned. "Can't deprive the maintenance and cleanup crews of a chance to drink to you too. Agent wrote the note but, because he's supposed to be dead too, I signed it."

Steve cocked an eyebrow at Tony and then at Coulson. Tony put the carefully tagged pack of beer on his grave. A solemn Coulson placed flowers.
This felt so strange that Steve became lightheaded. Natasha cracked open a water bottle and handed it to him. He took a long drink and quietly thanked her.

"There is a Steve Rogers who died," Bucky said.

Steve's eyes darted to the Sergeant.

Bucky took a breath and then continued. "He had a hard life that left him bent but unbroken, and smaller and more sickly than he would have been if he'd been treated well and fed right from the time he was born and maybe before. He was a slight youth with thick blond hair and sky blue eyes who created things of beauty with charcoal sticks and scraps of butcher paper. He was my friend and I still miss him sometimes." He raised his eyes to Steve's. "I hear your voice and I look up and expect to see him but I see you instead and you aren't quite him. I was his hero and you are mine and I don't know who that makes me, which is maybe okay because sometimes I don't know who I am at all."

Bucky took a breath before adding, "James Buchanan Barnes died too. Something else came back out of that ravine. So that gravestone is true and may as well stay there."

"No." Steve shook his head. "By some strange combination of tragedy and miracles, we're both still alive Buck, both somehow standing here. We may have changed but we lived."

"Not exactly as ourselves." Bucky's gaze was level, certain. "If something inside is from where we started it's all changed, like a caterpillar that crawled into a cocoon and came out the other side as a moth."

Clint looked at Natasha and mouthed, "Moth?"

Natasha made the oh-so-appropriate looking ASL sign for I do not know.

On the walk back to the SUV, Natasha positioned herself beside Bucky. "The blond you mentioned to Jacques," she said, "did she have blue eyes?"

Bucky gave her an odd look. "She did. She was a brave woman—a member of the resistance—and endlessly creative. She made these astonishing embroidered scenes with pieces cut from flour sacks, and thread salvaged from ruined garments. I used to like watching her long fingers as she made colorful pictures out of nothing. She had nice nails, too."

Natasha and Clint exchanged a look.

"She was still working on a picture of your face when we left her village." Steve's voice sounded raspy to his own ears. He drank more water but was unable to settle the weird feeling that squeezed his chest as he listened to Bucky tell his current flame about an old love interest that felt to Steve like it was just a few years gone but had really happened decades ago.

He finished the water and his throat still felt dry.
Arlington National Cemetery was well over an hour from the cemetery where Phil's headstone was, more than two in the heavy lunch hour traffic. Phil and Clint were back in the sedan, which was partly a relief and partly made Clint miss Natasha. She was the only one who'd ever gone to Phil's grave with him before. When she did, she drove.

As long as he looked out of the passenger side window, it almost felt normal even though the car smelled wrong to be Nat's. They had gone in rental cars sometimes, so it seemed like that.

He didn't want to go to Phil's grave. He felt a different kind of emptiness now, heading there. Wanting to say so to Natasha, he turned his head toward the driver. Seeing Phil, he cringed so hard he curled forward, and then shuddered.

"Clint?" Phil sounded alarmed.

"Expected to see Natasha," Clint gasped.

Phil glanced at him.

"She always drove"—Clint straightened up—"when she went with me to visit your grave."

Clint's phone rang. He fumbled and almost dropped it before he managed to answer it. "Nat?"

"Pull over at that restaurant up there," she said.

Clint conveyed the message to Phil.

"We need to feed the supersoldiers," she said. "They're both so cranky I'm ready to punch them. Tony's not much better." She hung up.

Clint was glad for the delay. He might never be ready to visit Phil's grave, under any circumstances, ever. Besides, he was hungry. Probably everyone was. Stopping for lunch only made sense. It was a late lunch too. The upside was that the small, local, dimly lit diner in Maryland was mostly empty. The place felt cool, quiet, and cozy.

After they ordered and their drinks arrived, Bucky took a sip of lemonade before he spoke. "I can't believe all the Howling Commandos survived the war." He took a breath. "Everyone but us."

"We survived too," Steve said.

"Yes and no." Bucky shook his head. "As far as they were concerned, we didn't make it. Not sure what this is. Kinda dismal for an afterlife." He bared his teeth for a second in something that wasn't a smile. "Maybe it's a special kind of hell."

Natasha snorted. "Had about enough of your pity party."

Steve glared at her. "Can't you ever be considerate toward him? Even now? You know he doesn't know what he's saying."

She raised an eyebrow.

With his right hand, Bucky clutched Steve's forearm. "Don't do that."
"What?" Steve's tone was some combination of a whine and a snap.

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here."

"But—"

"But what?" Bucky clutched harder until the top third of his fingernail beds went white. "I'm not a kid and I'm not crazy. I'm still plenty damaged but I do know what I'm saying."

"Hm," Natasha muttered. "Sometime you need to hear the Pink song *Just Give Me a Reason.*"

Bucky's eyes darted to the redhead.

Steve blinked. "I don't think you're crazy."

"Don't you?" Bucky glanced at the natural blond.

"I was telling you that you aren't crazy back when *you* were saying you're crazy."

"I remember that." Bucky sighed. "You were being nice."

"Was not!"

"Yes you were," Bucky smirked. "Nice is your default setting. And, back then, I might have been crazy, getting lost in some identity, somewhere, or somewhen."

"Well," Steve spoke slowly, "you're still not always in the present."

"And you are?" Bucky let his arm go.

Steve flinched.

Bucky scowled. "Clint might be the only one who never treated me like I was pathetic."

Steve did a double take.

"Hey." Clint shrugged. "Messed up as I am, I figure, long as someone's not trying to hurt me, I'll just meet 'em wherever they are."

Phil glanced at him. Clint put his hand on Phil's thigh and the older man rested his palm on the archer's fingers.

"Thank you," Bucky said. "You never made me feel weird even when I wasn't sure how old I was or what year it was."

"Since you've mostly come out of that," Clint said, "you just seem to have random impulse control problems, sorta like me and Tony."

"Hey!" Tony objected.

Clint grinned. "They aren't even special impulse control problems. You know, like Bruce's."

Bucky smiled at Clint and then he turned to Natasha. "You might be right about the pity party."

She shrugged. "I liked it better when you were teasing Tony."

"Me too," Bucky said.
"When were you teasing me?" Tony frowned.

Bucky aimed an incredulous look at Stark. "You know, when I was yanking your chain about me sleeping with Natasha."

"But you slept with her!" Tony raised his voice.

Pepper dropped her face into her hand.

"Exactly," Bucky said.

Bewildered, Tony stared at him.

"We slept," Natasha said.

"But, but—" Tony managed to stammer before Steve started choking on his apple juice.

Bucky thumped on Steve's back. "Did you not realize it either?" His tone was annoyed. "We were joshing Tony because he was being kind of a jerk, jumping to confusions and everything."

Clint and Pepper chuckled. Phil rolled his eyes and Natasha beamed. Happy nervously cleared his throat. Clint also thought he should have another talk with Steve. The Captain seemed even more tied up in his not-necessarily-hidden fears than he had five days ago when they were in the kitchen close to midnight. Right now, though, Clint needed to get through the looming visit to Phil's grave.

Their food arrived just then, interrupting whatever might have happened next. Clint wasn't sure whether he was disappointed or not. Might have been fun to see Tony flail some more and Natasha snap at him. Oh well, not gonna happen now.

Clint took a bite of his meatloaf, which was excellent. The mashed potatoes too. He swallowed before addressing Phil. "So how many niblings do you—"

"Niblings?" Tony frowned. "Is that some kind of appetizer, like tapas or something?"

Pepper tittered. Clint scowled.

"Well?" Tony asked.

"No," Natasha said.

"Why the hell doesn't anybody know what a nibling is?" Clint snapped.

"Who the hell actually does know?" Tony snapped back.

Phil froze. Steve, Bucky and Happy shook their heads.

Natasha rolled her eyes. "I know what a nibling is. Of course, I've heard Clint's rant before."

"Doesn't count then," Tony said.

"It's nieces and nephews," Pepper said. "You know, like siblings are brothers and sisters."

Phil sighed and visibly relaxed.

Tony threw his hands up. "Of course you'd know."

Pepper quirked an eyebrow. "It's an anthropology term that's been in use since 1951."
"Not my specialty as far as sciences," Tony grumbled.

Pepper smiled. "At least you acknowledge that it's a science."

Tony huffed and said things under his breath.

"Look." Bucky flipped through a little menu booklet that was on the table. He thrust it in front of Steve. "They have homemade pie."

Steve started laughing.

"And ice cream." Bucky's expression was halfway to a pout and his tone was insistent.

"Pie a la mode always was your favorite," Steve said.

"Ooh, they've got cobbler," Bucky said. "How's anyone supposed to pick between blackberry cobbler and cherry pie?"

"You don't have to pick." Tony grinned. "You can order both."

"Really?" Bucky looked like a delighted little kid. "Thank you."

Natasha leaned forward. "What about the rest of us?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "You can all order two desserts. Or coffee, or whatever."

Pepper leaned close to Tony and murmured, "These are the times when I love you most."

He gave her a surprised questioning look.

"Like now." Her voice was soft. "When you're being genuine and bighearted. You try too hard to hide that side of you."

"Too easy to get hurt." He scowled.

"I'm proud of you for not worrying about that too much," she said easily. "This whole trip, and sending Bruce and Sam off, are all part of that. I'm glad I'm not the only one you'll let see that you have this big heart." She tapped a knuckle lightly on the faintly glowy spot on his shirt with a wink.

"She's right," Steve said. "And I'm grateful to you for a lot more than just this trip or this meal."

Tony actually blushed. A few bites of lunch later, he motioned the waiter over.

As the flurry of dessert and coffee ordering subsided, Phil leaned toward Natasha and spoke. She scooted to the chair at the end of the table so they could lean their heads together. Even sitting right next to Phil and wearing high tech hearing devices, Clint couldn't understand most of what they said. When he heard Phil say, "Lydia," he leaned closer.

Natasha nodded. "Makes sense. They would have been embedded in the organization even then."

"We talking calamari?" Clint asked.

Phil nodded. "Wish I'd seen it sooner, back then, stopped it."

"Nobody saw it," Natasha said.

"Not even Fury," Clint said.
Phil sighed. "Doesn't really make me feel better."

"You're awesome, babe," Clint said, "but you're only human."

Bucky whooped as hot cobbler and pie, both liberally accompanied by melting ice cream, and a big glass of milk were set in front of him. Everyone had ordered dessert except Pepper who only had coffee, plus bites of Natasha's cake and Tony's two desserts.

Clint picked at his blackberry cobbler a la mode and unenthusiastically drank coffee. He was pretty sure he'd never been less interested in going to Phil's grave. He leaned around Phil and clasped Natasha's wrist. "Ride with us," he said.

She met his eyes. "How about I drive?"

Clint swallowed and nodded, only vaguely aware that Tony was paying.

"I'll want to go to the gas station across the street," Natasha said, "to get a styrofoam cooler and ice."

"Ice?" Phil said.

Clint sighed. "For the water."

Natasha stood. "I'm going with them. We have a stop to make."

Pepper nodded. "We'll see you at the cemetery."

Two minutes later, Natasha was standing in the open door to the driver's seat of the black sedan. "Get in the back," she said.

Phil looked puzzled. "Which one?"

"Both of you."

Phil raised his eyebrows but climbed in the backseat with Clint, who sat stiffly and stared out the window.

It barely registered to Clint as Natasha pulled across to the gas station and went in. Phil took his hand. With slow movements, Clint clasped and released Phil's hand three times in succession before pulling away altogether when Natasha returned to the car. She put the too-warm water bottles in the cooler and then poured a bag of ice over them. She settled the lid onto the inexpensive cooler before strapping it into the front seat.

"Hang on to your hats." Natasha pulled away from the gas station and rapidly got up to speed.

Clint struggled to breathe. Oh God, the way Nat drove, they'd be there in thirty minutes—way too fast.

"It'll be all right." Phil patted Clint's thigh.

The archer shook his head.

Phil smiled crookedly. "Natasha always drives this way."

"I will put you out on the curb, Director Coulson." Natasha's words were crisp.
Phil chuckled but stopped when Clint collapsed against him. "That woman is evil," he whispered.

Phil wrapped his arms around Clint. "Mockta's other evil plan worked out okay."

"Only because you short-circuited it. I couldn't have taken much more."

Phil ran one hand through Clint's hair. "We don't have to stay at the cemetery long. Just visit."

Clint buried his face in the older man's neck, inhaling the light hormonal musk of clean human skin accented by the faint bite of dried sweat from having been out in the hot spring sunshine at Arlington. Nuzzling and smelling Phil made him seem more real than feeling his solid warmth did. He started hoping for a traffic jam. As long as the car's air conditioning held out, he'd rather revel for an hour or two in the salt and spice aroma that was uniquely Phil's than actually get to the cemetery.

Perversely, he couldn't stop images from flickering through his mind's eye—Phil's granite grave marker gleaming in the sunshine sometimes, slick in the rain other times. Kneeling down to brush snow off of the polished stone. Planting a small ornamental shrub. Holding Natasha's hand visit after visit. Stumbling away unseeing when he went alone.

He felt jolted when the car stopped, and was shocked when he looked up to see that Happy was in the driver's seat of the SUV Nat parked next to.

"We—we can't be here yet." Clint breathed. He didn't move when Phil tried to coax him out of the backseat.

Natasha thrust the cooler into Steve's arms then opened the door next to Clint and yanked him out of the car. She wrapped her hand tightly around his. "Come on, mladshiy brat."

Reflexively, he followed her as he had so many times, up the sidewalk through the pillars that anchored the open gate, deep into the green and stone space of loss and memory. He was unable to look at Phil, who hesitated a moment and then followed behind Natasha and Clint. The other five followed behind Phil.

Clint could have closed his eyes and made the walk. He knew how many steps it was from the gate to the slightly uneven part of the sidewalk and how many steps to go past that to get to the first turn. When Phil's grave came into view, he noticed the difference immediately. He pulled his hand away from Natasha's and ran.
When Clint got to Phil's grave he dropped to his knees and ran his hands over the two miniature rose bushes. "Nat, look. Someone planted little white roses that match the red roses I planted last year. This wasn't here in February."

"You were here in February?" Phil frowned.

"Sure, Phil." Clint looked up at the specter of his lost love. "You know I come every Valentine's Day." He ran his hand lovingly over the gleaming granite. "I refused to leave for Argentina until after I kept our Valentine's date. I had to brush a lot of snow off your marker this year." He settled more comfortably on his knees and skimmed his fingers over small red rosebuds. "It was so cold, I was really glad I brought coffee. I made your favorite chocolate cupcakes with cherry frosting and I made coffee with organic vanilla and fresh ground cinnamon. I left the cupcakes like I always do and, when your coffee had cooled enough, I poured it over the roots of the rose bush. I figured—"

He sighed and leaned forward with his hands on his knees. "I'll never forget you."

"Clint!" Phil's tone was shocked. "I'm really here."

Clint was confused for a moment. Of course Phil was really buried here. That's why he visited for every occasion. Anniversaries. Phil's birthday. His birthday. Holidays.

Except—

He looked up and saw Phil with tears on his cheeks, watching him. In his peripheral vision, he saw Natasha, Steve, Bucky, Pepper, Tony, and Happy. Natasha should be comforting him like she usually did.

Except—

"Phil," he whispered.

Then strong hands were pulling him to his feet and an arm wrapped around his waist. It took him a second to realize it was Bucky.

"When I realized Steve had died," the oddly blond Bucky said, "I was in the Soviet Union. No way to get to his grave, no one I could tell about my grief. If anyone of my owners had suspected, it would have been the end of what little freedom I had. They'd have crushed my crumbs of self-awareness. So I made a card, bought charcoal sticks, got some butcher paper, and took it all to a Catholic church where I lit a candle for Steve. I brought foil so I could stand there and burn it all—the card, the paper, the charcoal. I guarded those ashes until Steve's birthday, which is when I took them to the river where I scattered them on the water as I prayed to his saints to take the ashes to the sea where I hoped his spirit could be free."

"Jesus, Bucky." As Clint hugged the sergeant hard, he heard Steve make a wet choking sound. "You never got closure. At least I got a funeral and a place of remembrance to visit."

"I really lost Steve," Bucky said. "Just like you really lost Phil. Just like for you, he was lost to me for years. Somehow, they're both still breathing but it doesn't take the loss away. Finding each other again has been so strange and awful, but not awful, and I haven't been able to slow down
enough to make sense of any of it. It's like I have one foot in a place where Steve is dead and one foot in a space where he isn't, and which is true depends on which way I'm turned."

Clint nodded. "I know what you mean." He looked around and noticed that only he and Bucky had dry eyes. Even Natasha had one narrow glistening streak on one cheek. He wondered, though, if he looked as desolate as Bucky did.

Bucky looked down then darted forward and scooped something up from under the miniature white rose bush. He handed it to Clint—a plastic figure of Captain America, an inexpensive toy. Clint held it out toward Phil.

"I don't know." Phil scrubbed the back of his hand over one cheek. "Maybe one of my sisters or—or niblings—left it."

"Maybe left a superhero," Bucky said, "to look out for you."

Phil nodded. "That'd be a really nice gesture. But I brought my own superhero to look out for me." He pulled a Hawkeye toy out of his pocket, took the Captain America figure, and then put them both on his grave stone.

"No." Clint was panicked. "I can't. I'm in no shape to look out for anyone."

"Maybe not." Phil pulled him close. "But your action figure looks like he can hold his own."

Bucky looked askance at Clint. "You're a superhero too?"

Clint shook his head. "I'm just a guy with good aim."

"He's a superhero," Phil growled.

Clint choked. Natasha handed him a bottle of cold water. Then she handed a bottle of water to Bucky, Steve, and Phil. Pepper took the last one and shared it with Tony.

"The next time you make cupcakes," Phil said, "just hand them to me in person."

"Make enough to include me," Bucky said.

Clint grinned at Bucky. "Absolutely."

"Can we...go now?" Phil's voice was hopeful even as he was hesitant.

Clint raised his eyebrows. "Don't you still need to process, or something?"

"I need to process your reaction," Phil said. "This"—he gestured—"seems like most any other cover."

"But"—Clint faltered—"it's not."

"No." Phil swept his eyes over the lettering on the stone. "Doesn't feel real to me."

"Feels more real to me than"—Clint flattened his hand against Phil's chest—"than this."

"I...just saw that." Phil put his hand over Clint's against his chest. "When you said that for you there was an empty void, that wasn't quite right. You actually maintained a relationship with—with the Phil that's there." He gestured at the grave.
Clint went lightheaded enough to sway. Phil put an arm around his waist. Clint took a breath. "I brought cake on your birthday, pumpkin pie at Thanksgiving, champagne on New Year's Eve."

Phil winced.

Clint pulled away. "Let's—go." Without waiting for a response, he walked away. Natasha caught one of his hands and Pepper caught the other. They took up the width of the path as they strolled away and Pepper started swinging his hand. Natasha grinned and swung his other hand.

"If you two start skipping," he groused, "I'm not going to play with you." When Natasha and Pepper both started giggling, he huffed, "So what, we've regressed to kindergarten?"

"Second grade." Pepper's answer was deadpan.

Clint couldn't help but chuckle.

"Made you laugh," Natasha said.

There, right beside the gate, Clint gathered the two women into his arms. "What would I do without you?"

"Live a life of loud desperation?" Pepper said.

"Become a fugitive?" Natasha said.

Clint shook his head. "Whatever you've saved me from, thanks."

Bucky carried the cooler. Steve had his arm around Phil's shoulders as they walked. Tony and Happy brought up the rear.

"That went well," Natasha said.

Tony eyed her. "That drama counts as well?"

She nodded. "First time I've been to Phil's grave with Clint where he didn't retch."

Phil glanced at Clint who nodded.

"Maybe you should've punched me harder," Phil said dryly to Natasha.

"Toldja you were a right bastard." She kissed him on the cheek. "But I'm seeing you went through worse than you've let on."

The group wandered over to the vehicles in a disorganized knot. The cooler, which now held only empty water bottles, went into the SUV trunk. Hugs and farewells were exchanged all around.

As Tony climbed into the SUV, he said, "I need a drink after all that."

"Me too," Steve said, "but it won't do me any good."

"Let's drink with Tony anyway," Bucky said, "and pretend."

"Where are the good bars, Happy?" Natasha yelled just as the last SUV door closed.

As Happy drove away, everyone in the SUV waved at Clint and Phil, who waved back. When the black SUV was out of sight, Phil pulled Clint close. Clint turned and buried his face in Phil's
"So, do you want to go drinking too," Phil asked, "or just hit me?"

"Neither." Clint's voice was muffled against Phil's shirt. "The only mind-altered state that might help at all is being drunk on you."

"That is definitely the best kind of drunk."

Clint could have made a quip right there but couldn't drag up the energy. He handed the car keys to Phil. About ten minutes into the drive, leaning against the passenger side door, Clint fell asleep and dreamt of wind and water. When he woke up, they were in Pennsylvania and Phil had just parked in front of a white, Victorian-era house with a wrap-around porch and a bench swing.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty," Phil said. "Perfect timing."

Clint grunted in response.

Phil grinned. "How about I check in and you get luggage?"

Clint nodded and stretched. When he opened the trunk, he noted that there was more dirty clothing in the laundry bag than clean clothing in the suitcases. At least that made the luggage lighter.

Fifteen minutes later, he and Phil were engaged in the familiar ritual of unpacking and settling into a rented room. This was a large, very private room on the main floor with a king size bed and a door that opened onto the porch.

Phil shook a pair of slacks out before hanging them in the armoire. "So, visiting—uh—my grave in February is the last thing you did before leaving for a long mission in Rio Gallegos then hitchhiking back from Argentina after S.H.I.E.L.D. fell."

Clint nodded. "And I was cut off from the world electronically because my stuff was bricked up, even my phone didn't work, and isolated in my own head more than usual because I couldn't really hear. During that month of hitchhiking, I kept planning on going to see you, um, your grave, again as soon as I could. But, before I could do that, I got back to civilization, Tony got my phone working within a few days, minutes later I saw twenty six calls from you, two hours later you were there, and—" He exhaled forcibly. "For almost two months, I'd been thinking I'd only ever see you again like I always did, talking to you at your graveside."

"I guess"—Phil dropped socks and underwear into a drawer—"it didn't seem quite real."

"Sometimes, it still doesn't feel real," Clint stowed his suitcase between the armoire and the desk. "And that first week, I still couldn't hear, so it all seemed especially dreamlike, and I used to dream about you all the time, so it all kind of ran together."

"What you did today," Phil said, "kneeling by the grave and talking to—to—"

"Talking to you?" Clint gave Phil a hard look. "Yeah, I talked to you every time I went. I brought you things every time too." He closed his eyes. "I kept loving you, wishing..."

"I guess I owe you a lot of cake and pie and champagne and probably Christmas bread." Phil sighed. "I learned a lot, seeing you there."

Clint crossed his arms. "How pathetic I am?"

"Didn't have a lot of choice, if I was going to live at all."

"No wonder you were offended, when I said I figured you'd moved on. I'm more shocked than ever that you didn't just punch me, give me a piece of your mind, then break up with me entirely up there on Stark's helipad."

"I spent too many years thinking I'd sell my soul to get you back if I could."

"Getting me back must have been—a disappointment."

"Shocking. Painful." Clint put his hands on Phil's waist. "But disappointing? No." He stripped Phil's shirt off and ran his fingers over the daunting scars. "Don't know how you dealt with me. Didn't you feel rejected when I couldn't face these?"

"I was confused by what you did, and you seemed confused, but I didn't feel rejected. I mean, it was all passion, from the first hit and anguished words to the heated kiss in the elevator to the lovemaking."

"I was so overwhelmed and upset, I was almost insane."

"I got that, that you were crazy conflicted. But the fact that you wanted me cut through everything like a laser beam." He kissed the corner of Clint's mouth.

"The strength you had." Clint shook his head. "Being tender in the face of my anger."

"I didn't think fighting was what you wanted."

"Kinda."

"Not really." Phil touched Clint's cheek. "Think you wanted reassurance. I wasn't thinking that at the time, just reacting. You seemed hurt and desperate as much as furious."

"Was afraid pain was all I knew how to feel." Clint leaned into Phil. "But it wasn't. I felt the heat of every touch and kiss, and wound up overwhelmed by that too."

"Me too." Phil pressed his face lightly against Clint's, lips half-kissing the younger man's temple as he spoke. "The whole thing confirmed some of my memories and that I wasn't just deluding myself with wishful thinking."

Clint blinked. "Confirmed your memories?"

"I had no idea how you'd react to me. Never once did I think you'd drag me off to bed within minutes of my arrival." Phil scrubbed a hand through his hair. "There are still...holes."

"Holes? Like things you don't remember?"

"Like that." Phil exhaled.

Anger bubbling up, red hot and demanding, Clint stepped back. "Take your shoes off."

Clint sat on the bed and removed his own shoes. Hesitantly, Phil sat next to him and removed his.

"Sit up there and talk to me." Clint gestured toward the pillows and headboard.
Phil cast a wary glance toward the headboard but then got on the bed and sat back against the pillows. Clint crawled onto the bed, straddled Phil's lap, and gripped the headboard to either side of Phil's head, effectively caging him in with his body.

"What did they do to you?" Clint was furious about Phil being hurt—apparently desperately damaged.

Phil closed his eyes. "They put in some kind of block that makes it hard for me to talk about it."

"Talk around it or something."

'I'm trying." Phil leaned his head back against the headboard. "I wasn't kidding when I said they made hash of my brain. They physically mucked with my memories." Clint's arms went stiff as a wave of horror rushed through him. "They cut your head open?"

Phil nodded.

Clint pulled the other man's head forward and went combing through his hair. He found a neat pattern of precise white lines. "The scars aren't thick enough to feel but they're here."

"That was—worse than torture. I was awake for it."

"They broke you." It wasn't a question.

Phil stared at Clint then nodded. "I lost the will to live. Given the choice, I would've died."

"I'm glad you weren't given the choice then," Clint whispered.

Phil leaned his head back against the headboard. "It's the stuff of nightmares."

Clint sucked in a breath. "You mean that literally."

Phil sighed. "Haunts my dreams."

"That's why you say, 'Let me die,' when you talk in your sleep."

Phil nodded. "I used to scream that when they—" His chest heaved and he swallowed.

Clint jumped off the bed, rushed to the bathroom and came right back with a cup of water. Phil choked the water down.

Clint sat beside him. "I've seen you tortured and post-torture—battered, bloody, pushed over a psychological edge—but I've never seen you broken. Freeing you from capture, I'd kill people or beat them or arrest them. I want to do that and don't know where to aim it."

"Sometimes well-meaning hurt is the worst kind."

"Was it well-meaning?"

"I think so."

"I'm not so sure," Clint mused. "You know, you having trouble remembering has not been obvious."

Phil shrugged. "Apparently, they kept me alive for some kind of work purpose, so as soon as they
cleared me medically, many months down the road, that's where I aimed myself—getting on with work. Especially in the chaos of S.H.I.E.L.D's remains, I've had a lot of practice extrapolating from what's going on, and looking okay and in control."

"Well, you're good at it." Clint couldn't help but be a little bitter. "Up until recently, I figured I was a lot worse off than you."

Phil shifted to face him. "They kept me alive." He touched Clint's shoulder. "But you make me feel alive."

Clint's eyes snapped to Phil's. "I'm sorry you went through that," he said. "At the same time, I'm glad, because you're still here."

"Me too." Phil sighed. "Before, I was just going through the motions." It was like a whispered confession. "Then I got back to you, and every fast heartbeat—every breath—matters now whether you're getting me worked up because of anger or excitement, my blood pounds I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive into my brain."

Clint murmured, "You make me feel alive too."

Phil pulled him close and breathed words into his neck. "You give me something to live for."

Clint shuddered under the weight of the words. He moved his hands to the nape of Phil's neck. When Phil tensed, he held his breath.

"There's something I need to know." Phil exhaled. "It's been nagging at me."

Clint frowned. "What?"

Phil held Clint's face between his hands and kissed him with a terrible and thorough tenderness like it might be their last. Tragedy shone from Phil's eyes when he pulled back and stared at Clint. His voice was hoarse when he said, "Yegor Kuznetsov. Was that before or after Cheyenne Mountain?"

"What?" Clint flung himself back, away from Phil, as though he'd been burned. "You think I cheated on you with Yegor?"

"Not... cheated." Phil's cheeks were bright red. "Am I a substitute? Or who you rebounded to?"

Shocked, Clint sucked in a breath. "Yegor happened before Cheyenne Mountain. He reminded me of you—so strongly that I reacted to him in a very genuine way, and he noticed. This weapons dealer who never let anyone get close to him reacted to me very powerfully. I used that to pull off the impossible. One of the hardest things I've ever done. Especially because I thought you didn't, would never—"

Phil's eyes were bright with disbelief and maybe hope.

"It's always been you, Phil." Clint crawled forward until he was chest to chest with his lover. "I was in love with you before Yegor and long before Cheyenne Mountain."

Phil's eyes went wide and Clint found himself on his back being kissed over and over and his name whispered between kisses.

During a pause, Clint said, "You've always been the brightest star in my sky." He slid his hands around Phil's shoulders. "Did you love me then? Before Yegor?"
Expression pained and vulnerable, Phil looked away. "I think I did."

"I wish I'd known."

"I do too." Phil brushed his lips against Clint's, a mere ghost of a kiss. "Tell me about us." The words were a hushed plea.

Clint pulled Phil down and held him against his chest as he tried to figure out how to answer. There seemed nowhere to start but the beginning. He rolled them onto one side so they could face each other and pulled back a little so he could look into Phil's brilliant blue eyes. "When Natasha and I were assigned to you, I was sure I was going to hate you."

Phil grinned.

"Then you held your first Unit meeting," Clint said, "and I thought this man is trouble. I was riveted."

Phil listened for an hour as though the story of them was the best one he'd ever heard. He coaxed Clint to tell more stories over a pitcher of sangria during dinner.

After they returned to their room and went to bed early, Clint pulled his phone out. "I have pictures of you, and some of Nat, and a few of me, from Christmas parties and missions."

Phil laughed, frowned, and commented as they scrolled through several dozen photos.

"Natasha really looks glamorous there," Phil said. "Where was that?"

"Paris," Clint said. "You both look glamorous. You escorted her to that party because your French is so good."

"That's right. You created a distraction and I hustled our mark out the back door into a waiting van."

"Yup." Clint grinned. He'd carefully avoided some photos but in looking at Phil, he unintentionally thumbed over to a picture of himself.

Phil grabbed the phone. "You look thin."

Clint took the phone back. He held it to his chest. "In the weeks after you died, it was hard to eat and sleep."

Expression sober, Phil nodded. "Haven't seen many pictures of you."

"Nat has the good pictures of me." Clint curled around his phone.

Phil curled around him. "When we get back home, let's ask her to share those with us."

"Okay."

"Thank you," Phil whispered. "I wish I'd asked you to do this a long time ago."

"We've only been back together a couple of months," Clint said. "I think we got here about as fast as we could."

"You're right but I still wish, because this was wonderful."
Clint plugged his phone in, Phil turned out the light, then they curled up together.

"You're the brightest star in my sky too," Phil muttered.

Clint snuggled closer and drifted on a wave of exhaustion.

Chapter End Notes

The next couple chapters here are going to be very Steve/Bucky/Natasha/Tony/Pepper-centric. For what happens with Phil and Clint while thee two of them are visiting Phil's family and this story is busy following the others, please see part 4 of this series, "Return of the Prodigal Agent."
Chapter 38

The next morning found Steve frowning down at his brand new, pre-ripped jeans, some of the spoils of Natasha's late night run to Walmart after the group had gone drinking the evening before. He sighed. "I feel ridiculous."

"You look hip," Natasha dismissed from the other side of the sitting room where she sat, using a compact mirror to double check that no red was poking out from under her blond wig. "Maybe a little dorky, but generally hip. The hat works on you."

"I don't understand the reference on this shirt."

Natasha rolled her eyes, got up, and leaned over to push his knit cap back, letting the front of his hair stick out. "And no one would expect you to. No way Captain America is into Twilight, he's way too macho and old school for that."

"Doesn't Clint actively dislike Twilight?"

"Yes." She plopped onto the sofa next to him. "We're going for unrecognizable. Short of heavy makeup, psyching people out is one of the best ways to be unrecognizable. The shirt does that."

"You shouldn't have shaved this morning," Tony noted over the top of his phone.

"I didn't." Steve sighed.

"Steve has to try to grow a beard," Bucky said without looking up from studying the seams of the glove on his left hand. "And even then."

"It's because I'm blond!" Steve defended.

Natasha arched an eyebrow. "Clint can grow a beard. I have pictures."

Steve made a sound in his throat. Tony chuckled. Bucky looked around, smirking.

Before the antagonisms could continue, Pepper appeared in the doorway. "I'm sorry, I had to take that call. We all ready to go?"

"Yup!" Tony slipped his phone back in his pocket. "Happy's got the SUV outside."

Halfway through the roughly an hour drive from the Wilson House to the museum, Pepper was turned around in her seat, saying to Natasha, "Tony and I will go in a few minutes before you and the soldiers, draw the obligatory flurry of attention away from you."

"Good, the less notice we get the better. Barnes is twitchy enough as it is."

"I am not twitchy," Bucky snapped. The handrest he was holding onto groaned in protest at the tightening of his grip. He let go quickly.

"You might be a little twitchy," Steve said.

"Maybe a little," Bucky muttered.

"You're the one who wanted to go," Tony pointed out.
"I want to go to the museum, not to D.C. The museum is just in D.C." Bucky scrubbed his fingers through his hair.

Pepper reached to pat his shoulder. "It'll be fine. You've been before and it was fine, right?"

Bucky pressed his forehead to the window. "Far as I know nobody died so I guess that counts as fine."

"Come off it." Natasha sighed, uncrossed her legs, and leaned forward. "This was your idea. I've got a loaded tranq gun under this hoodie and you know I'll use it if you start to freak, which I don't expect you will. You've got Steve for the whole bro moral support thing. Standing next to each other, both you and Steve look a lot shorter which makes you less recognizable, not to mention the hair and the clothes. With all three of us blond right now—Tony don't even start—most people are going to assume we're related. Since, being a full goddamn foot shorter than Steve, I look downright tiny next to the two of you, they'll probably think I'm you're little sister. Nobody thinks of the Winter Soldier as having a little sister. Nobody is going to look at you and go, 'Hey, look! It's the guy who blew up Constitution Avenue three months ago!'"

Bucky blinked at her.

Steve tilted his head. "I don't think they'll let you bring guns in. There's metal detectors."

Tony snorted. "That's what you got out of that spiel?"

"Shut up, Stark." Natasha rolled her eyes. "Three-D printed plastic gun. Bright purple. It looks like a toy. Also a ceramic knife."

'I've got an obsidian one.' Bucky pulled a small, wood handled, black glass Bowie knife out from under his clothes.

Natasha made a sound of reverent appreciation. Steve ran a hand over his face. "I'm never going to understand how you people manage to hide weapons on your persons."

"You realize you're going to set the metal detector off, anyway. Right, Tinman?" Tony asked.

Bucky frowned, eyes darting to his currently ungloved left hand.

"I've got that covered!" Pepper shook her head and started digging through her purse. "I almost forgot, meant to give you this earlier. I blame that phone call. Here."

She handed him a laminated card that said Medical Alert at the top, followed by Prototype Prosthetic Arm. The card also listed Bucky's name as James Steinhauer and the attending physician as Dr. J. Simmons followed by a phone number. There were various medical details. The bottom of the card said Sponsoring Organization: Maria Stark Foundation.

"That should solve the metal detector problem." Pepper shrugged. "It's also mostly true."

"Thank you." Bucky pocketed the card and tucked his knife away.

"Good thinking, Pep." Tony thought of something and frowned at Barnes. "Where did you even get that knife? I'm damn sure you didn't have it when Steve hauled your unconscious ass to the Tower and you haven't exactly had the opportunity to go shopping."

Bucky shrugged. "Jarvis ordered it for me."
Tony's frown deepened. "Oh, did he?"

Bucky held his hands up defensively. "He says he got good deals on everything."

"What else did you order?!"

"Couple other knives, some throwing stars, a bamboo shinai, a set of fingerless leather gloves, and some old fashioned candy."

Tony gaped at him then shook his head. "I'm going to have to have a word with my A.I."

"Jarvis said he found good deals," Bucky said softly, sounding almost like a guilty young child.

"It's not the money, it's the fact he's letting you buy weaponry without telling anybody."

"I buy weaponry on your dime, too," Natasha said.

"You're arguably more stable." Tony flapped a hand at her.

She snorted. "You put way too much stock in my sanity."

"Stability, not sanity." Tony turned to Pepper. "Did you know about this?"

"I knew the items had been purchased, yes. I, unlike you, do read the expense reports."

"So you knew a bunch of knives and throwing stars and crap had been bought and you didn't say anything?"

Pepper shrugged. "I figured it was Natasha."

"I did order a set of playing card shaped throwing knives a couple weeks ago, so some of it was me."

"Oh, those sound nice," Bucky said.

Natasha nodded. "Full deck, ultra thin stainless steel, comes with a case."

"I want a set."

"You and Clint both."

"Unless you got yourself a second set a few days later," Pepper said, "I think Clint has one."

Tony made a half strangled squawking noise. "Clint just buys crap too?"

Pepper nodded. "Mostly K-cups, archery paraphernalia, and socks. Bruce buys arcane varieties of tea. Jemma just a couple days ago ordered an entire case of Coca-cola from Mexico and a total of eight pounds of five different kinds of banana flavored candy. I figured the other candy was her too."

Tony blinked a couple times then glared at Steve. "You go on online shopping sprees too?"

Steve shook his head. "I have never had Jarvis buy me anything."

"Steve," Pepper said gently, "where do you think your art supplies come from?"

"An art supply store?" He shrugged. "I don't ask for those, they just show up."
Tony groaned and sank down in his seat. Pepper ruffled his hair. "You'd know about all this if you read the expense reports."

Tony grumbled wordlessly. Natasha bit back a laugh, eyes glittering under the bangs of her wig. Pepper glanced back at Natasha and snorted. Then Natasha did laugh. Within seconds, Pepper, Steve, and Bucky were all laughing as well. Curled up in the back most seat, hugging herself in mirth, Natasha called, "This's what you get for giving people access to your credit cards, Stark!"

When they got into D.C., Happy parked as near as he could to the National Museum of American History. Natasha, Steve, and Bucky took a walk around the National Mall out front of the museum while Tony and Pepper went in ahead of them. Natasha did a casual, graceful cartwheel without even jostling her wig. Bucky shoved his hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched. "I can smell the river."

"We're only about a mile from the water." Steve gestured down the walkway. "I'd run the Mall in the mornings when I was living here. That's how I met Sam."

Bucky nodded, still hunched, head down, late morning sun turning his blond hair bright gold. "How many people died?"

"Huh?" Steve frowned.

"When the carriers crashed."

Steve stopped walking. Natasha looped an arm through his and dragged him onward. She looped an arm through Bucky's too. "The carriers barely had skeleton crews aboard and what crew they did have were Hydra. The one that clipped the building was a bit more of a problem but the building was already being evacuated and casualties were minimal. Since they went down in the river, not on land, no one else was harmed when they crashed. Well, actually, I think some guy on a boat conked his head when the wave got to him but that hardly counts."

Bucky nodded again. Some of the tension drained from his shoulders. Natasha slipped out from between the two men to let Steve put an arm around Bucky. "C'mon fellas," she called over her shoulder as she led the way around a corner back toward the museum. "Pepper and Tony've probably drawn all the nosy moths away from the entrance with their lifestyles of the rich and famous flame."

The museum atrium was crowded, it being a Saturday far enough into summer that most schools in the country were out for the season. When the trio got to the front of the queue, they were patted down—somehow neither Bucky's nor Natasha's weapons were discovered—Bucky showed his card and was pulled aside to be gone over with a wand while Natasha and Steve passed through the metal detectors and waited for him.

The guard gestured at Bucky. "Can you take your jacket off?"

Bucky hesitated and glanced at Natasha and Steve waiting for him.

"Sir?"

"Yeah." He carefully shrugged out of his light jacket and smoothed down the sleeve of his T-shirt to be sure the star on his shoulder was hidden.

"Not used to letting people see, huh?" the guard asked while she checked the rest of him for metal, then his arm for explosives.
"No, ma'am."

"Yeah." The guard nodded understandingly. "My cousin hasn't worn shorts out in years. That thing looks heavy."

"It is."

"Hope for your sake you can get a lighter one."

"They're working on it."

"Prototype, yeah? Wounded Warrior or Walter Reed?"

"Uh, Maria Stark Foundation."

The guard's head snapped up. "Stark? Tony Stark is—"

"Here. I know."

The guard grinned and tapped the side of her nose. "I see. Well, you're clean. Enjoy your visit."

Bucky nodded and quickly pulled his jacket back on as he rejoined Steve and Natasha. "I think that's the most interaction I've had with anybody not affiliated with—one organization or the other in over a decade," he muttered.

"I'm going to call that a good thing." Steve clapped him on the back.

"Third floor?" Natasha asked.

"Third floor," Steve confirmed.

Upstairs, Bucky took the lead, ignoring the larger than life mural of Steve in uniform at the entrance to the exhibit and making a bee line for the screen running a loop of newsreels and other archive footage of the Howling Commandos.

For a few minutes, Bucky watched, transfixed. Natasha and Steve let him take the lead as he moved slowly through the exhibit along with the light crowd of visitors. The trio blended right in, just another family.

Steve paused at the show business section that featured a lot of Cappette memorabilia. "Last time I was here, I realized I knew whose dress this is."

Natasha looked up at him. "Oh, yeah?"

He nodded. "See the worn spot on the hem?"

"On the red panel there?" Bucky pointed.

"Mhm." Steve chuckled. "That's from bobby pins. One of the girls, Gertrude—we called her Trudi—had this beautiful, long brown hair. It was just about long enough for her to sit on, and she didn't want to cut it. Few of the other girls would sometimes call her Lady Godiva. They wouldn't let her do the show with her hair down because it was too long, it was the wrong look, and if she just put it up in a bun she looked too different from the other girls, so she worked out a way to pin her hair up so it looked about half the length it was. Course, it took a while to do and it took a lot of pins. Trudi'd walk around while she was pinning her hair up and she hated having to go back to her dressing table to get more pins, so she'd clip a dozen or so on the edge of her skirt to keep them
Natasha chuckled. "I can respect that."

"Is she in this picture?" Bucky had moved over to a plexiglass encased photo of the Cappettes. Steve joined him at the photo. "Yeah, that's her." He pointed.

"She's cute," Natasha noted. She pulled out her phone. "Gertrude...do you know her last name?"

Steve made a face. "I want to say Chandler but I might have that wrong."

She tapped at her phone while Bucky asked Steve about the other girls. After a bit, she made a sound of triumph. "Found her! You got her name right. Looks like Trudi married a painter."

She handed the guys her phone to show a painting of inarguably the same woman Steve had pointed out in the Cappettes group shot reclining topless on a divan, her breasts covered by her hair.

Steve smiled and handed Natasha her phone back. "Good for her."

"If she's into artists," Bucky began and shoved his hands in his jacket pockets, "did you sleep with her."

Steve rolled his eyes. "Only how you slept with Natasha night before last."

Bucky frowned. Natasha laughed.

Steve's phone buzzed. He pulled it out. Natasha leaned around him. "Did somebody text you? Who on Earth is texting you?"

"Clint." Steve shook his head and laughed, rather bemused. He showed her and Bucky the picture Clint had sent him.

The two of them leaned in close to each other to look.

"Is that...Coulson?" Bucky asked. "Dressed up like you?"

"I think so." Steve chuckled again and carefully typed an answer. "Looks like he's about six."

"He's adorable." Natasha snorted. "And I will be teasing him about that for the rest of forever."

They resumed moving through the exhibit. Natasha paused in front of the replica of Steve's motorcycle. "It's stuff like this that makes me wish Night at the Museum was a real thing."

"What?"

Natasha glanced at Steve and sighed. "It's a movie. Add it to your list."

Steve dutifully slipped the little notebook out of his pocket and wrote down the title. "Clint got a hold of this thing a while back and added half a dozen things, most of which I can't read his writing."

"Lemme see?" Natasha took the book from him. "Oh. Oh my."

"What?" both men asked at once, leaning around Natasha to look at Clint's scribbles.
"Quite the range here, *Sesame Street* to *Brokeback Mountain*. And even I can't read that third one." Natasha tilted the book. "Is that an A or an N?"

"I thought it was an R." Steve shrugged.

"I was gonna say a U." Bucky shrugged too.

"We'll have to ask." Natasha handed Steve his notebook.

"Hey, look!" Bucky made for another display. He reached out to touch the case over the framed portrait. "God, I haven't seen this in forever," he breathed.

The drawing Steve had done of him boxing, the one his mother had gotten framed, stood behind glass along with two open sketchbooks and various scraps of paper covered in sketches and doodles.

"This wasn't here my last visit. I didn't know this still existed." Steve leaned over the case. "I always loved that picture."

"Me too," Bucky muttered.

One of the sketchbooks in the case was open to a page showing studies of the Cappettes during down time, the other was open to a view of a city street as seen from an upper story window.

"I need—can we go?" Bucky said.

"Yeah, of course." Steve put an arm around his shoulders and looked to Natasha.

"The First Ladies exhibit is across the hall," she said. "Let's go look at dresses and plates."

Steve looked at Bucky, who shrugged, so they went across the hall and wandered through the exhibit which displayed a more genteel history.

"A lot of these are too pretty to eat off of," Bucky mused, leaning down to examine former first families' dishware.

"I'm suddenly grateful Tony has normal plates." Steve frowned.

"You realize the casual stuff he's got in the kitchen is around a hundred and fifty dollars per setting." Natasha quirked an eyebrow.

Steve made a choking noise. Bucky whistled. "At least they're plain?"

"The red and gold formal stuff in the china cabinet is Wedgwood and something like two hundred a plate."

"Oh that's so expensive it hurts." Steve cringed.

Both Bucky and Natasha patted his back.

"And just think, your brain isn't even adjusting for inflation I bet."

"I don't need to think about that, Natasha."

The trio was almost through the First Ladies exhibit when Pepper called and instructed them to meet her and Tony at the gift shop.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The gift shop had been shut down for Tony's sake, and when Steve, Bucky, and Natasha got there, the guard barred their entrance. Before any of the three of them could think of something to say, Tony called to the guard from inside the shop. “Dude! You're blocking Captain America. C'mon, I know him and you've got his socks on display upstairs.”

The somewhat chagrined guard stepped aside to let them in.

“Tony, they do not have my socks.”

“The mannequin with your show uniform is wearing socks, isn't it?” Natasha asked.

“Those are tights.”

“Hm.” Tony chuckled. “Wish I'd known. That would've been funnier.”

Pepper shoved him lightly then dropped a few books in his arms. “I'm buying those.” She went over to ruffle Bucky's hair, then hugged Steve and Natasha each in turn. “How was your visit?”

“Enlightening,” Natasha said. Both Steve and Bucky snapped their heads around to look at her.

Tony picked up an ornate fridge magnet styled after the facade of the building, crept up behind Bucky, and stuck it to his shoulder over his jacket. The inventor giggled. Bucky frowned at the magnet, then looked at Tony, nonplussed. “Are you kidding me?”

“Well, yes.” Tony removed the magnet. “But also, you know, science. Question: Is Locutus's arm magnetic? Answer: Yes. See, science.”

The sergeant rolled his eyes and went to browse through the merchandise.

“Hey, it's my jacket.” Bucky picked a replica of the jacket he wore in his army days up off a rack of others like it. “Steve, they make my jacket!”

Steve couldn't help but smile at Bucky's excitement. “That's fantastic.”

Bucky grinned, got the jacket off its hanger, shed the one he was wearing, and tried the replica on. “I like this.”

“Do you want it?”

“Yes.”

“It does look good on you.” Steve chuckled.

“I should hope so.” Bucky changed jackets back and draped the replica over his arm to hold onto it while he continued to look around.

A few minutes later, Steve looked up from a book and caught Bucky experimentally sticking fridge magnets to his ungloved left hand and wiggling his fingers until they fell off. Steve snorted. Bucky noticed him watching and quickly put the current magnet back on the display.
Eventually, Pepper decided it was time to wrap it up and go to lunch. She herded Tony and Bucky toward the register. “Natasha, Steve, not buying anything?”

Natasha shook her head. Steve fiddled with his knit hat which he had long since taken off. “What would I do with any of this stuff?”

Pepper gave him a look. “They're keepsakes.”

He shrugged. “I don't need anything.”

As they left the museum, Tony frowned at the receipt he had uncharacteristically deined to actually read. “You bought a replica of your own jacket?”

Bucky hugged the gift shop bag to his chest. “My original is worn, faded, and seventy years old. This one's new, softer, and machine washable.”

“You spent two hundred dollars on a replica of your own damn jacket.”

“You have two hundred dollar plates.” Bucky yawned.

“What?”


“Oh, yeah.” Tony mused momentarily. “They're nice plates, though.”

“It's a nice jacket.”

When they got to the SUV, Happy held the door open for Pepper.

“Hey, Hap,” Tony said. “Remember my favorite pizza place here?”

Happy nodded. “The overly fancy one with the extensive drink menu?”

“That's the one.” Tony grinned. “Take us there.”

They got settled in the car and Happy eased out into lunch hour traffic.

Bucky stared out the window. “I'm glad I'm not driving.”

Tony turned around to look at him. “Do you even have a valid driver's license, Swiss Mister?”

“Sure I do, somewhere.” Bucky grinned. “Just not in my actual name.”

“Join the club,” Natasha said without looking up from her phone.

Twenty minutes later, they pulled up in front of an upscale pizzeria where Happy dropped them off. Tony clapped Happy's shoulder as he got out. “We'll save you a seat.”

The hostess eyed Tony. “You look familiar,” she said. “Are you a congressman?”

He grinned. “Senator. We want the big round booth at the back.”

She frowned. “Someone just got seated there.”

Tony held his hands up. “So move them.”
“Uh,” the young woman said. Pepper slipped her a twenty. “Right away ma'am, Senator.” She nodded at Pepper and Tony.

Happy joined them just as they were being seated.

Pepper elbowed Tony and chuckled. “Senator. Really?”

He shrugged. “Don't want to be one. Rather own a couple.”

“Pretty sure you already do,” Natasha said.

“You're just joking, right?” Steve said.

“Not since Citizens United,” Pepper muttered as she opened a menu.

Steve's eyes went wide and his forehead crinkled.

The waiter came over and Tony ordered craft beers all around while Pepper quickly polled everyone about topping preferences and managed to order two extra large pizzas with the drink order.

“And salads,” Happy said.

Tony gestured. “Sure. Salad for everyone.”

Bucky looked around the restaurant. “There are a couple of congressmen here. I'm kind of surprised no one tried to take our picture when Happy dropped us off.”

“D.C. paparazzi are so much more respectful,” Tony noted almost fondly.

“One of many reasons I liked living in D.C.” Steve agreed.

Natasha frowned thoughtfully. “Do you still have the lease on your apartment?”

Steve shook his head. “All my stuff's in storage.”

Tony tittered. “We can have it sent to the tower.”

Frosted mugs of beer in varying shades of gold, amber, and brown were set on the table. Steve took a thoughtful sip of his. “I think you're right.”

Tony smirked. “I'm always right.”

“Maybe.” Steve shrugged. “Realistically, me and Buck won't be leaving the tower anytime soon.” He cut his eyes to Pepper.

“I think the two of you should stay,” she said.

“Indefinitely,” Tony said.

Natasha licked foam off her top lip. “Your reputation as a loner mad scientist is being endangered.”

Tony shrugged. “Long as my rep as a mad scientific is intact.”

Pepper grinned. “You're already in the history books as that.”

“Then it's all good,” Tony said.
Bucky smiled over the top of his empty beer mug. “I think you like the company.”

The salads arrived just then and the pizzas arrived soon after. The party of six ate with gusto. Steve and Bucky fidgeted the whole time. The service was smooth and fast. Less than an hour after they arrived, Happy was picking them up. Natasha got herself settled in the back seat of the SUV for the long drive back to their Bed and Breakfast. She began unpinning her hair from having it all shoved up under her wig.

“I'm gonna call now a good time to wear out the soldiers,” she said as they pulled into the parking area for the Wilson House. “Shall we change and hit the gym, boys?”

“Sounds good,” Steve agreed.

Bucky shook his head. “I'm tired, actually.”

He did look to be drooping a little. Pepper rubbed his shoulder. “You took in a lot at the museum. Why don't you take a nap while Steve and Natasha go to the gym?”

Bucky nodded. “Okay.”

“You know what,” Tony said, “I think I'll go to the gym too.”

“You work out?” Natasha asked mockingly.

“I have a gym in my house, missy.” Tony shoved her shoulder as he walked past. She cackled.

When they headed out a short time later to Happy and the SUV waiting to take them to the gym, Steve took in Natasha's matched outfit of sportsbra, tanktop, and leggings all in red and grey. “Do you know that most of your workout clothes look more like superhero costumes than what you actually wear to go save the world?”

“Mhm.” She smirked. “Do you know that that shirt is at least a size too small for you?”

He frowned and looked down at his T-shirt. “No, it's not.”

“It definitely is.” She brushed past him, then past a laughing Tony, to climb into the SUV and sprawl in her usual place in the back seat.

The drive to the gym was mercifully short and the gym itself was uncrowded. Nonetheless, whispers of curious recognition went through the customers—mostly big beefy guys—upon the group's arrival.

“Everybody be chill and promise not to take pictures and I won't pay the manager to kick you all out, 'cause I totally have enough money to do that,” Tony called jovially.

There was a round of amiable shrugs from the nearest gym goers.

“Good enough.” Tony grinned.

Natasha made straight for the freeweights. Steve gestured after her and gave Tony a questioning look.

“No, oh no. Combination of having dropped way too many heavy things on my feet over the course of my life and a really awkward college movie night where somebody started drawing parallels between my father and Dr. Frank N. Furter has permanently turned me away from those monsters.” Tony headed toward a row of fancy treadmill like things.
“Between Howard and who?”

“You know what, never mind.”

Steve looked baffled and Tony kept grumbling to himself as he fiddled with the settings on a step machine.

A guy eyed the weight Natasha had set up for herself. “No way you can lift that.”

“No way, huh?” Natasha snorted, bent to grip the barbell in front of her, lifted it to her hips, then over her head, before dropping it back down to the floor amid whoops, cheers, and profanity-laced exclamations of praise, excitement, and disbelief from the assembled beefcakes. She grinned and brushed her hands together. “You think that's impressive? You should see him.” She jerked a thumb at Steve.

“Nah.” One of the other weightlifters shook his head. “He's a big guy, that's different.”

“And I'm what, a little girl?” Natasha shot the dude one of her patented death glares.

“I know.” She rolled her eyes. “Seriously though. Steve,” she called, “how much can you clean and jerk? Six hundred?”

“About, yeah,” he called back. “Six-O-two, six-O-three, at least”

“And the official world record is...?” Natasha gestured at the beefcakes to answer.

One of them said, “Five eighty one.”

“I rest my case,” Natasha said. “He's impressive as hell.”

“And not good for one's self esteem to have as a gym buddy,” Tony grumbled.

“Sorry,” Steve said earnestly.

“Oh, don't apologize.” Natasha rolled her eyes. “He chose to come with us.”

After that, the gym regulars accepted the trio of Avengers into their larger group. Natasha, Steve, and Tony spent two hours in exercising and training that was just challenging enough to be pleasantly tiring.

After they arrived back at the Wilson House and got cleaned up, Bucky and Steve lay on the music room carpet to work on the timeline they'd been putting together for Bucky, the long scroll of taped-together papers unrolled on the floor between them.

“Then that's when we finished school.” Steve poked at a picture in the flip book, wrote Spring 1932 in pencil next to it, and added Graduation to the timeline.

Bucky nodded, fingering the photo.

Tony leaned over curiously to look at the timeline. “Hold up, in thirty-two you would've been, what, thirteen? You graduated at thirteen?”

“Fourteen,” Steve corrected. “We only went through the eighth grade then. Got more schooling later in the military.”
“Did we know anybody who went to high school?” Bucky asked, frowning.

“Uh.” Steve looked to the ceiling and tapped his pencil against his mouth. “Ashley did I know. I think Bobby started then dropped out.”

Tony made a face. “Only person you knew who did high school was a girl? That seems anachronistic.”

“Ashley was a guy.”

“Joined the military with me, didn't he?”

“Mhm.” Steve nodded. “As a medic.” He looked at Tony. “I don't think I ever met a woman named Ashley until twenty twelve. Same goes for Vivians and Beverleys.”

“Hm. Weird. Didn't know those were ever guy names.”

“I find it weird they've become girl names.” Steve shrugged and continued writing on the timeline. A few minutes later and two years down the page, Steve penciled in another event and circled it. “That was when you had your first real boxing match. Which you lost. Your mother about had a fit, she was so sure you were going to get yourself beaten to death.”

Bucky chuckled. “Gee, gotta appreciate the vote of confidence there. Hey, when did you draw that picture of me? The one at the museum?”

“Oh, that was later. When was that…?” Steve pondered for a moment. “I wanna say that was thirty-seven. Mighta been thirty-eight, but I know I wasn't twenty yet.”

They'd gotten up to Bucky enlisting by the time they had to put their work away and leave for dinner.

“I can get us through to the train intercept, but after that,” Steve shrugged, “I don't know what was going on with you.”

“I'm not sure of a lot of that either,” Bucky said.

Tony yanked the SUV door open. “So put a squiggle like you do when you've got a gap in the data on a graph, tape on another sheet, have the Czarina fill in what she can in the eighties or whenever the hell she was a kid, do another squiggle, and skip to last March.”

“That's actually a good idea,” Steve said as he climbed into the car.

“Why do you sound surprised about that?” Tony scoffed. “I have good ideas.”

“Sometimes.” Natasha chuckled from the back seat. “Like making me Czarina. That is a great idea. I should absolutely be given control of a country. Pepper can be my right hand.”

After they got back from dinner, everyone packed then went to bed. Sunday morning, they all slept in and checked out before eating. Over brunch at a comfortable restaurant, it was affirmatively decided that Steve's belongings should be sent to the tower. After they ate, they headed to the self-storage place.

Bucky slumped in his seat in the SUV. “I can't believe we're headed back toward D.C. again,” he groused.

“Me either.” Tony sighed. “This means it'll take that much longer to get back to New York.”
Pepper rolled her eyes. “This was your idea.”

He shrugged. “Doesn't invalidate my observations about the direction and time impact.”

Steve shook his head. Low level bickering continued during the entire trip to the storage facility. They followed Steve to his climate controlled unit.

After Steve unlocked the door and rolled it open, Bucky gaped. “Wow, you have a lot of stuff.”

“It's hardly anything,” Tony said. “One little truck's worth.”

“True,” Natasha mused. “You kind of lived like a monk, Steve.”

Steve shot her a look. She smiled sweetly at him.

“We'll get you set up in a suite at the tower,” Pepper said, “so you'll have sitting area where you can put your living room furniture.”

“Thank you,” Steve said.

It took longer than expected to make arrangements for a moving truck and end the lease on the storage unit. Finally, the group was back in the SUV and aimed toward home.

“Oh God,” Tony moaned. “Trapped in this box again.”

Pepper patted his arm. “The trip will be interrupted by a stop to eat.”

“Lunch in Maryland again.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “I can't wait.”

“When you put it that way,” Natasha said, “you make it sound like we're stuck in a rut.”


“We watched it last weekend,” Bucky said.

“Good to know Clint is recommending appropriately high brow cultural fare.” Natasha laughed.

“Oh no,” Bucky said. “Coulson recommended that one.”

Natasha laughed harder.

Chapter End Notes

This gif inspired the bit with Nat and the weightlifting:  
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/19/darian-sperry-powerful-gif-crossfit_n_6901456.html
In the elevator up to the restricted personal floors of the tower, Clint fingered a crease on Phil's cheek. "You slept for four hours. That's even longer than I slept in the car after visiting your grave."

"Emotional exhaustion, I guess." Phil's voice was tight.

"And healing," Clint's said quietly. "I'm glad we finally are."

Phil's expression softened when he looked at Clint. "Thank you."

The elevator doors opened with a ding. Clint and Phil began juggling luggage and bags of laundry.

"We weren't gone that long. How'd we get so many bags of dirty clothes.?” Clint groused.

Phil shrugged. "Thankfully, we can just drop it all off at Stark's laundry room and not have to do it ourselves."

"Yeah."

They headed to the laundry room first and dropped their many bags off as neatly as they could. When they were in their room washing up and unpacking the few items remaining in their luggage, Jarvis said, “Sir's party has just parked in the garage.”

"Thank you,” Clint said. He and Phil were waiting in the common room when the elevator doors opened.

Bucky lifted his head from Steve's shoulder and blinked at Clint and Phil.

"Rip van Winkle here slept the whole way back,” Tony said as the group of five spilled out of the elevator. "After we stopped for lunch anyway. Before that, he was a motor mouth. Wound up stopping at that same diner. Apparently pie plus milk is like a sleeping pill for him.”

Natasha scooped Clint and then Phil into a hug. She stepped back and looked at them. “You look better,” she said to Clint. “And you look tired,” she said to Phil. “Did you drive?”

Phil shook his head. “Clint drove.”

“Yeah, but you drove after the visit to the graves and I slept.” Clint shrugged. “Today, I drove and you slept. Makes sense that this part of the trip was tougher on you.”

“Maybe all the suffering is coming into better balance,” Natasha said.

Clint looked askance at her, not sure what she meant.

Pepper herded everyone toward the common room sofas. “I imagine we could all use some supper.”

Tony sighed. “Makes me wish I already had a chef hired.”

“Even if you had, the chef'd probably be off on Sunday night,” Pepper said. “Let's just order in. How about Chinese?”
“Sounds great,” Clint said. “Feels like lunch happened yesterday.”

“Jarvis,” Phil said, “please ask Fitz and Jemma to come to the common area so they can order dinner too.”

“Right away, Director Coulson,” the A.I. said.

Everyone got settled comfortably onto sofa's and chairs. Bucky leaned against Steve's shoulder and closed his eyes.

“How was your visit with your family?” Steve asked.

“Surprisingly good but intense,” Phil said.

“His family is cool.” Clint grinned. “Deceptively normal. One of his nieces does archery, see?” He held out his phone with the pictures he’d taking of him and Gabby.

Pepper tilted his phone toward her so she could see better. “Oh, how cute.”

Cooing over the pictures Clint had on his phone was interrupted by Jemma and Fitz tramping in, carrying a giant giftbasket full of assorted yellow candies and a case of Coca-Cola, respectively.

“Welcome back, everyone!” Jemma called cheerfully. “Steve! I've gotten you presents. Call it early birthday or belated saving the world gifts.” She set the basket on the table and Fitz did the same with the case of cola.

“Oh, thank you.” Steve laughed and hugged her appreciatively.

“I may have accidentally spoiled the surprised,” Pepper said. “We had a rather interesting conversation about online ordering on our way to the Smithsonian and I mentioned you'd ordered a few pounds of banana candy. I'm sorry.”

“It's fine.” Steve shook his head. “I still didn't see this coming. Thank you, Jemma.”

She shrugged. “I know what it's like to be at a store or restaurant and find yourself looking at the food and drinks and everything like, this is all a little off.”

“I'm there even in most of the U.K.” Fitz stuck his hands in his pockets. “Jemma swears by international aisles and thought she'd make you a timetravel aisle.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Can I have some of these?” Bucky poked at the pound and a half bag of banana sassy spheres.

“Let's get that takeout ordered, hm?” Pepper said pointedly while Steve and Bucky broke into the candy.

By the time everyone had their order in, the group had arrayed themselves on the common room couches and classes of ice had been fetched from the bar for Coke.

“How was the museum?” Coulson asked of the D.C.-trip group in general.

“I bought my jacket,” Bucky said through a mouth full of gummy banana, then leaned his head on Steve's shoulder again and closed his eyes.

“There were replicas of his old military jacket for sale in the gift shop,” Steve clarified. “The
museum was cool. Still pretty surreal though.”

“I can imagine.” Clint sucked contemplatively on a sassy sphere. “Do these actually taste like vintage edition bananas?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” Steve confirmed. “Extra sweet but otherwise.”

“They oughta add a display about that.” Clint snorted.

“They have added stuff since I was there before.”

“Oh yeah, they had some of his sketchbooks on display that weren't there before.” Natasha tossed a couple banana heads in the air and caught them in her mouth. “In case anybody doubted it, soldier boy here has got skills. I'd let him draw me like one of his French girls if it's gonna turn out anything like that.” She paused and looked at Steve. “That's from—”

“Titanic, I know.”

“Oh thank God, you've seen Titanic.”

“Actually, I haven't,” Steve said. “That line's just been explained to me.”

Natasha looked flabbergasted. “You've seen Saw, but you haven't seen Titanic?”

“No, I haven't seen Saw, nor do I want to. That line had been explained to me too.”

Bucky opened his eyes but left his head on Steve's shoulder. “What's Saw?”

“Horror movie.” Clint shuddered. “Torture porn horror movie. She took me to see the first one.” He pointed an accusing finger at Natasha. “I was nearly sick. Always look stuff up before letting her take you to the movies. She is not to be trusted.”

Natasha shrugged. “Most horror movies don't bother me. I'm acclimated.”

“You know how I have issues with broken and dislocated bones?” Clint made a face, stole Phil's glass of Coke, and drank about half of it. “You're lucky I didn't pass out.”

“I passed out in a horror movie one time,” Jemma said thoughtfully. “Pretty sure it was more to do with having not really eaten all day than with the film—I was a little bit stupid in high school—but one moment I'm in the theatre with the lot of my friends then next thing I know I'm on a bench outside the mall and one of my friends is trying to give me tea and another one is trying to give me chocolate because Harry Potter taught her that that's how you deal with someone who's fainted. It was all really rather bizarre.”

“Yeah, I know that feeling. Got drunk in London one time, woke up in Paris.” Tony stroked his beard. He paused and grinned. “But I'm pretty sure that's nothing on the granddaddy of 'I blacked out then when I woke up, what the fucks' Cap's got.”

“Wha—? Oh.” Steve frowned. “That is different.”

“C'mon I think you are actually the Guinness world record holder for longest time spent unconscious.”

“How did you react to waking up?” Bucky asked, sitting fully upright and reaching for the nearest open bottle of soda. “Now I'm curious
“Well....”

“He busted out a wall,” Clint said. “Okay, no, before that, they’d mocked up a forties-style hospital room in the hopes he wouldn't immediately flip his shit. Sent a junior agent who was a theatre major in all dressed up like the G.I Jane version of Rita Hayworth. Steve didn't buy the ruse, because apparently by dumb luck the archived radio broadcast they had playing was of a baseball game he was fucking at. So then he sorta freaked and busted through a wall, took out about a dozen grunts, ran out of the building, into traffic, and to Times Square. Then Fury intervened.”

“Who?” Bucky frowned over top of his Coke,

“Fury. Uh, Phil's predecessor.” Clint quickly changed the subject before it went down too dark an ally. “By the way, Steve. I know you like baseball, but you don't like baseball that much, did you seriously fucking come a hair's breadth from going all Natasha on a nurse because you thought you recognized a baseball game?”

“It wasn't just the game.” Steve sighed and leaned his elbows on his knees. “Whoever was in charge of dressing the junior agent did a horrible job.”

Clint frowned. “How so?”

“Her hair.” Steve held up a finger. “No dame working in a military hospital—or any hospital for that matter—would have her hair a loose mess like that.” He held up another finger. “She was wearing a man's tie.” He held up a third. “He bra was wrong.”

Bucky made a face. “What do you mean her bra was wrong and how could you tell?”

“I worked with the USO girls, I saw plenty of them without their blouses. Back then, bras were all cloth, they were soft. Now they're foam or something and they make lines.” He gestured at his own chest, tracing a shape like the top of a heart. “And they're rounder. Breasts are not naturally spherical. It was just wrong.”

“Huh.” Clint leaned back in his seat. “You sure were paying a lot of attention to her chest.”

“It was noticeable!”

“Uh-huh. I bet it was.” Clint smirked. “If you're lookin'.”

Steve threw a sassy sphere at him. Clint caught it easily and tossed it back. The impending candy fight was halted by the elevator dinging and disgorging someone from reception with a rolling cart laden with Chinese food.
As everyone dug into their food, discussion of their trips resumed. Eating—along with sugar and caffeine from Jemma's gifts—rather quickly perked Bucky back up. Phil was still summarizing his family's reactions to his being alive, being with S.H.I.E.L.D, and bring Clint with him by the time the plates of takeout had been set aside. “And,” he sighed in closing, “my nephews determined that I win every scar showing-off contest ever.”

“Oh, really?” Natasha chuckled. “Because, you know, room full of superheroes, I think you might have some competition.”

“I think he just might,” Tony chimed in. “Let's do this.”

Pepper rolled her eyes. “Welcome to middle school, everyone.”

“This isn't fair,” Steve said. “All mine are gone.”

“Tough,” Natasha laughed. “My best ones I think are all from people in this room.” She tugged her shirt down off her left shoulder. “That's from Barnes shooting me in March.” Bucky cringed; she ignored him and continued, pulling up her shirt and pushing down her pants to show the scar on her abdomen. “He shot a nuclear engineer through me a few years ago.” She held out her left forearm and pointed at a thin, faint line running along it. “And this is from him throwing me out a window as a kid. No, wait, there's more.” Without the slightest trace of insecurity, she took off her pants. “This,” she indicated a ragged starburst on her thigh, “is from mine and Clint's first date. These,” a set of white hashmarks on her knee, “are proof that it's fucking dangerous to be Stark's secretary.” She put her foot up on the table and gestured at a discolored spot on her ankle. “Rash from some plant I stepped in tracking down Banner left a scar, and,” she twisted her leg to show a few jagged streaks down the back of her calf, “broken glass from Big Guy trying to smush me on the helicarrier.”

“If we're gonna do this,” Clint stood and stripped off his shirt, “let's do this.” He indicated several in quick succession across his chest and arms. “Knife, knife, knife, sharpened spork, gunshot that barely missed important things, electrical burn.” He rolled up his pantsleg. “Got kicked with a stiletto, another electrical burn. There's a few from grenade shrapnel on my back. And those are just the Natasha-induced ones.” He shot her a look.

“In my defense,” she held her hands palm up, “that gunshot scar happened about half a second after this arrow scar,” she smacked her own thigh, “and the second electrical burn was an accident.”

Clint rolled his eyes. “She's right, but still. Oh, I forgot the one on my foot from when you broke that damn mug. Moving on!” Clint tilted his head back to show a ragged pale splotch under his chin. “Fell off an aerial ring, just about bit a hole through my tongue.” He rolled up his other pants leg and indicated a jagged line down his shin. “Ran into a tent stake—yes, Tony, a circus tent. Don't think you can see 'em through my hair but I have some on my head from my asshole brother pushing a Christmas tree over on me when I was two or three.” He paused and looked at the heel of his left hand. “Nat, what was it that bit me in Australia?”

“An emu,” Natasha provided helpfully. “Don't forget your elbow.”

“We're not gonna talk about my elbow.” He continued. “Just about cut my middle finger off trying to deal with a rack of lamb. Burned myself with a curling iron, burned myself welding a thing. Another electrical burn—not from Natasha. From Bobbi, actually. Goddamn, what is it with
S.H.I.E.L.D. women and giving me electrical burns? I have a bunch of really faint scars on my cheek from fletching cutting me. I could go on.”

Tony stood and ripped his buttondown open, superman style, and received many eye rolls, a couple face palms, a whoop from Natasha, and a wolf whistle from Pepper. “Thank you, ladies.” He shrugged the rest of the way out of his shirt, tossed it aside and gestured at his chest. “Most apparently, a humvee blew up on top of me and questionable cave surgery happened.” He looked at his hands and arms. “Uh, I fell down a flight of stairs and tore up my elbow—there had been too much tequila. A toaster exploded.” He glanced up at Clint. “Burned myself welding a thing. Welding is damn dangerous. Oh, so many science scars on my hands, don’t even know what they’re all from. Probably some stupid drunk shenanigan scars mixed in there too…. Oh!” He took his jeans off and pointed at a triangular scar above his knee. “Smacked into the ceiling during early tests of the Mark II, then I fell to the floor and I think—yup! One on the back of my arm from landing on a screwdriver—the tool, not the drink. That was not a case of engineering under the influence.” He touched a faint scar on his forehead. “Walked into a half closed garage door—I was not drunk, it was just dark and that was pre built-in night light era. This one on my shoulder is from Pep throwing a shoe at me. One of those strappy sandals, caught me with a buckle. I deserved it, doesn't matter why.” He put his foot up on the table and pointed at his ankle. “Got that beast from a college boyfriend's parrot. Gorgeous bird, it hated me. These—” a set of vicious looking claw marks on his thigh “—were from an ex-girlfriend's maincoon.” He frowned at a patchy burn scar on his other thigh. “Jarvis, is that from the coffee pot incident or the firecracker debacle?”

“The coffee pot incident, Sir,” Jarvis provided coolly. “The fire cracker scars you'll find are on your buttocks.”

“Oh, yeah.” Tony chuckled. “Hm, there's that one from a particularly nasty wasp sting. Got scars on my ears from getting them pierced in college. My father was not pleased about that.”

“I almost wish I'd been there for that argument,” Steve said ruefully. “Partially really glad I wasn't, but also almost wish I had been.”

“It was a hell of a shouting match. Ultimately though, he was right that I looked stupid. Course, didn't admit that til years later when I let 'em close up.” Tony looked down at himself. “Think that's everything worth mentioning.”

Pepper rolled her eyes and tugged him back to sit by the waistband of his boxers.

“I also have a scar from an exploding toaster.” Fitz shrugged and rolled up his sleeve. “My mum was furious, she liked that toaster. I was about seven, thought I'd make it toast better. Didn't work.”

“That makes a lot more sense than trying to make a toaster fly,” Tony conceded.

Steve shot him a look. “You were trying to make it fly?”

“It seemed like a good idea at three in the morning whilst under the influence of mind-altering substances, such as coffee.” Tony waved a dismissive hand. “Fitz, what else you got.”

“Uh,” Fitz ran a hand through the back of his hair. “Got one from cracking my head open at the beach as a kid. I was climbing a sea wall and I fell. There's a few from welding stuff. Flat place on my thumb where I burned off the print picking up a wire that I'd forgotten to quench.” He held his thumb up to show the smooth ovoid burn. “Mostly just little stuff like that.”

“It's all the good ones I don't have to take my clothes off to show and I'd rather stay dressed, thanks.”

Natasha snorted. “Suit yourself.”

Jemma put her foot up on the table without moving from her seat and tugged up her legging. “That's the best scar I've got.”

Clint leaned forward. “Looks like Tony's parrot bite.”

“A rabbit.” She put her foot down. “I got bit by a rabbit. A very mean, pregnant rabbit. It bled profusely. Also got bit by a rat.” She indicated a scar on her ring finger. “It didn't appreciate being injected with radioactive dye….”

“Can't say I blame it,” Bucky muttered darkly.

Jemma shrugged. “So I might have deserved that one.” She pointed at her wrist. “And even I have a welding scar.”

“How did you get a welding scar?” Fitz asked incredulously.

“I was helping you!”

“When?!?”

“First month on the Bus.”

“I do not remember that.”

“I do,” Coulson said.

Clint snorted.

“Cap,” Tony said, “you sure you don't have anything to show off?”

Steve shook his head. “All my old ones are gone and I haven't kept a scar for more than a couple weeks since.”

“Hang on.” Bucky bounded over the back of the couch and disappeared down the hall, leaving the others to looked confusedly at one another in his wake. He returned a moment later with his flip book and a tablet in hand. “We have pictures!” He vaulted over the couch again to resume his seat, bouncing on the cushion as he landed.

“Ah, yes!” Tony laughed. “Hooray for photography!”

Bucky grinned and flipped through the book to an old class picture that showed the both of them at about age twelve. Steve was near the front in a tanktop at least two sizes too big. “You can see pretty good on his arm there where he got bit by a dog.”

The picture made its way around the group.

“Why did it bite you?” Pepper asked with slightly morbid curiosity.

“It was just over excited and poorly trained.” Steve shrugged. “It wasn't like it attacked me.”

Next to him, Bucky scrolled through all the old pictures of Steve Jarvis could scrounge up. “There
are a bunch of you from basic."

"Really?" Steve grabbed the tablet from him. "Who the hell was taking these? I don't remember these being taken."

"How would I know?" Bucky called up one picture in particular that showed Steve shirtless, mostly from behind, leaning against a flagpole. "You can see a few here."

"Yeah." Steve pointed. "Mrs. Wright's cat scratched me, and gave me cat scratch fever. Not a bad case, thank God. That one's from slipping on ice and landing on a brick. Those are from chicken pox. That's that same dog bite. Burned myself with a candle. Was trying to draw at night, wasn't paying attention, stuck my elbow right in the flame. And I'm pretty sure I'm on the verge of an asthma attack in this picture so I feel like that ought to count for something."

Bucky zoomed in on part of the photo. "Is that from that time you had a chest tube?"

Steve tilted his head. "Think so. Yeah. I had a spontaneous collapsed lung. Nearly died."

"You nearly died a lot," Bucky pointed out.

"Pneumonia five times by age twenty, flu I don't even know how many times, lots of bronchitis, chicken pox, TB, whooping cough, ear infections, slapped cheek disease, measles, German measles, scarlet fever. I was sick all the time."

"God, no wonder the military wouldn't pick you up," Clint said.

"More like, it's a miracle he survived long enough to be old enough to even try to enlist," Jemma corrected.

"She's got a point." Steve scrubbed a hand through his hair. He pointed at Bucky. "You're the one who got actually impressive scars growing up. Still got 'em?"

"Probably? I have a lot of scars and I don't know where they all came from." Bucky sat forward and pulled his shirt off.

"Yup." Steve poked a scar on the other soldier's ribs. "You got that sledding on a trashcan lid."

Bucky twisted to look at the scar, frowned at it for a moment, then brightened and laughed. "Oh yeah! Trashcan lids don't steer well."

"No, they don't!" Clint agreed.

"This." Bucky traced a metal finger along the scar of a cut across the back of his right hand. "Got this fixing a neighbor's window. And," he turned his arm over to show three parallel scratches across his forearm, "was that Mrs. Wright's cat?"

"Yes."

"That fucking cat." Bucky chuckled. He noticed a long faint scar higher up on his arm. "Dunno where that came from."

Natasha raised her hand. "That was me. That was why you broke my knife."

"Oh. Hm." He frowned. "Hey, do scratches on metal count?"

"Only if they're not routine and you remember how they happened," Clint replied without missing
a beat.

Bucky grinned, held up his left hand, and traced a fingernail along a pretty significant defect across the plates of his palm. “Caught Steve's shield.”

“Is that where that came from?” Steve grabbed Bucky's wrist to examine the damage. “You were wearing gloves!”

“Yeah, it sliced right through the leather.”

“Steve,” Natasha shook out her hair, “I have seen you open up aircraft grade aluminum with that frisbee like it was paper.”

“Point taken.” He released Bucky's wrist.

“Hey.” Tony leaned forward. “I've seen that thing slice into shit but I've also seen you bounce it off walls and crap, and you always seem to know which it's gonna do. How d'you control that? Is it an angle of incidence thing, or what?”

Steve shrugged. “I don't know about angle of whatever you just said. I throw it a little different and it does different things. I don't think about it, I just do it.”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “I'm going to want to study that. I would also like to play disk golf with you. Anyway, metal scratches, yes, carry on.”

“If I do this,” Bucky twisted his arm across his chest, forcing the plates of metal to shift, “I think there's still scorch marks from that taser chip thing Natasha stuck on me.”

Natasha got up to examine. “Yup, sure can.” She returned to her seat.

Bucky grinned, faltered, then took his shirt off. “And there's these, of course.” He gestured to the rough, gnarled, reddish scaring around the edge of his prosthesis where the skin had tried and failed to grow over the metal. He didn't bother to point out the other scars on his torso—fine lines from knives or other sharp edges, discolored splotches from burns, the pocks of old bullet and shrapnel wounds, and what looked suspiciously like claw tracks from something much bigger than Mrs. Wright's cat.

“I'm sure I can't really compete but,” Pepper pulled her shoe off and showed the bottom of her foot. “Cut up my foot stepping on glass at the beach.”

“My youngest sister's done something like that,” Phil noted.

“I'm not surprised. Broken glass plus feet is a horrible, horrible thing.” Pepper shook her head. “And salt water makes everything worse. I think that's the best I've got.”

“You're dating Tony,” Bucky said skeptically, then yawned and leaned on Steve again, the restorative powers of mu gu gai pan, candy, and soda wearing off.

“I do my best to avoid the explosions,” she laughed.

Clint tugged at Phil's sleeve. “You technically started this. Go on.”

Phil sighed, stood up, and divested himself of his shirt. Fitz and Jemma looked at the floor. Tony whistled, got to his feet, and went to put an arm around Phil's shoulders. “Well, yours are gnarlier, but I have a nightlight. I feel like I should get bonus points for the nightlight.”
Phil raised an eyebrow. “I've got more.” He turned around.

Tony cursed. “Right, well. I still light up.”

“You're both pretty, calm down.” Pepper laughed.

“But it's a contest!” Tony protested.

“Then it's a three-way tie between the two of you and Bucky.”

At the sudden mention of his name, Bucky jerked out of his doze and nearly fell into Steve's lap. Steve helped him upright. “Well, I think it's bedtime.”

“Yeah.” Bucky yawned as he and Steve bid the others goodnight and headed off toward the room with the chamber.

The rest of the group began to dissolve as well.

“Hey, Nat,” Clint called, grabbing his friend before she escaped. “D'you think, would you mind—I think Phil should probably see some of the pictures you've got of me from when I was staying with you. If it's not a problem.”

She studied him for a heartbeat then scrubbed her nails affectionately through his hair. “Yeah, no problem. C'mon.”

“Now?”

“Might as well.” She shrugged. “Come along, Boss,” she called over her shoulder to Phil while she dragged Clint in the direction of her room. “Time for more show and tell.”
Phil looked around Natasha's room as though he'd never been inside it before. Come to think of it, he probably hadn't. He frowned. "Why does this room have a king size bed?"

She smirked. "I noticed long ago that the rooms closest to the common area have queen size beds and these that are farther away have king size beds. The rooms right outside the common area are really meant as crash pads for party guests who've overdone it. Pretty sure the idea was that there'd only be one person in those rooms and just for a short time. This is meant as a longer term guest room."

Phil nodded.

Clint put his hands in his pockets. "Up until now, I just spent a few days here, or maybe a week, now and then." He looked at the floor. "Never thought I'd be sharing the room with...anyone else."

"You were overdue for that to change." She put her hand on Clint's shoulder. "I'm sure Tony would let you move to a bigger room."

"I don't know," Phil said. "It's kind of cozy."

Natasha flashed a smile at the older man as she kicked her shoes off. She grabbed her phone and a tablet and crawled up into the middle of her bed. "Come on," she said. She dragged all the pillows up against the head board to make a long comfortable place to lean against.

Phil and Clint removed their shoes and joined her, one to either side of her. Clint tensed as she fiddled with her phone. Even though he'd asked her to do this, he wanted to bolt.

Natasha started with a photo of Clint not long after the Battle of New York where he looked haunted but still fit. "He couldn't eat or sleep much for weeks—hell, months—after you died. He was already thinner here and that was just a week after."

Phil inhaled sharply as Natasha thumbed over to a picture of Clint and Natasha at his funeral. Phil's parents and his oldest sister, Maddie, were visible in the background. The shadows under Clint's eyes were pronounced.

"Within two months, he didn't weigh much more than I did." Natasha swiped to the next image. "Realized he was just going to waste away if I didn't make him put on some weight, so I started bringing home cheesecake."

Clint made a strangled sound and put his hands over his face. "So much cheesecake," he said, muffled by his hands. "She brought home a different whole cheesecake from the mall every week and she'd make me eat it. She'd use interrogation techniques to *make* me eat it."

"You make it sound like I force fed you." She rolled her eyes and looked to Phil. "I mostly just stared at him. One of the Cheesecake Factory employees was so sure I had a pregnant wife at
home.”

Natasha grabbed the tablet and showed more photos, including some of Clint eating scrumptious looking slices of cheesecake—lemon raspberry cream cheesecake, dolce de leche caramel cheesecake, chocolate mousse cheesecake, kahlua cocoa coffee cheesecake, and several others. In every photo Clint wore an expression like a child being forced to eat brussels sprouts.

“You always loved cheesecake.” Phil sounded puzzled.

“Oh, I used to.” Clint cut his eyes to Natasha. She bumped her shoulder against his. “Then she forced me to eat tons of it and now I can't stand the sight of it, at least not the fancy ones. Thank God the cheesecake at Taormina is plain and is that lighter weight texture. I think that's the only cheesecake I'm able to eat any more.”

“But you wouldn't eat donuts at all.” She stroked his blond hair. “They made you think of Phil.”

Phil winced.

Clint leaned his head against the headboard. “I can't believe I asked you to do this,” he moaned. “I look awful.”

“Actually, you look disturbingly beautiful, like a heroin-chic model.” Phil took the tablet from Natasha and traced an index finger over a photo of Clint standing in Natasha's kitchen wearing a tank top and cargoes that were so loose they hung low on his hips. His cheekbones were prominent, his lash-fringed eyes fever bright, and his red lips were an almost shocking contrast to his pale face. “You look sort of translucent,” Phil murmured.

Clint closed his eyes—against the photo that hurt to look at, against Phil's words. “You mean, like a ghost?”

“I guess we were both sort of ghosts then.” Phil sighed. “Right about then, I still wouldn't have known what my name was, still would have been—” He clamped his mouth shut.

Natasha looked at Phil curiously. Clint leaned forward so he could look at Phil too. “Still screaming,” he said, “because they were cutting into your brain.”

“Probably.” Phil spoke through gritted teeth.

Natasha raised an eyebrow.

“Phil didn't show all of his scars,” Clint said. “He has some where they cut his head open. They mucked around in his brain and made it where he has a hard time talking about it.” Clint quickly explained what little he knew while Phil went pale and still.

Natasha let out a string of multilingual curses. “I'm so sorry for what you both went through.”

“What we all went through, Nat. You grieved him too.”

“I did.” She turned toward Phil and then ran her hand through his hair. “Losing you left a big hole in my life. I cried for you.” They smiled sadly at each other. “You're not allowed to do that again.”

“I'll try not to.” Phil choked on his words a little.

“See that you don't.” She elbowed him.

“Ow.” He grimaced.
“It was hard on me.” She turned back toward Clint. “But it was much harder on you. I wasn't in love with him and I had the major distraction of trying to make sure you didn't die on me too.”

Clint slid down against the wall of pillows at his back. He turned his face into her shoulder. “Sorry Nat.”

She rubbed his back. “Not your fault, mladshiy brat.”

“The lion's share of the fault,” Phil said fiercely, “lies with that deranged murderous alien with delusions of grandeur.”

“I agree,” Natasha said.

Clint mumbled his semi-coherent agreement and then listened as Natasha and Phil talked while looking at more photos. Driving for most of the day on top of the draining trip was catching up to him and he began to doze.

Clint woke up in the morning wrapped around a mostly clothed Phil with a pajama-clad Natasha pressed against his back. Even though he was still dressed, it was one of the most restful nights of sleep he’d had in years.

An alarm went off. Natasha and Phil both got up. They talked about meeting at nine thirty to discuss Natasha going to Europe for a mission. Clint was dozing and only understood about half of what was said and remembered even less.

At some point, Phil said, “Let him sleep.”

After a pause, Natasha said, “I think you're right.”

Thinking about how much he missed his Keurig just then, Clint dropped back into a deep sleep.

~*~

After her meeting with Coulson, Natasha went to the kitchen for more coffee. There she found Steve and Bucky, just recently awake and not yet looking ready to deal with the world, and Sam and Bruce, just returned from their trip. Someone had made eggs.

“Hey, fellas,” Natasha said brightly as she poked at the coffee machine.

Steve raised the hand not occupied with his fork in greeting, Bucky made a short disinterested sound, and Bruce and Sam both said, “Hey.”

Sam yawned. “I can't sleep on planes.”

Bucky yawned too, looked at his now empty plate, pushed it away, and lay forward onto the island using his right arm as a pillow. Steve reached over to fluff his hair.

Clint strolled in looking almost as bedraggled as Bucky. Natasha grinned. “Hey, sleepyhead.” She turned back to the coffee machine.

“Hey, Nat.” He nodded at Steve, Bucky, Sam, and Bruce before grabbing a croissant and ladling up some scrambled eggs for himself.
“Hey Bruce,” Clint said, “you usually don't fidget this much.”

“I kinda hate flying.” Bruce shrugged. “On top of being keyed up from the trip.”

Natasha held a cup of cappuccino out to Clint just as Tony breezed in.

“Hey, can I have that?” Tony said.

Natasha raised an eyebrow and Clint just looked at him.

“Seriously, Legolas,” Tony whined. “I'm on my way to HR and I'll never make it without a hit of caffeine. I'm going to need to meet with you later too. They've screwed up my paperwork for hiring a chef and apparently lost some of it. I'm so pissed.”

Clint grinned and made a gesture at Natasha. She sighed and handed Tony the clear glass mug.

“Thanks, czarina, Legolas.” He took the cappuccino and rushed away.

Natasha shook her head. Clint laughed and got up to make himself a latte.

“I didn't know you don't like flying,” Steve said to Bruce. “You seemed fine on the Helicarrier way back when.”

“Well, he seemed fine up until the whole Loki's hypnotized goon-induced engine failure thing.” Natasha deposited herself gracefully on a stool. “But that doesn't count.”

Both Clint and Bruce cringed. Bruce drummed his fingers. “It's not the flying itself that's the problem. It's that it's an enclosed space that you can't just leave. I have the same issue with submersibles, aerial trams, and chairlifts.”


Natasha sipped her coffee. “If you want, I could help you blow off some steam.”

Bruce paused. “I'd say I appreciate that but I'm not sure I trust your definition of 'blow off steam.'”

She rolled her eyes. “Gym. Martial artsy bullshit.”

The doctor considered for a moment. “Alright. Sounds good.”

“Great.” Natasha grinned, set her coffee down, and came around the island. “Let's fix that whole you don't spar issue.”

Clint perked up. “Now that I want to see.”

“Wait, no, that's not—Hey!”

Natasha grabbed Bruce by the back of his shirt and headed out of the kitchen, dragging him stumbling backwards behind her. Bucky lifted his head about an inch, reached for her abandoned coffee, and claimed it for his own. Clint snorted with laughter then downed what was left in his mug. “I'm gonna go watch.”

When Clint got to the gym, Natasha was already standing in the ring, bouncing on the balls of her bare feet.

Bruce shifted his weight uncomfortably. “I still don't think this is a good idea.”
“You already agreed.” Natasha rolled her eyes and leaned on the ropes. “Humor the adrenalin junky in me.”

“I don't know—”

“Dude,” Clint interrupted, “that argument is going to get you nowhere. You are talking to a woman who refers to assassination as 'augmented yoga.'”

Bruce gave Natasha a disbelieving look. “Augmented yoga?”

She shrugged. “I find it relaxing, like yoga, but better because I get to kill things.”

Bruce turned back to Clint. “Without her job, she'd be a serial murderer, wouldn't she?”

“Oh, no doubt about it.”

“C'mon, Banner,” Natasha called cheerfully. “I promise not to throw you and I doubt you'll hit me. It'll be fine.”

“Thanks?” Bruce cautiously climbed up into the ring. “So, uh…."

Natasha grinned, folded her hands, and bowed. Bruce let out a breath and returned the gesture. Natasha threw an intentionally bad punch which Bruce easily blocked. The same thing happened thrice more. Then Natasha stopped going easy—though she kept fighting clean. The match turned into a half hour game of Try to Hit the Doctor. Clint filmed a few minutes of it with his phone.

When they called it quits, Natasha shoved Bruce's shoulder. “I don't think you threw a single punch.”

He shrugged. “I prefer to fight defensively.”

“No kidding.” She cracked open a water bottle and drank. “Barton, you cooking?”

Clint raised an eyebrow. “You helping?”

“Sure.” She poked Bruce's leg with her foot. “We should make a habit of this.”

Erin Mockta arrived about an hour after late lunch ended for the tower's denizens. Just after she stepped off the elevator, Bucky pressed a mug of cappuccino into her hands.

She raised her eyebrows. "Thank you."

He gave her a bashful smile. "Clint taught me how to use the crazy coffee machine."

She took a sip. "This is excellent."

He drank some of his sparkling citrus water. Then they went down the hall to his room. He got settled in his nest and she got settled in a bean bag chair with her notebook. She carefully set her mug on the floor and grinned at him. "I can hardly believe it but I already see the beginnings of dark roots. It only makes you cuter."
He rolled his eyes. "Flatterer."

"Seriously," she said. "It makes you look like a surfer."

"I take it back." He raised his hands with a chuckle. "You are totally hurting my feelings."

"Liar," she said with a warm laugh.


"I'm glad to see you in a good mood."

"Me too."

"So, the trip was good?"

He thought it over. "In the end, it was good."

"Not in the beginning?"

He hooted. "Even I thought Tony and I were gonna kill each other during the car ride to Maryland."

"So, is there a Youtube video of that?" She was kidding, he knew. He shook his head. "Oh, too bad," she said. "I bet it would be a hot seller."

"Not sure if it was a tragedy or a comedy."

"I'm not surprised." She tapped her pen against her notebook.

"I talked to Sasha." Bucky snuggled back further into his extensive collection of pillows. "We cried. She threatened to cut my heart out if I made her cry again. Then I slept with her. So I think we're better."

Dr. Mockta calmly made a note.

"Tony assumed I had sex with her so I kidded him but he didn't know it for a long time." He sighed. "But Steve didn't either."

Mockta made another note.

"Seeing my grave, even my friend's graves, at Arlington was more strange than painful. God, I miss them all—Pinky, Gabe, Jacques—but I already knew they were dead." He exhaled. "Going to Coulson's grave was harder, especially when I realized Clint and I are heartache bros."

"Heartache bros?"

He nodded and then described the visit to Phil's grave followed up by a description of the trip to the Smithsonian. At the end of their session, he pulled his replica jacket out of the closet. She put it on.

"You're tall enough," he said, "but not wide enough."

"I want one anyway." She looked in the mirror. "In the correct size, of course."
A combination of technical issues, two on-going large-scale DIY projects, a spontaneous bout of Harry Potter obsession, and intermittent writer's block caused this chapter to be somewhat delayed. I appreciate your patience.
There was a knock at the door, it opened, and Clint stuck his head in. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Steve sat up.

“Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

“Thought this might be a good time to see you, while Buck's talking to the doc.”

Steve rolled a charcoal stick between his fingers and nodded.

Clint stepped the rest of the way into the room and kicked the door shut. He held up a thick, clear briefcase-like box. “Tony sent me to give these to you.”

Clint unclipped the case's closures and pulled out a couple of the leather bound books, each in its own, vacuum sealed, hard plastic sleeve.

Steve picked one up. “Am I allowed to take them out?”

“They're your sketchbooks, man.” Clint shrugged. “Figure you can do whatever the hell you want with them.”

Steve wandered over to his bed and sat, opening the seal on the sleeve with a soft hiss of air as he went.

“There's something like a dozen of these in here, and there's at least two at the Smithsonian, right?” Clint asked, pulling more tomes out of the acrylic case. “How many sketchbooks did you have?”

“I never got rid of any if I could help it.” Steve thumbed through the one in his hands. “When I left for basic, there was an old milk crate under my bed at home that was just about full of ones I'd used up.”

“Damn.” Clint shook his head. “Now, am I allowed to open them or is that a diary reading type no-no?”

Steve snorted. “No, go ahead.”

Clint grinned, got one of the books out of its sleeve, and sat next to Steve. He opened it to a random page, which had a pencil sketch of a piebald, smushed face cat laying on some invisible
surface. “Is this the evil cat?”

Steve looked at the drawing. “Yeah, that's Mrs. Wright's cat, Wilfred. He's not evil, just
temperamental and not a fan of being petted. Though Buck'll swear up and down he was
hellsspawn.”

Clint chuckled. “He looks like a Wilfred.”

“I think she named him after her brother.” Steve shook his head and turned a page in the
sketchbook he was looking at.

Clint continued perusing. “I think seventy percent of what's in this is Barnes—oh, wait, hello.
Who's this?” He held up a full page portrait of a young blond woman—obviously naked but with
nothing showing—curled up in the corner between a mattress and a wall.

“One of Buck's girlfriends. Name started with a P, I think. Patricia or Petunia—Priscilla maybe? I
don't know.”

“That one of his girlfriends, too?” Clint indicated the blue inkwash drawing Steve's book was open
to.

“Hm? Oh, no. Well, sort of?” Steve held up the drawing. It showed an unconventionally pretty girl
with pinned up dark hair, wearing an apron over a long-sleeved dress, leaning against a wall, a
cigarette between her fingers. “That's Ariana. Me and Bucky went to school with her and they dated
for maybe a month when we were teenagers. Then she figured out she was less likely to end up
bashing his head in with a brick if they were just friends. She was the youngest kid of a deli
owner.”

“Cool.”

Steve turned the page to another drawing of Ariana, this one of her laughing, her eyes scrunched up
in mirth. “She was something else.”

“D'you know if the deli's still there?”

“Yeah, actually.” Steve brightened for a moment, then shrugged. “Not in the same family anymore
though.”

Clint hummed and flipped a few pages, stopping on a rough sketch of a scowling young woman
with a wild tangle of short, curly hair. “Okay, she definitely looks like somebody's girlfriend.”

“Yup.” Steve laughed. “One of Bucky's. Agatha, I'm pretty sure. Mostly remember her for
backhanding him when they broke up.”

Clint cringed and laughed. “Note to self, never piss off any ninety year old ladies named Agatha,
just to be safe. You got any of your girlfriends in here?”

Steve sighed. “Closest I ever had to girlfriends were the handful of USO girls I was intermittently
involved with.”

Clint shot him a look. “The Captain was getting it on with the Cappettes?”

Steve blushed and squirmed a little. “Only about five of them.”

“Five of them?! Holy shit, Steve.”
“Not all at once!”

“Still!” Clint laughed. “Cap's got game!”

“Hey, they came onto me.” Steve held his hands up defensively.

“Even better!” Clint laughed harder. Once he'd calmed, he said, “Okay, so no drawings of any of your five showgirl girlfriends, not in these sketchbooks at any rate. How about any of your boyfriends?”

“Clint!”

“Hey! Honest, legitimate question. Which you are not obligated to answer or could lie about.”

Steve ran a hand over his face and sighed. “I kept drawings of the Village in different sketchbooks.”

Clint's eyebrows went for his hairline. “So there are drawings.”

“I draw everything.” Steve got up to see what other books were in the case.

Clint smirked. “So there are boyfriends.”

“No comment.”

“Also, what about Peggy?”

“Huh?” Steve turned over his shoulder.

“Peggy Carter.” Clint lifted one shoulder. “She not your girlfriend?”

Steve turned away again. “She might've been, except I died.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“It's okay.” He got down to the last book in the case, thinner than the others and bound in dark red rather than brown or black. “Here's one of them. Not sure I wanna think about the fact Howard had this.” He hesitated, then handed the sketchbook to Clint.

“Want you to know, I consider it one hell of an honor that you're willing to share this with me.”

Steve shrugged and shoved his hands into his pants pockets. “You said I can talk to you about anything. Figure I'll take you at your word.”

“Appreciate that.” Clint opened the red sketchbook to the first page. It was a detailed colored pencil drawing of a woman—no, Clint realized upon closer inspection, a man—with shoulder length hair pinned into neat victory rolls, wearing a green polkadot dress, leaning back against shelves of liquor and glasses. “Who's this?”

Steve came around to look. “That's Mags.” He sat back down next to Clint. “She use to own and tend bar at Magnolia's.”

“She looks badass.”

“She would physically throw people out if she had to.” Steve smiled fondly.
Clint thumbed a few pages and landed on a pencil sketch of two men in nice suits holding hands while one dozed on the other's shoulder. “Oh, that's cute.”

Steve rubbed at some charcoal dust in the crevice of his thumb nail. “I didn't really know them. They were just there from time to time. Mags was pretty sure they were lawyers or doctors or something 'cause they'd actually buy the expensive stuff. I don't know.”

Clint nodded. “You draw ridiculously well, by the way.” He kept skimming.

“Thanks.”

Clint noticed Steve react to a page as he passed it and flipped back to it. It was a rough drawing of Mags and a young man in a backwards newsboy cap arm wrestling across the bar. “Yes?” Clint prodded.

“It's nothing.” Steve shook his head. “I'd just forgotten about that.”

“Who won?”

“Mags. Every time.” Steve kept rubbing at his thumb though the charcoal had gone.

“This happened a lot?” Clint grinned.

“At least once a week. Always with whisky on the line.”

“Who's the guy?”

“Seamus Corcoran.”

“Irish?”

Steve nodded. “His father and three of his brothers were police. They spoke Irish at home and even though he'd lived here since he was a baby Seamus had a pretty strong accent. Sometimes the only reason I could understand what he was saying is because I was used to my dad.”

“So you and Seamus were friends.”

“Something like that.”

“Given that there's about seven of him on the next page…” Clint turned the page to illustrate his point, “I'm gonna say that's a yes. Unless, you know, he was something more?”

Steve flopped back on the mattress. “No.”

“Just friends then?”

“Well,” Steve made a face, “not exactly?”

“It's complicated?” Clint silently swore to himself he wouldn't pry. Excessively.

“We definitely weren't dating.”

“But...?” Clint made a vague, suggestive yet somehow not rude gesture.

Steve shrugged and sat up, shoulders hunched. “Yeah.”

“Cool.”
Steve took the book and slowly turned pages in silence for a while. Clint let him.

“I lived a double life. Had two separate sets of friends. Did my damndest to keep it that way. We all did.” He ran his fingers over the open page: a half-inked sketch of a sparsely populated dance floor with a woman in a fur wrap at a microphone in the background. The pair of dancers nearest to where Steve had been sitting as he drew were two boys, were at once very much alike and incredibly opposite. Where one was pale and freckled, with feathery blond hair falling in his kohl-lined eyes as he danced, the other was dark with shorn short curls, but they were both slight and petite—shorter even than the two women dancing next to them. The dark one had his shirtsleeves rolled up, one suspender falling off his shoulders, letting his too-big trousers hang asymmetrically at his waist. The other boy's clothes fit him correctly but the striped cigarette pants and lace cuffed blouse were clearly meant for a woman. Steve took a breath. “Charley and Thomas. Two of my best friends, all because the three of us were the exact same height. Guys would always assume me and Thomas were fairies 'cause we were so scrappy. Charley was more offended by that than we were.” Steve chuckled. “I saw Charley when he was at work one time and almost didn't recognize him without the makeup and lace. Mags didn't have pierced ears so she always wore clip-ons and sometimes when Charley got drunk he'd steal her earrings and ware them.”

“I've known guys like that.” Clint touched the corner of the aged paper. He felt like he could've fallen through the page looking-glass style into the night some eighty years past that Steve had frozen on it. “Were you and he…?”

“No.” Steve shook his head. “He, uh,” Steve blushed, took a breath, and said quickly, “Charley had a talent for scoring one night stands with businessmen and that was the game he liked to play.”

Clint took a second to let that sink in, then whistled. “Good on Charley.”

Steve snorted. “He was something else.” He tapped a finger on the page and paused a moment. “We weren't yet when I drew this but, later, Thomas and I, we were, well—”

“Together?” Clint provided.

“Yeah.” Steve rubbed a hand over his face. “Probably never woulda been—we were both shy—but Seamus threatened to tell Thomas I liked him if I didn't do it myself.”

“So, you're telling me Seamus is Natasha?”

“Actually,” Steve laughed, “that's pretty accurate. Or,” his mirth faded, “it was until he got beaten.”

“What?” Clint stiffened. “No—”

“His uncle caught him with one of his other friends and beat them both within an inch of their lives. The other guy died a week later and Seamus was never the same. Shit like that's why we all lead double lives. The last time I ever saw Charley, he showed up at mine and Buck's apartment at one or two in the morning, looking like he'd been run over. That's what I'd thought'd happened. Some bastard had tried to rape him.” Steve's jaw and fists clenched. “He beat the scum's head in with a brick and got away but he was a mess. He stayed the night with me, Bucky helped me patch him up—between Boxing and growing up with me around Buck's a real good medic. Charley told him he'd pissed off the mob, didn't tell me the real story 'til the next day when Buck wasn't around. Then he borrowed some of my clothes, kissed me on the cheek, and left. He hopped the border.” Steve took a shaky breath. “Not even a year before that, Thomas had moved halfway across the country. Never knew either of their last names so I can't look them up, see how they turned out.”
“What about Seamus? You can look him up.”

“Died in Vietnam.”

“Oh.” Unable to think of anything else to say or better to do, Clint hugged Steve. The kid from Brooklyn hugged him back.

When they'd finished talking, Clint left Steve's room to head to his and Phil's appointment with Mockta. A grinning Bucky strolled down the hall. "You sure look different," Clint said, "than you used to after sessions with Mockta."

Bucky laughed. "You mean back when I ended sessions by throwing projectiles or slipping into murderous artificial personalities? Those sessions?"

"Yeah." Clint smiled.

Bucky clapped his shoulder. "Told Mockta we're heartache bros."

Clint frowned. It came to him in a rush. "Oh, you mean back at Phil's grave."

Bucky nodded. "To bear the unbearable sorrow. Somehow, we both did."

"Where'd you learn a term like that anyway?" Clint laughed. "Heartache bros."

"Been listening to stuff, like the songs Natasha mentions." Bucky shrugged. "Watching stuff, including movies and TV you recommend to Steve. And reading."

"Reading? You mean like stuff on the internet?"

Bucky nodded.

"Don't know if we're going to make you or ruin you," Clint said.

"Already been ruined," Bucky said.

"Nah, not ruined. Just pretty roughed up." He took a breath. "Kinda like me."

Bucky tilted his head to consider him. "But we're on the mend."

"Yeah," Clint said. "And we're practically human again, in spite of it all."

Bucky smiled, all sparkling and bright, as he shoved on Clint's shoulder. Clint couldn't help but grin in return. Bucky yawned.

"Still tired from the trip?" Clint asked.

"Guess so," Bucky said. "Wish I'd thought to ask Mockta about being so tired from this. I needed extra nap time during the trip too. I didn't feel energized and starving like I usually do when I wake up in the goldfish bowl."

"I took a long nap after going to Phil's grave." Clint shrugged. "Then Phil slept during most of the drive back to New York. I'm pretty sure that was emotional shock from seeing his family, on top of the rest of the trip."

Bucky stretched. "Guess it's normal then." He went into Steve's room and Clint continued down the hall.
Mockta was already settled into her favorite chair when Clint walked into Phil's office. Instead of being seated in his favorite chair, Phil paced.

Clint watched him for a moment. "You waiting on me?"

Phil shook his head. "You're not late."

Clint and Erin Mockta nodded at each other and then Clint went over and perched on Phil's desk. He looked at the floor and swung his legs. Mockta alternately watched one man and then the other. Clint could feel her waiting, almost like an asset waiting for a target to show during an op. A minute later, Clint realized he was waiting too.

Two more minutes went by. Mockta tapped her pen against her notebook.

Phil abruptly stopped pacing and clenched his fists. His back was to Dr. Mockta and Clint. "Everything hurts so much more." He turned around. "And I hurt everyone."

He resumed pacing. "My parents are visibly older. Cadence was a baby last time I saw her and now she's four. My favorite niece, Elissa, seems all grown up and I missed her going to prom not to mention high school graduation." He dropped heavily into his chair.

Mockta glanced at Clint. Let him talk Clint signed. She nodded.

"At least my sisters are mostly the same," Phil continued, hardly seeming to take a breath. "And they forgave me. They weren't even as mad as I thought they'd be. Not even Kit who has the most temper."

He gazed warmly at the archer seated on his desk. "And they liked Clint. I figured they would but that part seemed so natural and easy. Of course, they'd noticed that someone devoted to me was visiting my grave regularly and they'd already decided that they liked that person they never saw. So they liked meeting him. My mother especially."

Mockta made notes.

Phil rubbed his hands over his face. "My grave. Seeing the stone. That was almost nothing. Just not real, like an elaborate cover isn't real. But the roses, the one planted by my mother and one planted by"—he looked up at Clint—"you. Seeing you at my grave. That was shocking." He ended on a whisper.

"That was hard." Clint crossed his arms. "I was just this side of insane. In a way, it hadn't been that long since I last went to your grave because I went all the time. I was last there in February. It's still so hard to believe you're not dead. I mean some mornings, I still wake up thinking you're dead and I get disoriented when I see you, so it was like that. It was too easy to slip back, go to that place where you are dead, and talk to the you that I thought was in that grave. What was hard to believe was that you were really there."

Phil wrung his hands and shifted in his seat. "I'm so sorry."

"It was Bucky who pulled me back from that brink." Clint grinned at Mockta. "I saw him in the hallway. He said he told you we were heartache bros."
She smiled. "He did."

"Sometimes I think I have too much in common with Bucky." He gripped the edge of the desk. "For me, the trip was good. Visiting Phil's family was a little nerve-racking because of the nature of it, but they were very welcoming. Going to Phil's grave—I didn't realize it but I needed it."

Phil frowned.

"Oh?" Mockta's face was a little too still and neutral for her eyes to be so lit up.

"I see you trying to fight off that know-it-all grin," Clint declared. She smirked. He smiled, then became more serious. "But you were right. We weren't there long but it was emotionally exhausting. I slept on the drive to Pennsylvania and had intense dreams. By the end of the trip, I had great clarity about all of that."

He looked into Phil's eyes. "The days at Gramercy Mansion. Those were"—he closed his eyes —"more than I hoped for. I gained so much peace and acceptance there." He looked at Mockta. "I didn't know until Pennsylvania that dying might not have been the worst thing that happened to Phil."

"Oh?" Mockta was again trying to keep her face neutral but not due to mirth.

"He has a second set of scars." Clint couldn't move his eyes from Phil's face even as he watched Phil cringe and knew how much he wanted to hide. "I don't know which set is worse."

"I can't talk about it," Phil said tightly. "The block."

"Show her."

Phil froze. With an effort, Clint looked at Mockta. "His hair hides the scars."

Within a few seconds her eyes went wide. She crossed to stand in front of Phil. "Your amnesia was caused surgically?"

He looked up at her. "At least partly."

She gestured toward his scalp. "May I?" He nodded. She searched through his hair, and examined his skull by feel. "Damn," she breathed. "Did they take the entire top of your skull off?"

"I think"—he choked.

Clint was by his side in an instant. "Water?"

Phil shook his head.

Slowly, Mockta sat back down. "I want a full medical work up, Phil. Blood tests, scans, everything."

He nodded.

She tapped her pen against her notebook. "This will change my treatment plan for you." He nodded again and she made notes. Phil fidgeted while she did.

When Mockta finished quickly jotting notes that filled the better part of a page, she turned to Clint. "I can't help but notice—no kooshes or bouncy balls or projectiles today?"
"I"—Clint shrugged—"just don't feel the need."

"And you"—she turned to Phil—"can't sit still today."

He started, then shifted in his seat again. "I guess not."

"I understand the two of you have this dynamic." She leaned back in her chair. "And you still manage to surprise me. I knew this trip would be significant for both of you, but I didn't think you'd come back like this. You've switched positions."

Clint raised an eyebrow in question. "You," she said to him, "have come back remarkably stabilized. You've progressed fast, probably because you've dealt openly and honestly with your feelings. And you"—she gestured at Phil—"have come back in crisis." Phil frowned. "Ultimately, it's good," she said. "I suspect that, for the first time, you're letting yourself really feel what you've suffered."

Phil let out a long slow breath. "You're right, and it's horrible. It leaves me terrified of experiencing things that have already happened, like losing my family." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Losing Clint." He took a breath and muttered. "Botching my job, causing people to be hurt or die."

Mockta nodded. "Yeah, it's a problem, you being strong and high functioning like that. You're afraid that emotional processing will make you fail." She sighed. "And I hate to cripple you, even temporarily. It complicates the risk/benefit analysis of treating you but I'm leaning toward putting you in the hyperbaric chamber."

Phil looked shocked.

Clint grinned. "Assume I'll crawl in there with him sometimes."

Mockta rolled her eyes. "I should've figured. Fine. Full medical workup on you too. You've suffered enough concussions that it'll benefit you."

Clint suppressed the urge to snort with laughter. Mockta didn't know the half of his history of mild head trauma—he had a brother.

She turned to Phil. "Tell me how you felt, seeing Clint at your grave."

"Sick," Phil said. "I finally saw how much Clint had suffered and it hit me like a train."

Phil did most of the talking for the rest of the session, including describing his memory issues and looking at photos with Clint and Natasha. Toward the end, right after her watch beeped, Mockta said, "You're in that tough spot where it all gets worse before it gets better. Even as you're talking to me, I see you feeling worse."

"I really screwed up," Phil said.

"It's not that simple," Mockta said. "I insist you take responsibility but not blame. You were clearly victimized too."

Phil frowned. "That doesn't make sense."

"Actually," she said, "these things that seem like paradoxes do make sense. Give it time. Also, consider having some individual sessions with me."

He sighed. "Might be a good idea." A small smile settled on his face. "Insisting that Clint and I
"Well, come see you turned out to be a good idea, even though at first he was pretty unhappy about it."

"That's the spirit." Mockta stood. "So, meet you in the library?"

Clint nodded. "I'll bring coffee."

"Decaf please," she said. "Nothing too sweet." She walked out the door.

Clint pulled Phil out of his chair. "How about after my session, we have dinner together, just the two of us?" He ran his hands along the lapels of Phil's jacket. "I know you want to talk to Nat some more tonight, so I was thinking we could just take the elevator down to the bistro in the lobby. We could have a nice casual meal and it would only take about an hour."

"Sounds good." Phil's voice was rough.

Clint kissed him, a reassuring press of lips. "It's also okay for you to let yourself fall apart here in the privacy of your office while I'm talking with Mockta."

"I'll think about it."

Feeling simultaneously affectionate and exasperated, Clint shook his head. Phil held him close for a moment then released him so he could leave.
Clint made a detour by the kitchen on his way to the library. He found Mockta settled into a leather easy chair and pressed a mug into her hands.

"That's a cocoaccino," he said. "Made with frothed milk, it's sort of like mocha but without sugar, so it's on the bitter side."

She took a sip. "Mm. Delicious." She gestured at the mug he still held.

"This," he said, "is dolce cocoa coffee. Made like your cocoaccino but with sweet whipped cream instead of frothed milk, so this is a little bit sweet. I made them both with decaf, in case you wanted this one."

"Next time. For now, I'm really enjoying the cocoaccino."

Clint nestled comfortably onto the leather couch nearest Mockta and took a sip of coffee. "It feels strange to be here because I haven't felt calmer, well, maybe, ever. I feel like I'm just here, meeting you as a friend."

She smiled. "That's a great place for you to be."

"In the past few months, of getting Phil back and seeing you, I've done more acting out, writing, communicating, talking, target practice, running myself ragged physically, and crying, than I've done before but I haven't dealt with the Loki stuff directly. Somehow, even that feels better."

"Your emotions and brain aren't like separate folders in individual drawers in a filing cabinet. They're more like threads crocheted into an elaborate afghan. It isn't obvious which threads of the same color are all really one thread even when they're many rows apart, and which threads of different colors touch each other and will unravel together."

Clint held his hand up. "I'm visual and I'm having trouble following that."

She laughed. "The real point is, when you're processing emotions, you don't process them in a vacuum. You usually process more than one thing at a time. If you're crying or punching pillows"—she gave him a sly glance—"or sticking projectiles in the wall, you don't even have to understand what emotions you're processing or exactly why for it to be effective. You just have to be present with yourself and your feelings and be open to it."

He chuckled. "So I'm guessing that's why you let me get away with pens and letter openers in the wall."

Mockta raised an eyebrow. "And intervened with Pepper so she wouldn't give you a good talking to."

"Thank you. Guess I should apologize to Pepper."

"She'd appreciate it, I'm sure. But she told me she figures you made up for it by cooking for everyone so often."

Clint laughed. "Good to know."

"So," she said, "it's not like you have to say to yourself 'this time I'm crying because of Phil' and"
'this time because of Loki' and 'this time because of my rotten childhood' in order to work out some of all of those. Even I don't have to understand what you're doing for it to be effective."

He cradled the warm mug between his hands and breathed in the scent of his aromatic coffee. "You remind me of the only other therapist I trusted. Her name was Tomoko Wise, went by Tomi."

"Thank you," Mockta said.

He nodded.

"Since you're here, why don't you tell me about Loki."

He nodded again and began describing being bent to another being's will, like a live butterfly pinned to a board who couldn't fly away no matter how hard he flapped his wings. The insidious manipulation, being sullied by Loki's poisonous certainty of the need for what he was doing, the imperative—

Suddenly Clint looked up. "It was all about him. Who I was didn't even matter."

Mockta nodded. "So it is with abusers, narcissists, psychopaths. In their minds, only they matter and they're opportunists."

"He would have victimized anyone that he came across who seemed adequately useful."

"Yes, he would have."

"That's...a weird kind of relief."

"You weren't victimized because of you, Clint. You were victimized because he was fucked up in the most horrible, self-centric way."

Clint nodded. This truth was like a trickle of clean water making a small rivulet in a muddy crust and beginning to clear it away.

"The same is true of others, such as those who abused you as a child. That wasn't your fault but happened because they were fucked up," Mockta said. "And the most remarkable thing is that somehow, despite it all, you're still a good person. Which means you won."

Clint's eyes snapped to hers.

"You didn't let them beat you in the ways that matter most," she said. "Not even Loki who was inhumanly powerful. I'm always humbled by the inner strength of those who survive the unimaginable. You are one of those survivors."

"I feel so inadequate." Clint's voice was small.

"You're astonishing. The most relatable Avenger. Just a guy with intense determination who trained himself, who fights beside giants and against giants. And you've also survived all kinds of very human difficulties. Plus a few inhuman ones."

"Maybe." He sighed. "People can be horrible to each other and life can be horrible even without that."

"True. Which is why we've evolved to have physical and emotional healing processes. Somehow, culturally, we've gotten away from having general knowledge and respect for emotional healing processes but they exist nonetheless. I've seen people get really good at those emotional healing
processes, and really fast. Some of my clients even. They're open to their feelings, and feel and deal with them all the time. Then, once they understand their processes, and having survived so much, they become amazingly strong inside—not on the surface but deep inside. They don't try to withstand the body blows of life without a ripple. They let the blow hit them and go through them. They cry or do whatever they need to do and process that blow so fast they're ready to face the next blow with breathtaking speed."

Clint shook his head. "I can hardly imagine."

"You don't have to," she said. "You're already one of those people."

After a moment of disbelieving silence, he said, "How do you figure?"

"Most people wouldn't have survived Loki, much less Loki plus the loss of the great love of their life. If they lived at all—didn't just die from the systemic stress—they'd have been institutionalized, or maybe become drug addicts desperate to escape the pain. One way or another, they'd have become nonfunctional. People destroy their lives over less. You lived and you kept functioning. You got up day after day choosing to face the pain, to do good work and even to save the world."

He shrugged. "It's not like I never tried to escape. I drank sometimes. Even slept with Natasha."

"You are human even if you're an astonishing human being. You didn't become an alcoholic and you didn't use Natasha. That's one of the things that separates you from your abusers by the way, they use people, you don't. Being a good operative doesn't mean never having a bad mission."

He met her eyes. "It means coming back even from a bad mission, preferably with your team intact. Or, at least, as intact as possible."

She nodded. "Loki was the worst kind of mission."

He'd started the session calm. Now he felt warmth welling up from deep inside and radiating outward from the top of his head, his throat, his solar plexus. This was a deep serene energy that made him feel as centered as getting to a peak experience with his bow.

He took a slow even breath. "I came back. Wounded but as intact as possible."

She smiled. "And fought like hell to heal."

"Natasha helped with that. I stayed with her while I was on mandatory leave. And then some."

"That's how she has the pictures you showed Phil."

He nodded and closed his eyes. "I hate those pictures. They're proof it wasn't all just a nightmare, and I look like a ghost. A sickly ghost."

"Seeing the pictures makes you relive it?"

"Yeah."

They talked until her watch went off. Clint looked at her. "Let's do this again."

"A few more times," she said. "You really don't need me much longer."

"Maybe I don't." He stood. "Right now, I need to take the love of my life to dinner."
She grinned. "Normally, I'd have worried about leaving a client quite as distressed as Phil seemed at the end of our session but I learned early on that the two of you will take care of each other."

He grinned back. "I'll make sure he gets through the night okay."

"I know you will. The thing you two are bad about is taking care of yourselves. It's important to take care of yourselves. Most of the time, you should be taking care of yourself first and then taking care of other people. It's kind of like those safety briefings on airplanes. They tell you to put your own oxygen mask on first. You're no good to the other person that you're meaning to help if you pass out while trying to get an oxygen mask on them because you didn't put one on."

"Never thought about it that way. Makes sense."

She stood and collected the mugs. "I'll take these to the kitchen. You go have a nice dinner with Phil."

He smiled. "Thanks." He strode from the room feeling lighter than he had in years.
In the elevator down to the ground floor bistro, Clint ran his fingers through Phil's hair. “I'd try to talk you down from your moping—actually, would that be talking up? I think that would be talking up—anyway, I would, but I'm pretty sure it would be a losing battle.”

“I'm not moping.”

“You are totally moping.” He kissed Phil's cheek. “But that's okay, you've earned your mope-fest.”

Phil raised his eyebrows. “How do you earn a mope-fest?”

“By going through hell. Also, you put up with my mope-fest for weeks. I figure I can return the favor.”

“Not as long, I hope.”

Clint grinned. “I'm with you there.”

The elevator door's opened with a ding. They crossed the lobby to the bistro. The hostess's face showed a glimmer of recognition. “Good evening, gentlemen. Two?”

“Yes, two,” Phil said. “We'd like to be seated somewhere private, if you could.”

The hostess grabbed two menus from under her station. “You mean like the booth behind the screen that we had installed specifically because of all of you who live upstairs?”

“Yeah,” Clint chuckled, “like that.”

The hostess got them settled in the smallest of the three booths hidden behind the decorative and elaborate shoji screen. Clint barely glanced at the menu. “I want the trout.”

“A burger,” Phil growled just as their waiter strode up.

They knew what they wanted and the waiter was efficient. In three minutes, they had drinks, salads, and bread in front of them.

Phil swallowed a bit of salad. “I've asked Natasha to assess the remains of S.H.I.E.L.D. in Europe. She's flying out Wednesday afternoon.”

Clint nodded. “Makes sense.”

“I need you to take over some of what Natasha's been doing, especially analysis and report summaries.”

Clint shook his head. “Doesn't make sense. Bureaucratic paperwork is not my strong suit. Hell, it's barely in my deck of cards.”

Phil exhaled. “Even if you're in the bottom ten percent as far as aptitude, you're the best I've got.”

Clint raised his eyebrows.

“You don't have to think about it too hard for it to make sense,” Phil said. “You know the agency was decimated. We went from ten thousand employees worldwide plus twenty five hundred
support services contractors to fewer than one thousand personnel worldwide.” He looked Clint in the eye. “And I trust you.”

Clint nodded once. “I'll do my best.”

“That's all I ask.”

Their food arrived. Most of their dinner conversation wound up being S.H.I.E.L.D. shop talk—Phil had slipped into full-on Director Coulson mode—but Clint didn't mind.

Out of trout, Clint set his fork down. “Do we want dessert?”

“Maybe.” Phil flipped open the dessert menu from the end of the table and perused it. “I'm uninspired.” He held the menu out to Clint.

Clint thumbed through it, hummed, and snapped it shut. “Tenth floor vending machines?”

“Tenth floor vending machines.”

A short time later, Phil handed Clint a packet of powdered sugar donuts from the vending machine. The archer grinned. “Thanks.”

As they headed back to the elevator, Phil said, “I wonder why the tenth floor vending machines are the best ones?”

Clint shrugged. “Maybe because they're in the breakroom closest to the tower security offices.”

“Could be,” Phil said. “C'mon, let's go upstairs for coffee with everyone else.”

When they got to the kitchen, their housemates were finishing up their dinner, and someone—probably Tony—had apparently just touched a nerve.

“Shut up!” Steve snapped, smacking one hand flat on the table. “You talk like I'm some old man then you act like I'm a little kid, and that's bullshit. I got plenty of being treated like a child when I was barely a hundred pounds and maybe then I deserved it. But you.” He jabbed a finger at Tony. “You have no damn good reason. I'm not some blushing virgin, I'm not a boy playing soldier, I was in the fucking second world war! You forget that, a lot. And when you remember it's to joke about how I'm nearly a hundred. You all do that!” He glared around at everyone else, settling on Natasha. “Even you. Even me. But I'm not ninety-five, actually, I just might be the youngest person in this room. Fitz, how old are you?”

Fitz jumped at suddenly being called upon. “Uh, twenty-seven.”

Steve nodded. “Jemma.”

“Twenty-seven.”

“Me too.” Steve crossed his arms. “Buck used to be younger than me, but with the time Hydra had him, he's thirty-odd by now. No one understands, not even him, that for me, World War Two wasn't even four years ago. Then I woke up, and that was crazy. Then there was the Chitauri. Then there was, what are they calling what happened in March? Hydragate? One after the other after the other. Only one out of all of you I'd think has half a chance of knowing what my past five, six years have been like is Natasha. Maybe Clint. The USO was one hell of a circus.” He stalked out of the room, brushing roughly past Clint as he went.
Bucky rushed out after him. There was a moment of stunned silence.

“What just happened?” Clint asked cautiously.

“No idea.” Tony pushed his plate forward and got up. Natasha made a seriously? gesture in his direction which he didn't see, didn't recognize, or just ignored. “Clint, because of the whole lost paperwork snafu I need to talk through potential hires for chef one more time, if you don't mind. Workshop, this way, talking.”

Clint rolled his eyes. “I’m just going to tell you the same thing I have the last five times we’ve had this conversation: Your best bet is Kolab 'Rose' Khin.”

Phil snapped to attention. “You're advising Tony to hire your ex?”

“What?” Clint turned, confusion writ across his face. “I have definitely never dated her.”

“But,” Phil frowned, “Kolab Khin, didn't you used to live with her, after you broke up with Bobbi?”

“Lived with her, yes. Dated her, no.”

“So she was your girlfriend.” Phil persisted.

“No.” Clint rolled his eyes. “You make my love life sound a lot more James Bondish than it ever really was.”

Natasha grinned but then went over and took Phil's arm. “Join me at the tower bar. We can make you a cup of coffee and spike it. I bet even the donuts taste better.”

“These are the finest vending machine donuts in the tower.” Phil held up the plastic wrapped sleeve of mini donuts. “No enhancement needed.”

“Tenth floor?” Bruce asked.

“You know it.” Clint smirked.

“They're always the freshest,” Bruce said.

“I want some of those,” Sam said.

“Great idea,” Tony said. “Jarvis.”

“Donuts, Sir?” the A.I. asked.

“Enough for everyone,” Tony said.

“I'll contact the concierge at the reception desk right away.”

“Thanks, Jarv.” Tony turned to Clint. “On second thought, let's take this to the bar. Spiked coffee sounds good.”

A line formed at the coffee machine. Fifteen minutes later, everyone in the kitchen had a cup of coffee in their hand, some plain and some fancy, and headed to the tower bar. Everyone set about spiking their coffee.

“Kahlua is the way to go,” Sam said.

Phil said nothing but poured a measure of Irish whiskey into his steaming mug.

“Vodka and simple syrup.” Natasha stirred those ingredients into her coffee.

“I'll have to try that sometime,” Tony said as he poured brandy and then Amaretto into his cup. He snagged Clint and went to a set of easy chairs in the corner.

“I'm partial to crème de cacao myself,” Jemma said.

“I'm sticking with tea,” Bruce said.

Pepper arrived with a basket of vending machine donuts. Looking confused, she held up one of the plastic wrapped donut packages. “I wound up on the same elevator as the concierge, and she was carrying these?” Pepper's inflection made it a question.

“Aren't they awesome?” Clint said as he and Tony hurried over to grab two packages apiece.

Tony kissed his CEO's cheek. “How was your business dinner?”

The ginger haired woman sighed. “The food was good.”

“Oh, okay,” Tony said. “I won't ask.” They grinned at each other. “Come talk to me and Clint about hiring a chef.”

She grabbed a sleeve of donuts before relinquishing the basket to Clint who went over and set it on the bar.

“I'm drinking your coffee,” Pepper said.

Tony chuckled. “You can have part of it.”

Jemma opened a plastic package and held up one of the powdered sugar donuts. “I can't believe I'm eating these.” She shrugged. “At least there's no high fructose corn syrup in them.”

“They're delicious,” Fitz said. He wiped powdered sugar off his chin.

Clint watched Natasha lead Phil to the sofa that was in the middle of the bar area. He listened for a couple of minutes before heading back over to the chairs where Tony and Pepper sat.

Natasha curled up next to Phil. “You remember Kolab. She quickly started going by the name Rose, because that's what Kolab means.”

Phil went tense. “Some.”

“There's a mission report that stars her.” Natasha inhaled the steam from her fragrant coffee. “Of course, the mission came to us. Just like she did.”

“The human trafficking ring,” Phil said.

Natasha nodded. “That scum had been after Rose's employer for three years already. After they killed the wife, Rose came looking for us. Clint was protecting her, not sleeping with her.”

Phil's cheeks colored and he took a drink of coffee.
“He loves you,” Natasha said. “Don't let your fragmented memories make you doubt that.” She
took Phil's hand. “I listened to his verbal bleeding for months after you died.”

He squeezed her hand.

“It was hard for him to tell me,” she said. “But once he started, he couldn't stop. He loves you so
hard, Phil.”

“Thanks, Tasha.” He leaned back and sighed. “I'm making myself a little crazy right now.”

She elbowed his ribs. “If Clint can forgive you, you can forgive yourself.”

Bucky dragged a sheepish looking Steve in.

“Hey, Cap,” Natasha called. She grinned over her mug. “Coffee?”

“Oh, no. Thank you.” Steve looked to Bucky. “Unless you…?”

Bucky shook his head, leaned over the bar to grab a glass and a can of pineapple juice, then looked
between the can and his left hand a few times. “Sometimes I'm real disappointed I don't have a
built in can opener.” He pulled a knife from his pocket and stabbed a hole in the top of the tabless
can.

Clint, Tony, and Pepper kept talking about chef’s candidates—mostly Rose—while Bruce and Sam
held court about their trip.

After a few minutes Sam said, “The group at Georgia Tech are doing some interesting things.”

Bruce nodded his agreement. “Bioneural circuitry.”

Bucky flinched as Bruce spoke and Steve patted his shoulder,

“Are we done here?” Tony said.

“Pretty much,” Pepper said.

“Good.” Tony stood. “I want to hear what Bruce and Sam are talking about.”

Clint looked at his empty mug and then at Pepper. “How about we get more coffee?”

“Good idea,” she said.

When Clint and Pepper returned a few minutes later with mugs of cappuccino for themselves and a
pot of coffee for refills for everyone else, Steve and Bucky had moved away from where Tony,
Bruce, and Sam were still talking about prosthetics and biomedicine. Bucky looked a little glazed
over and occasionally wild-eyed but was holding his own in a discussion with Jemma, Fitz, Phil,
and Natasha about the trip to Maryland. Steve and Fitz were standing while the others sat in a
quartet of chairs arranged for easy conversation.

Pepper put the pot of coffee on a trivet on the bar top. Phil went over to refill his mug.

“Me and Clint, we're heartache bros.” Bucky stood and began to pace. “But Phil is like me and
Steve. He kind of died and kind of didn't, and isn't always himself. He changed. Like a moth.”

“I'm curious,” Clint said. “Why a moth?”
Bucky shrugged. “Moths are sturdy and often overlooked. They fly in the dark but are drawn to the light.”

“You and Steve are both in dream-man territory.” Natasha grinned. “Both beautiful enough to be butterflies.”

Bucky gestured toward Steve. “He was more beautiful before, softer.” He touched Steve's cheek. “Even your face was softer. I'm sure many dream of Captain America, but I dreamt of Steve Rogers.” His eyes fluttered closed and he slid his hand over Steve's cheek and around to the back of his neck as he continued speaking. His own head dropped forward until his forehead was almost touching Steve's shoulder. “I'm not sure when. Sometimes I think I dreamt of you in cryo—”

The sudden stillness in the room was broken by Steve's sharp inhalation of breath. He stepped away from Bucky's touch.

Bucky's eyes flew open. He took a step back and the room was silent, riveted. Steve was staring at him, eyes wide, mouth hanging slightly open. Everyone else in the room was staring too. Steve let out a long shaky breath, drew another one, gave a small borderline hysterical laugh, ran a hand over his face.

"Steve, I—" Bucky glanced anxiously around the room. "Should I not have done that?"

Steve didn't respond. Across the room, Clint inexplicably started laughing. "Dude, I think you broke Captain America." He shook his head, grinning, and moved to shepherd the two supersoldiers out the door and down the hall. "C'mon you two."

Steve still seemed vaguely like he'd been smacked with a cartoon frying pan. Bucky meanwhile was looking at Clint with confused, pleading distress. "I don't—"

"Shut up." Clint rolled his eyes, shoved his charges into a room off the hall, and pulled the door shut, leaving them alone.

"Bucky, it's okay, I wouldn't—" Steve took a breath. "I don't expect—"

"I haven't heard you stammer like that since the last time you asked a girl out." Bucky tried to make light of the situation, but then, realizing what he was saying, he sucked in a breath. Eyes wide, he turned to fully face Steve. "You'd stammer asking anyone." And would not make the first move. That thought set Bucky's nerves on edge.

"Just because Clint—"

"Hush," Bucky said fondly. "I can't hear myself think." Bucky's thoughts raced. In his mind's eye he saw the graceful artist Steve, the young man Bucky would never have risked offending by crossing personal boundaries, would never have risked losing their friendship. In recent weeks, when his impulses caused him to push up against those boundaries, he'd wrenched himself back out of fear—more than one fear.

Steve stared at Bucky who held his gaze. If a woman looked at him like that, eyes wide and dark with blown-out pupils, he'd—

Bucky slid his fingers along Steve's jaw—the touch light and slow—then pulled him close and gave him a soft but serious kiss—a gentle test that he hoped they'd survive.

Steve froze.
Bucky took a half step back and couldn't make himself look up. He shut his eyes, not sure if he was more scared that he'd just fucked up, or that he'd be misunderstood and pushed away again. "I'm sorry, I—"

His sentence was cut off in the last way he expected—Steve's mouth on his, anxious but insistent, arm wrapped around his waist, pulling him close, and long, dextrous fingers curling themselves into the back of his hair. Time blurred. After what felt like a lifetime, Steve broke away. He relinquished his grip on Bucky's hair to brush a gentle thumb over his cheekbone. "I have wanted to do that," he breathed, "since I was fifteen years old."

Bucky gaped at him. "Since—? Are you fucking kidding me?"

Steve shook his head.

With a growl, Bucky pushed Steve against the door, blocking him in with his body, pressing him back with his weight, pinning Steve's shoulder with his left hand, right hand firm against the back of Steve's neck, and he kissed him. Bucky's mouth was firm and demanding as he controlled the kiss. Steve was pliant as he allowed Bucky to have his way and kissed back when Bucky let him.

Bucky would never have been intimidating with the old Steve like this, would never have risked scaring him, if he'd dared to kiss him, back before the supersoldier serum. But now, they were well matched in height and fighting prowess and Steve probably outweighed him, and Bucky wasn't quite sure what that difference meant.

When their breathing was uneven and heavy, Bucky drew back from the kiss and risked looking at Steve.

The astonished reverence in Steve's blue eyes was the same as the old Steve would have had. Exactly the same.

Bucky inhaled a long slow breath. He eased up on the pressure he was exerting, shifting his weight and his hold until he was cradling Steve protectively against his body and the door at Steve's back was just another element of security. He kissed Steve with soft slow patience and Steve melted into him, clutching his hands into the back of Bucky's shirt. This was the kiss that made Bucky tingle, the sensation slipping over his skin, made him warm, made him dizzy. Made Steve lose his breath.

When the lush kiss ended, Bucky stumbled back a step into the room, which he realized was his—the pillow nest of a bed was a dead giveaway. Steve reached out for him and Bucky grabbed his arm then dragged them both down to sit on the low profile bed.

Steve let out a breath and hid his face in Bucky's blond hair. "You just turned my world upside down."

Bucky scrubbed a hand over his face. "Mine too."

"I'm gonna need a bit to work out what to do with that."
Bucky leaned against him. "Yeah, I have no idea."

Shoulders touching, they sat together. Bucky slid his hand over and covered Steve's fingers with his own but didn't quite hold his hand.

They both jumped when the hidden household speakers squawked to life with Tony's voice. "We have a situation."
"So do I!" Steve snapped. "Lay off, Tony."

"I mean we as in the Avengers. We have to assemble. Get dressed."

"I am dressed."

"I mean get your uniform on. Jesus, Steve, we've got to go."

“Rotten timing.” Steve scrubbed a hand over his face. “I’m sorry, Bucky.”

“It's all right, Captain Rogers. Duty calls.” Wistfulness gripped him. “I wish I was still your sergeant.”

Steve sighed. “Me too, Barnes. Me too.”

Bucky kissed him then pushed him out the door. He stood in front of the closed door and put two fingers to his lips. Had he really just kissed Steve Rogers?
"What the hell?" Sam's voice came over the comms.

Clint and Natasha shifted in Tony's black SUV that had been pressed into service because S.H.I.E.L.D. vehicles weren't available and the quinjet was overkill. Happy drove. Steve rode shotgun.

"Talk to me," Coulson said.

"One of the gangs has energy weapons," Tony said.

"Copy, Ironman," Coulson said. "Did you hear that, Maria?"

"Affirmative," Maria said. "Alerting the mayor's office now."

"Falcon, Iron Man," Coulson said, "target those energy weapons. Take them out of play."

"Copy that," Sam and Tony said simultaneously.

Clint was restless but there was no point in leaving the SUV yet even though it seemed to creep through the traffic. They were too far away. Clint tuned out Coulson coordinating with the police precinct and let his eyes roam appreciatively over Phil's field suit. The man looked fine in the futuristic combat suit. The field suit emphasized Phil's shoulders in a different way than his tailored suits did. But the suit's special magic was in the way it showcased Phil's chest, the kevlar and leather and straps hugging his form in the most utilitarian way possible, while somehow managing to be incredibly sensuous.

Natasha muttered, "It's been Monday all day."

Clint grinned. "You think it'll get better after midnight?"

She smiled. "If nothing else, this day will be over."

"Fitz, Simmons, rotate the visuals," Coulson said as he punched keys on his laptop. Jemma and Fitz were at the tower running mission support with Jarvis' assistance.

"Acknowledged," Fitz said. "Start with the satellite feed then run through the traffic cams?"

"Affirmative," Coulson said.

Clint and Natasha leaned over Coulson from either side and watched the images flick through on his computer screen. Clint stabbed his finger toward one.

"Halt," Coulson said.

"Acknowledged," Jemma said.
"I'll start on this fire escape," Clint said.

Coulson studied the image and then revisited four other videos including the satellite image. "Good plan, Hawkeye."

Clint's heart flipped happily and he couldn't help but preen under the praise. It felt like old times.

"There are children," Sam said over the comms.

"We see women on the video feeds," Coulson said. "You sure those are children and not short women?"

"We're sure." The end of Tony's sentence was obscured by the sound of a repulsor blast.

"Are the children combatants?" Coulson asked calmly.

"Negative," Sam said.

"Trying to protect them," Tony said.

"Mother's appear to be trying to get the kids out of the line of fire," Sam said.

"Good work, Iron Man and Falcon," Coulson said.

"Only kind of work I do," Tony said.

Coulson rolled his eyes. "Almost there," he said. "Happy, stop at the curb in three, two, one—now!"

Happy's pull to the curb was fast and smooth. The instant he stopped, Avengers poured out of the black SUV and into the hot New York night.

Captain America ran straight into the fray of clashing gangs that started a hundred feet away in the side street. The Black Widow melted into an adjacent alley. Hawkeye bolted for the fire escape of an old, brick, twelve story office building halfway up the block.

Falcon was airlifting children out of the fray as much as he could and placing them in the alley that was visible to the SUV where Coulson was monitoring and directing.

"Hawkeye," Coulson said, "use those icer arrows to target anyone with a weapon, prioritizing those with energy weapons."

"Yessir." Clint continued to rapidly climb the fire escape. Ten stories up, he assumed a stable position and surveyed the impromptu battlefield.

Black Widow flitted in and out of the shadows at the edge of the battle, punching, kicking, and swiftly neutralizing combatants, and then dragging children and unarmed men and women out of harms way. She deployed her Widow's Bites against armed participants without ever breaking stride.

"Looks like the Bestias interrupted the Ranas Venenosas having a block party," Clint said as he fired an icer arrow, which took down a large man whose face was contorted in agony as he swung an energy rifle that flickered like it might be shorting out. "Not only are Ranas Venenosas outnumbered, a lot of them don't even have weapons." He continued firing icer arrows with precision and speed, dropping one armed combatant after another.
Three women were running toward the alley where the children were. One of the women stumbled. A small boy, maybe seven years old, darted from the alley and ran toward them. "Mami," he screamed.

"Ah, shit," Coulson said.

Phil so seldom cursed on ops that Clint swung his head in the direction of the SUV and saw the older man pop out of the vehicle door and rush to intercept the little boy who had run straight into the line of fire from two Bestias wielding energy weapons. Clint wounded both men with regular arrows and they dropped like stones but not before one of them fired.

Coulson leaped forward, scooped the boy up, and twisted. The energy beam skimmed across his back, singeing his field suit.

"Fu—" came out of Clint's mouth before he managed to stifle the string of curses on the tip of his tongue.

Coulson grunted, clasped the arm of the woman reaching toward the boy, and moved them both toward safety as he barked, "Take those energy weapons out of play."

"Copy," came the voices of the five Avengers and Falcon.

As the number of Bestias left on their feet dwindled, the NYPD stepped in to help clean up the mess and process the suspects, victims, and bystanders.

Iron Man casually dropped two unconscious felons in front of one of the few officers not in riot gear. "Hey, Cap," he said over the comms.

"Yeah?" Steve grunted as he knocked two combatants down with his shield.

"Why didn't you tell me you have a type?" Tony said.

"What?" Steve asked.

"So, tall, dark, and badass?" Tony quipped. "In which case, you've totally been holding out on me 'cause, you know, I fit that profile."

Steve huffed in apparent exasperation.

"No?" The sound of a repulsor blast came over the comms then Tony said, "Much as it pains me, I could dye my hair blond if that's what it takes. With Pep's permission, of course."

"Can we not have this conversation right now?" Steve snapped.

Tony cackled. "As long as we can have it later."

A loud clang came over the comms from Steve's shield hitting a wall. Fitz's voice, thoughtful and quiet, was heard in the relative quiet of the next second. "I don't think there's such a thing as having a type."

Jemma snorted. "Fitz, you have a type."

"No I don't."

"When it comes to men," Jemma said, "you have an extraordinarily specific type."
It was Fitz's turn to snort. "Yeah? Then what is it?"

"Military or paramilitary muscular black men with good jaw lines."

For a moment the only thing coming over the comms was the muffled sound of combat.

With a tone of horrified realization, Fitz said, "We're still on comms aren't we?"

Jemma sighed. "We're still on comms."

Sam crowed, "You sure are!"

Imagining Fitz's blazing red face, Clint chuckled.

Another hour was spent in mop up mode before the Avengers and Falcon were able to regroup. They stood in a haphazard circle beside the SUV. Happy handed out steaming paper cups filled with coffee.

"Did you magic these?" Tony said.

"Coffee shop across the street." Happy shrugged. "Convinced them to stay open."

The still brightly lit coffee shop was teeming with residents and NYPD.

"Mmm," Natasha said. "Thank you."

Clint wiped sweat off his brow. "Less than an hour to midnight and it's still ungodly hot and muggy."

"Good work." Coulson's tone was brisk. "Your teamwork was smooth and efficient, you ended a volatile situation while minimizing loss of life, and you did it with minimal injuries to yourselves. All in all, an excellent op. I couldn't have asked for better."

High fives and thank yous and awesomes were shared all around.

Coulson allowed a smile to show on his face before he went to a neutral expression. "Cap, I'll need you to go to the precinct with me. We have to coordinate interrogation of the participants with the NYPD." He sighed. "I miss the days when S.H.I.E.L.D. had plenty of resources to do the interrogations ourselves."

Steve nodded. "I'm happy to help you deal with that."

"Debriefing at eleven thirty tomorrow morning in the tower kitchen," Coulson growled. "You're dismissed."

Tony pushed against Sam's arm. "We're flying home."

'Yep," Sam agreed.

The mechanical flutter of Falcon's wings was punctuated by the roar of Iron Man's repulsors.

Clint caught at Phil's hand. The older man put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't wait up."

The archer studied Phil's face before nodding. Then he climbed into the SUV. As Happy drove, Clint massaged Natasha's shoulders and she, in turn, rubbed his arms.
Bruce met them at the elevator in the tower common room. "To my lab," he said and got in the elevator with them. "I just cleared Sam and Tony."

"So, um, where's Fitz?" Clint asked.

"Hyperbaric chamber." Bruce laughed. "This may be the only time he's ever truly been glad to have to climb into that thing and away from the world."

"Sam could still go talk to him there," Natasha said.

They got out at the floor where Bruce's lab was. "Jemma bolted the door," Bruce said. "And it seems that Fitz is ignoring Sam's texts."

"He's probably asleep," Clint said.

"Pretending to be." Bruce grinned.

Twenty minutes later, Bruce completed his examination of Natasha and Clint. "Remarkably few scrapes and bruises," he noted with satisfaction. "You're cleared."

"Thanks," Natasha said.

Clint gave him a thumbs up. "Way better than standard S.H.I.E.L.D. medical ever was."

They headed to their respective rooms.

After taking a long hot shower, Clint went to bed. He lay in the dark for a moment. "Jarvis," he said.

"Yes, Agent Barton."

"Let me know when Phil gets home, even if you have to wake me up."

"I will," the A.I. said.

Steve and Phil got back to the Tower at one in the morning. Bruce was waiting up for them. "I need to clear the two of you before I go to bed."

"You're the medic now?" Steve asked.

"By default, yes." Bruce sighed. "Jemma's asleep."

"We're fine," Phil grumbled, making to step around the doctor.

"I'm fine," Steve corrected, catching him by the back of the tac suit. "Other than a bruised rib that'll be fine by morning, all my injuries healed before we left the precinct. You got shot."

"Lab," Bruce ordered, pointing the way. "Both of you." The don't test me was apparent but unspoken.

Steve and Phil looked at each other. By unspoken agreement they headed to the good doctor's lab.

Once Bruce was satisfied neither of them was in need of serious medical attention, he dismissed
them and made off to put himself to bed.

Steve let himself into his room and found the lights low, almost but not quite off, and Bucky curled up asleep on his bed. "Oh," Steve muttered to himself, "you waited for me."

His eyes were caught by Bucky's peaceful face, dark lashes resting against his cheek. In the dim light, Bucky's relaxed face looked young and the blond of his hair and eyebrows wasn't as jarring. He was looking at the face of his Bucky again, the one before Hydra, before the Winter Soldier. The face that populated his sketchbooks, haunted his dreams...

Steve's had stretched toward Bucky. He wanted to touch him, stroke his fingers over the warm smooth cheek and then the dark stubble along Bucky's jaw, wanted to whisper his name, pull him close—

With a sharp intake of breath, Steve took a step back. Bucky had kissed him but they hadn't even gotten to talk about it. What if—what if that didn't mean what he hoped it did.

He looked around awkwardly for a moment, unsure if he should try to carry Bucky back to his own room, or whether he shouldn't for fear of waking him. To delay having to decide, he went to shower. Once he was washed and dried and dressed in sleep clothes, he stood in the middle of his room for a long moment.

Feeling guilty the whole time, he pushed gently on Bucky's shoulder, trying to get him to move off the comforter just enough. The sergeant made a sound in his sleep. "Bucky," he whispered, "let me get you under the covers."

"Mmm," Bucky said as he moved, his arms and legs floppy because he wasn't really awake.

Pushing and tugging, Steve got him under the covers and then carefully crawled into bed next to Bucky, back to back, like when they shared an apartment too small to have more than one bed.

A minute later, Bucky turned over and threw an arm around Steve, hand flopping against Steve's stomach. He rubbed his face against Steve's shoulder. After a shocked, breathless moment, Steve moved his arm and pressed his hand over Bucky's.

Steve never needed much sleep anyway, and this—having Bucky snuggled up against him—was going to keep him awake all night. The lights were plenty dim, so he didn't bother about them, just stared at the wall.

Bucky's warm breath wafted rhythmically through the thin Tshirt fabric covering his shoulder. The tension in Steve's body leaked away. He drifted off and dreamed of Bucky laughing in the rain.

Phil trudged down the hallway toward Clint's room. He didn't expect it when the archer, clad only in pajama pants, opened the door. "I thought you'd be asleep."

"I was." Clint grinned. "I asked Jarvis to wake me when you got home. He didn't wake me up until Bruce was done with you. Probably for the best."

Phil stepped into the room. Clint closed the door behind him and then ran his fingers over the scorch mark on the back of Phil's field suit. "I bet you're more bruised up than me this time."
Phil tensed up, not sure whether Clint's neutral sounding statement was actually tacit disapproval. "Thanks for the assist with those two goons."

"Happy to do it." Clint stepped around Phil and pulled him close by one of the straps on the field suit. "It's always so hot to watch you being Agent Coulson, badass defender of the good in the world."

The sense of surprise had barely caught up to Phil when Clint astonished him again by kissing him. Clint kept kissing him as he stepped back just enough to slowly unzip Phil's utilitarian suit. He reached into the opening and ran his hand over Phil's black undershirt.

Phil ran his hand over the smooth expanse of skin that was Clint's bare back.

"I'd forgotten how much I like tac suits," Clint whispered against Phil's lips as he undid the buckles. "Not wearing them. I kind of hate wearing them. Seeing them on you, though, that's a different story." He stepped around Phil, pulled the unforgiving material down his arms and then stepped away, taking the kevlar with him. "And on Natasha, but that's different."

Clint placed a kiss on Phil's shoulder. "You are so sexy."

"I don't feel sexy." Phil scrubbed a hand over his face. "I feel like I need a shower."

Clint laughed and swatted Phil's behind. "So shower. I'll take all this to the laundry chute."

When Phil stepped out of the shower, the pajama pants he'd set on the counter were missing. A few minutes later, he walked out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his hips and went over to the bed. The lights were low and Clint was laying under the covers but is still awake.

"That was not funny," Phil said.

"Not meant to be funny." Clint sat up and then reached toward Phil. As he stretched and the sheet shifted away, Phil realized the archer was naked. "I miss after mission sex," Clint said.

Phil clenched his hand more tightly where he was holding the towel together.

Clint laughed softly. "Come on, babe." He put his left hand over Phil's where it held the towel, and crawled his right hand up Phil's chest until it rested over his scars.

"Come here," the archer whispered.

Gripped by uncertainty, Phil hesitated. Clint loosened Phil's fingers until his towel dropped to the floor.

Phil sucked in a breath. "Are you sure?"

Clint rolled his eyes. "Even when I was the most pissed I still wanted you."

"Maybe I should've questioned that more, should've—"

Clint tumbled him down onto the bed. "Stop second-guessing yourself," he mumbled against the older man's lips.

Phil found himself engulfed in a deep insistent kiss. He put his hands on Clint's back and trailed one from the archer's nape to the small of his back which made Clint gasp. The only thing that made sense any more was touching Clint, kissing Clint, making love to Clint. He flipped the younger man onto to his back and Clint grinned up at him.
After the completion of their coupling, Clint sank down beside Phil. Phil smoothed his fingers over Clint's shoulder while Clint caressed Phil's chest. The restless play of Clint's fingers through Phil's chest hair and over his skin was soothing.

"Best use of adrenalin ever," Clint muttered.

Phil raised an eyebrow. "This one instance?"


Phil grinned to himself.

"And, hey," Clint said, "were you disagreeing about this use of adrenalin?"

"Not at all." Phil kissed the corner of his mouth. "This was a great use of adrenalin." He combed his fingers through Clint's hair. "I didn't know you were so nostalgic about mission sex."

"How could I not be?" Clint smirked. "There are so many great examples of it."

Phil frowned.

"Like that time in Vienna," Clint said. "Natasha was supposed to distract the target but it became clear that he wasn't interested in her at all. You were about to scrub the mission when the target glimpsed you and began flirting. Within ten minutes, he grabbed your ass. You elbowed him without seeming to move. He kept being grabby and you kept surreptitiously fighting him. Before the night was over, he was falling all over himself apologizing for his clumsiness."

"I remember that." Phil turned toward Clint,

"Yeah?"

Excitement bubbled up in Phil's chest knowing that this was a clear real memory. "While the target was occupied with me, Natasha hacked into his computer system and downloaded more intel than we'd thought we could get."

"Yeah." Clint chuckled.

"The, uh, mission sex that night was...vigorous."

"You do remember!"

"I do," Phil stroked his fingers over Clint's cheek. "You seemed a bit manic."

"I couldn't stand him putting his handprints all over you."

"Oh?" Phil took a breath, surprised that the archer had felt that possessive.

"Tried to make sure I wiped away all traces of his touch." Clint shifted enough to press his mouth to Phil's.

Phil fell asleep with Clint's kiss against his lips.
Chapter 48

Steve was pretty sure Jarvis's voice had awakened him but he didn't remember what the virtual butler said. What he was very aware of was Bucky warm against his back and rubbing his hand over Steve's arm. Steve opened his eyes and turned over. He did a doubletake at Bucky's blond hair. The dark roots were comforting though. Bucky would be back to himself in a few weeks.

"Hey." Bucky slid his hand up Steve's arm and cupped his shoulder.

"Hey." Feeling uncertain, Steve brushed his hand over Bucky's right arm. "So that wasn't just a dream."

Bucky raised his eyebrows.

Steve smiled. "That I found you asleep on my bed."

Bucky smirked. "Did you used to dream about that?"

Steve's face felt hot. "Um, uh," he mumbled, stumbling over the unintelligible sounds, not sure how much he should admit.

Bucky's smile softened as he touched Steve's cheek. "What about the other thing? Was that a dream?"

"Other thing?"

"The part where we kissed."

"That was more like you kissed me, then I kissed you, then you kissed me and I kissed back..." Now Steve's cheeks felt scorched.

"Yeah," Bucky breathed. He shifted forward just enough to place a brief lip-cling and release kiss against Steve's mouth. "Good morning."

For a second, Steve wondered if he hadn't actually woken up yet.

"Since you were fifteen, huh?" Bucky teased.

Okay, Steve must be awake. He wouldn't feel this mortified if he was still dreaming.

Bucky stroked his cheek. "All your blood's pooling in your face."

"I don't really know how to do this yet." Steve's gesture encompassed him and Bucky.

Bucky engulfed him in a deep soft kiss. "Better?" he whispered.

"Yeah..." Steve exhaled.

"All that time." Bucky slid his fingers through Steve's hair. "Why'd you never say anything?"

"I didn't want to ruin our friendship!" Steve sat up and leaned against the headboard. "I didn't want to make you hate me, make you leave." He sighed. "You were clearly interested in women."

Bucky sat up too, "So were you!"
"That's different."

"It's really not." He joined Steve in leaning against the headboard. "I just got more attention from them. At least before you got turned into goddamn Adonis."

Steve snorted derisively. "Why didn't you ever say anything?"

Bucky let out a breath. "I don't know. I don't remember. I'm," he paused, "not sure since when I— I've always cared about you, you're my best friend. I just don't know when that.... I don't even know if it's since before Hydra or after. I think before, but everything's still scrambled. I can't be sure."

Steve nodded. "I understand."

He put an arm around Bucky's shoulders and let him lean against him, the familiar gesture suddenly new and uncertain. Bucky chewed his lip a moment. "You used to hang around the Village."

"Yeah."

"You're queer, aren't you?"

"No," came the knee-jerk reply. Steve sighed. "Yes? I don't know."

"Mm." Bucky twisted to lean more heavily on Steve.

"You...?"

"No."

"Then what is this?"

"No clue." Bucky barked a short laugh. "Brain damage?"

"I don't think that's how that works," Steve said carefully.

Bucky snorted and closed his eyes. For a long moment he said nothing. In the interlude, Steve just listened to the both of them breathe. "Have you, you know, with a man...?"

"I—" Steve looked away quickly. "Yeah."

Bucky tucked his head against Steve's chest. "What's it like?"

"Uh." Steve blinked at the far wall, feeling an embarrassed flush creep up his neck as he petted the other man's hair. "I don't know know how to answer that, Buck. I mean, well, it's different. Than with a woman. But it's also really not." He hesitated. "Do—do you want to...?"

There was a beat of silence.

"Not right now."

They clung together for a minute. "Right now"—Bucky kissed his cheek—"right now I want breakfast. Jarvis said Clint's cooking."

Steve smiled. "Sounds good."

When they got to the kitchen fifteen minutes later, they found Clint looking a little rumpled but
comfortable in an eggplant colored Tshirt and gray sweatpants, humming and occasionally singing under his breath. Clint turned around and grinned. "Ah, my first patrons."

Steve nodded. "Good term. You're an artist with food."

Clint chuckled.

Bucky made a big show of taking a deep whiff of the aromas emanating from the ovens. "That smells fantastic. Whatcha making?"

"Four different kinds of quiche are in the small oven," Clint said, "and four breakfast casseroles are in the other oven along with two pans of biscuits. I ordered up a couple of boxes of muffins and pastries from the bakery across the street, and I'm finishing up the last of five different brunch friendly salads."

"Looks like you made pitchers of juice," Steve said from behind the open refrigerator door.

Clint turned back to assembling a large spinach, bacon, and raspberry salad. "Just enhanced some of the orange juice. There's a couple pitchers of orange raspberry juice and a couple made with orange and pineapple juice that need sparkling water added to them."

"I can do that." Steve hauled the four pitchers of juice out of the fridge and put them on the big kitchen island. "It looks like there's also plain orange juice."

"Mmhmm," Clint said and resumed humming and singing softly to himself.

Bucky got a bowl and put sample amounts of fruit salad, chickpea salad, and pasta salad in it. He made appreciative noises as he tried them.

Coulson, looking pristine in a navy blue suit and a blue silk tie, walked in carrying a stack of folders. When Clint glimpsed him, he turned and a luminous smile brightened his face. He made the next few lines of the song he was singing—Only You Can Love Me This Way—more audible then turned back to his cooking.

Phil blushed. He paused only a moment before moving forward and carding his fingers through Clint's blond hair.

"Dolce cocoa coffee?" Phil asked. Clint nodded as he continued singing softly.

Steve had seen the many weeks of tension between the two older men and he wouldn't have begrudged them their easy and affectionate interaction in any case, but he envied them. He wondered if he and Bucky would—could—ever get to a place like that and how high the price might be to get there. Clint and Coulson had certainly paid their dues, and then some.

Natasha leaned against the door frame as she watched Clint pull pan after pan out of the ovens. He closed both ovens, now empty, and turned them off, before he finished singing his song. Then he glanced up at the redhead. They grinned at each other.

She went over and ruffled his hair. "It's been a long, long time since I've seen you this way."

"Too long," he said.

She took a breath. "That's for sure."

"I agree." Coulson's words were quiet as he handed coffee to Clint and Natasha,
With a clear look of surprise, Natasha took the latte. "Thank you."

Coulson grabbed his dolce vanilla coffee from the counter then lifted it to her in solute. She returned the gesture. After taking a long appreciative sip, she sidled up to Steve.

“So,” she began casually, “I'd've been better off trying to hook you up with Lillian's brother, huh?”

Steve cringed. “Not necessarily, and he also has piercings I'm not ready for.”

Clint looked up. “Lillian from accounting's brother?”

“Yeah,” Steve and Natasha said together.

“He's got piercings I'm not ready for.”

Plate only half full, Bucky moved to stand beside Steve. "Well, I'm not getting any piercings," he growled.

Steve smiled at him.

Coulson gestured with his fork. "Is this your turkey sausage casserole?"

"Yep," Clint said.

"Delicious, You've outdone yourself," Coulson said. "I always like it when being happy inspires you to cook."

"I always like it when he cooks." Bucky took a bite of breakfast casserole and his face lit up. "But I see what you mean." He went over and put an arm around Clint's shoulders. "Normally, you're the patron saint of breakfast but cooking when you're happy makes you the archangel."

Clint grinned.

"Archangel of breakfast?" a rumpled Tony said from the door. "I gotta try this." Pepper was behind him, pristine in her business suit. Maria was behind her, carrying a stack of files.

"No strawberries in anything," Clint said.

"You're a saint." Pepper smiled. "No matter what anyone else says." She got herself a plate.

A bright looking Jemma and Fitz walked in followed two minutes later by a bedraggled looking Bruce and then Sam.

"Debriefing's not for another hour." Clint frowned. "How is it that everybody's already in the kitchen?"

"Jarvis," Tony said.

"I hope you don't mind." Pepper set her full plate down and went over to the coffee maker. "About a month ago, I asked Jarvis to let everyone know when it looked like you were cooking for the group and when the food was ready."

"Huh," Clint said. "So when's Rose showing up?"

"I made the job offer this morning and she accepted." Tony sighed. "But she's working for that big hotel restaurant and had to give thirty days notice."
"I'm still only cooking when I feel like it." Clint dug in to the food on his own laden plate.

"Understood," Pepper said. "I'm grateful any time you cook."

"Me too," Bucky said with enthusiasm.

"You ever want to open a restaurant," Maria said, "let me know. I'll look into expanding that little pub of mine."

"Hawkeye's Bar and Grill." Clint smirked. "I like the sound of that."

The group continued to talk and eat. Fitz turned pink now and again and steadfastly did not look at Sam who, for his part, kept sneaking glances of the Scotsman. Jemma pointedly ignored them both.

As soon as Pepper was finished eating, she stood. "Maria's staying but I have to go back to the grindstone. Lunch was delicious, Clint."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Tony's eyebrow ticked up. "You never call me sir."

Clint glanced at Phil, then at at Tony, then rolled his eyes. "Yeah, no, not gonna happen."

Tony laughed, then pulled Pepper down for a kiss. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

She grinned. "So, no restrictions, huh?"

"None for you, my love."

Laughing, she left the kitchen.

About the time Bucky was polishing off thirds, Coulson glanced at his watch. "It's only eleven fifteen," Coulson said.

Bucky stood and stretched. "Don't think I need to stay for this."

"Not unless you want to," Coulson said.

Bucky put his dishes in the dishwasher. "I'm a go nap then."

Steve frowned. Bucky sure was having trouble recovering from the trip to Maryland. Maybe it had been a little too much for him, what with the arguing with Tony, the stuff with Natalia, and the visits to the graves.

Bucky skimmed his hand over Steve's shoulders as he went by on his way out of the kitchen.

Coulson poured himself a fresh cup of coffee, black. Standing beside him, Maria made a latte for herself before resuming her seat. She put a pecan roll on a small clean plate and began eating it with a knife and fork. He put his dishes in the dishwasher then sat back down. "We're all here, so I'm going to start. Jarvis, please record this debriefing."

"Of course, Director Coulson," the A.I. said.

"Tony and Sam, you were the first to reach the battle zone. Tony, let's begin with you."

Tony described his impressions and experiences during the battle. Coulson then went around the
room and had everyone except Maria do the same. Bruce debriefed on the nature of the few minor injuries. Then Coulson said, "Maria, why don't you tell us what you found out this morning?"

Maria nodded and passed folders out. "I talked to the mayor's office and the NYPD this morning. Preliminary evidence indicates the energy weapons are designed from bastardized Chitauri tech, and most likely are Hydra prototypes. Hydra's trying to use Chitauri tech as a substitute for Tesseract energy, which isn't working well. Most of the weapons malfunctioned."

"That," Coulson said, "combined with your professionalism is why there were few casualties."

"Can I get my hands on a couple of those weapons?" Tony asked.

Coulson nodded. "I'll ask this afternoon."

There was a general discussion about the weapons and the battle, then Coulson gave his analysis and wrapped the debriefing up. He stood. "Maria and I are due at the precinct in an hour. I'll see you later this afternoon."

Coulson locked eyes with Clint for a moment then he and Maria left.

Tony rolled his shoulders. "I'm still fried from last night. Think I'll just chill for a bit and watch a movie. Who's with me?"

"I'm in," Bruce said. "After we finish cleaning up."

Natasha stood. "I've got to figure out what to pack. Fitz, I understand you have a couple new weapons for me."

"Yes, ma'am." Fitz stood and followed her out.

"I'm up for a Disney movie." Jemma loaded clear mugs into the dishwasher.

"Sounds good to me," Sam said as he continued putting leftovers away.

"How about you, Legolas?"

Clint shrugged. "Sure Tony, why not?"

"Awesome. Capsicle?"

Steve stood. "Think I'll go check on Bucky." He glanced at Clint who gave him a thumbs up.
"You're actually bothering with DVDs?" Sam asked.

"Blueray but yeah." Tony shrugged. "I kind of like having physical disks. Harder to have them taken away than digital copies."

"That is a good point," Jemma said.

"Skip the pre-menu reel?" Tony asked.

"Nah, let it play. Disney movies always have trailers for other Disney movies," Clint said.

"And Studio Ghibli movies," Bruce added.

"Orientophile."

The doctor grinned. "And proud of it."

A trailer for the DVD release of Pinocchio came on. Tony eyed the screen warily. "I've always hated that movie."

Bruce smirked. "Why?"

"Inanimate humanoids coming to life." Tony shuddered.

"You're a roboticist, Tony."

"Exactly."

"That makes no sense."

"Yes it does." Tony left the room.

Bruce looked around. "Anyone think that made sense?"

Clint fiddled with the remote. "Nope."

By the time Tony returned—with popcorn—the disk menu was up. "Oh good." He plopped on the couch. "I maybe had Jarv fudge with all my disks a little to make them extra international, so what language we wanna watch in? I have a thing for Disney Dubs."

"How about German?" Sam said.

Tony looked at him.

"What?" Sam said. "It's a language I understand and it kind of fits the movie. That dress of Anna's makes me think Sound of Music."

"That was Austria."

"They speak German."

Clint wielded the remote and Frozen started up in German. Tony opened his mouth. Clint elbowed him before Tony could say anything and growled, "Shut up and share the popcorn."
Tony held the bowl out and Jemma and Bruce laughed.

"Shh," Sam said. "I love this song."

Forty minutes into the movie, Clint couldn't sit still anymore. Aches from the previous night's battle held his attention more than the catchy movie songs. He got up quietly and made his way to the kitchen.

Clint found Bucky slumped on the kitchen island in his boxers and undershirt, face smushed against his right arm, absently shelling the contents of a bowl of in-shell mixed nuts with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand.

"Uh, Barnes? You okay man?" Clint rummaged in the pantry until he found the ibuprofen. He took three of the blue gel caps.

“No.” Bucky didn't bother to look up.

Clint came around the island to face him. “Like I need to have a tranq arrow nocked type not okay, or I need to call the shrink not okay, or we need to test if you really are incapable of getting drunk not okay?”

“The last one.” He placed a Brazil nut on the counter and brought his fist down on it.

“Okay.” Clint grabbed himself a stool. “What's up?”

Bucky sighed. “I just ran out of Steve's room.”

“Why...?”

“Because I don't know what I'm doing.” He sat up. “I don't even know how to do what I halfway think I ought to be doing and I chickened out.”

“Oh my God, did you leave him in bed?” Clint looked seriously concerned.

“No! No.” Bucky dropped his face into his hands. “Not quite.”

“Damn.”

“Why is this so hard?”

“He's your best friend and you don't want to fuck things up.” Clint scraped some of the shelled nuts into his hand and ate a couple. “By, you don't know what you're doing, you mean literally mechanically, don't you?”

“Yes.” Bucky's response was muffled and somewhat tinny coming through his hands.

“You know,” Clint threw a nut into his mouth and chewed. “You're dealing with a human being.”

“Yeah?”

“There's a lot of stuff that's the same about all human beings, men and women.”

Bucky made an uncertain grimace. “Not really.”

“No really,” Clint said. “Think about it—hands, mouths, broad expanses of skin, common ticklish spots—that's all the same regardless of boy parts or girl parts. I mean, girls have a couple more
squishy things but really.” He shrugged. “There's a lot more that's the same, like having feet, hair, eyes, faces. There's really more the same than is different. So, you're making out with your main squeeze, you're mostly doing the same kinds of things—kissing, touching, looking for the sensitive spots that get the best reactions. Most of those sensitive spots are common too, like the ear, the neck, chest, back, behind the knee—”

“Behind the knee?” Bucky gave Clint a questioning look.

“Typically very sensitive. You have got to be more imaginative.”

Bucky crushed another nut with his fist. “I see what you mean, up to a certain point.”

Clint nodded. “It's the end game that's a little different.”

Bucky sighed. “And that's what I can't imagine.”

Clint leaned his elbows on the island. “Do you know how to use Google?”

“Yeah.” He looked up at the archer.

“Google. The internet is full of sex. Your other option is I find the Gay Kama Sutra that Natasha gave me that I still don't know if it was supposed to be a joke.”

“Uh.” Bucky blushed slightly, which made Clint snicker. “I'll Google.”

Clint picked through the pile of shells, separating out bits of edible nut. “Of course, at some point, you're going to have to ask him.”

“Ask him?”

“Yep, even if he didn't already know more about this particular kind of circumstance than you—and I'm pretty sure he does—” Clint said and Bucky made a choking sound. “You should ask him, just like you would any lover.”

“I kinda tried but...” Bucky shrugged then studied his hands. “Like what?”

“You know, the usual stuff. What do you like? What do you want to do? How do you want to do it? Is this okay? How about this?”

Bucky's face went scarlet. Clint looked at him and calmly said, “You can't read his mind you know.”

Bucky exhaled. “Wish I could.”

“And that has been the problem,” Clint said. “You both kept trying to guess, or read each other's minds, rather than actually saying what you meant.”

Bucky nodded. “Can't say that isn't true.”

“So you need to say it,” Clint said, “and that might mean just laying it all out there.”

“All?”

Clint considered the sergeant for a long moment. “Maybe you just need to say to him, I want to fuck you and I don't know what I'm doing because I'm a virgin when it comes to being with a man.”
Bucky's eyes went wide and he took a shocked breath.

"Oh my God, Barton!" Steve barked as he strode in, fully dressed and carrying a robe over one arm.

Bucky stood and put a hand up. "He's not wrong."

Steve's face went soft when he looked at Bucky. "I know, but—"

"We were all there at some point," Clint interrupted gently. "If we're lucky, whoever takes us through the gate into the garden of forbidden fruit and knowledge really cares about us and takes us on that tour thoughtfully, while handfeeding us small bites of the apple."

Steve draped the robe around Bucky then stared at Clint. He turned back to Bucky. "Come on." He moved Bucky toward the door. "Tell me what he said."

"Hey Steve," Clint said.

Steve stopped and looked over his shoulder. Bucky put his arms through the sleeves of the robe.

"Shouldn't that be 'Come on, babe, tell me what he said.'"

Steve rolled his eyes.

"I'm serious," Clint said.

Bucky put his arm through Steve's. "Come on, babe."

Clint grinned. When the anxious couple was out the door, he dropped his face into his hands.

"How did I get to be the guy in charge of dealing with the supersoldiers' bisexual crises?"

With a sigh he got up and made two cappuccinos.

"Jarvis," he said, "where's Nat?"

"Miss Romanoff is in Sir's workshop with young Agent Fitz," the virtual butler said.

"Anyone else in the workshop?" Clint worked on making a latte.

"Not at this time, Agent Barton."

"I totally wish I could make one of these for you, Jarvis. You deserve a treat too."

"I do appreciate the thought. I believe I would enjoy many of the coffee concoctions if I had the means to do so. You seem especially skilled at creating the coffee drinks much as you are especially skilled at creating food dishes."

"Aw, thank you." Clint set the latte on the counter next to the cappuccinos. Despite knowing it was a meaningless gesture, he glanced up at the ceiling. "I want to tell you that, um, you've been a good friend. I don't always appreciate right at the moment when it feels like you're kicking my ass sometimes. Course, I have that same issue with Nat. Anyway, I look back and I realize that you've looked out for me. And, uh, thank you."

"You are most welcome, Agent Barton."

Clint nodded. He picked up the three coffees and headed to the workshop. Jarvis preemptively
opened doors, including elevator doors, for him the whole way. Clint walked into the workshop, found a clear enough space on a lab bench, and then set the coffees down.

Fitz was showing Natasha how to reload a small weapon that was disguised as a long tubular pendant on a stylish, heavy, but not ostentatious, necklace. The scientist eyed the three clear mugs. "Can I have the latte?"

"Sure," Natasha and Clint said at the same time.

Fitz flinched. "No wonder everyone—never mind."

Natasha raised an eyebrow. "Tends to think we're a couple at first?"

Fitz nodded into the steam of the mug he'd picked up. "You still kind of seem to be."

"Not if you pay attention," Clint said.

"True." Natasha grinned, feral and bright. "Because if you do, you see that we're better as the deadly spy duo."

"Still confusing." Fitz took a drink of coffee. "Mm. Hazelnut."

"Speaking of confusing"—Natasha picked up her cappuccino—"you should talk to Sam. Those texts you showed me? He was teasing you. Then he was sorry because you didn't understand."

Clint was thoughtful as he drank some cappuccino. "When he first got here, he spent a lot of time working the relationships out which I'm pretty sure he finally did. And he doesn't seem shy."

Fitz blinked. "Meaning what?"

"He's more direct than some—most—of the men in the tower." Natasha said.

Clint clapped the young blond on the shoulder. "Besides, he's not the one that looks at you sometimes like you're forbidden fruit under glass. Go talk to him, heck have dinner with him, see what gets stirred up."

Fitz held one hand up. "I don't want to stir up anything."

"Yes you do," Natasha said quietly.

"Well"—Fitz straightened himself to his full height—"I don't need you pushing me at anyone the way you did Barnes and Rogers."

Clint and Natasha shared a look.

"We don't meddle that way," she said.

"I didn't push," Clint said. "I didn't even do any facilitating until they'd both made their positions painfully clear."

"This isn't pushing?" Fitz sounded skeptical.

"I'm encouraging you to get this cleared up before someone's feelings get hurt."

Fitz frowned. "Sam's?"
Clint exhaled. "No."

Natasha smiled at Clint. He raised an eyebrow at her. "I wasn't going to say a word," she said. "Nothing about you ever being crazy making and frustrating—recently or, you know, in the past." He elbowed her. She shoved his shoulder.

"I still don't understand your relationship," Fitz said. "Agent Romanoff, did you have any questions about the dart gun or the icer?"

"Not right now," the redhead replied.

"I'll just"—Fitz gestured—"go then."

She nodded. After taking a sip of cappuccino she looked at Clint. "So, the office down from Phil's?"

"Sure. I assume everything's locked in your safe?"

"Of course."

Natasha scooped weapons off the top of the lab bench and into a bag. They drank their respective coffees as they made their way to the large parlor that had been turned into a group office for the Avengers. The room contained six desks and eight four drawer security containers that were approved for storing documents and weapons. As authorized backups for each other, Clint and Natasha knew the combinations for one another's safes, and the biometric scanners recognized both of them.

"Just to make sure it works right," Natasha said, "you open the safe."

Clint set his cappuccino on his desk. Then he stepped over to Natasha's safe and dialed the numeric combination before positioning his eye in front of the retinal scanner. The safe unlocked with a soft click.

"Top two drawers?" he said.

She nodded.

They sat across from each other and Natasha walked Clint through the issues she'd been tracking and analyzing for Phil, including information from Barnes, such as her report on him and the drawings Bucky had made of Hydra facilities. She shoved those papers aside. "My analysis of what I saw in Russia and elsewhere in Eastern Europe is complete."

Clint nodded. "I know."

"Obviously I'll update that when I get back from my upcoming trip to Europe, more Western Europe this time." She pulled two thick folders out of the stack. "This is the most critical project right now. I've been working with Maria on S.H.I.E.L.D's org structure and resources."

Clint frowned as she walked him through documents. "So things are still pretty fragmented."

Natasha sighed. "Unfortunately, yes."

"You already moved the electronic files associated with all this to the secure server?"

"Yes." Natasha flipped a laptop open. "Let me show you where it is and how it's all named."
Barefoot and wearing cargo pants and a Tshirt, Bucky sat in his nest of a bed. He shifted against the pillows to lean back more firmly against the wall.

Shoes off but otherwise fully clothed, Steve shifted too. "We can take it slow. Hell, it's been almost eighty years in real time, what's another few days or weeks?"

Bucky ran his hands over the top of his head hard enough to pull hair. "That's kind of it, isn't it? How much time has been wasted."

"We didn't waste anything. A lot of stuff happened to us and I'm just glad to have this chance at all." He took Bucky's hand and spoke softly. "When you fell, I thought I'd never have any chance at all to tell you how important you are to me."

"Guess I'm pressuring myself."

"There's no need." Steve leaned closer to Bucky. "Just relax."

Bucky stroked his fingers over Steve's smooth, stubble-free jaw. Steve pressed his lips to Bucky's in an undemanding kiss. They breathed against each other's mouths for a minute, sharing air and warmth and space, before Bucky deepened the kiss.

Steve slid his fingers through Bucky's hair. Bucky put his arms around Steve and pulled him close against his chest.

Clint is right, Bucky thought, this is pretty much the same—touching faces, combing fingers through hair, kissing, pressing clothed bodies together. Then he wasn't thinking of anything but Steve and what a relief it was to touch him.
Chapter 50

Clint stared at the extravagant coffee machine for thirty seconds then decided it wasn't worth the effort and just poured himself a cup of coffee. Phil had worked late with Tony examining the confiscated prototype energy weapons he and Maria had managed to bring back from the NYPD. Then Phil and Clint had eaten a very late dinner and kept each other up even later.

"Don't drink that," Betty said.

Clint looked up from stirring sugar into his coffee.

"At least not until I get your blood," she said.

"What?" Bruce said. "I thought you were here to get my blood."

"I am. But it would be useful to have control samples from similarly fit and heroic individuals who are ordinary humans who don't have tainted blood." Betty grinned. "You know, like the other Avengers. And Sam."

Sam looked up from his quiche and orange juice. "You want my blood?"

"I do."

"I'm not like the other Avengers," Bruce said haltingly.

She waved a hand. "Oh, you're all different."

Bruce crossed his arms and looked down. "Not exactly heroic."

"Reluctant." She patted his cheek. "But a hero."

Phil strode in wearing a gray suit and aubergine tie accented with a silver pattern. He went straight to the coffee maker.

"Oh," Betty said. "I should get your blood too."

"His blood's tainted," Clint said.

She frowned. "With supersoldier serum?"

"Unfortunately, no," Phil said as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

"With what then?" she asked.

"Classified." Phil drank down half his mug in one go. When he caught Clint's eye, he gave him a small grin and signed *worth it.*

Clint grinned back and signed *I love you.* He felt a little smug when Phil blushed.

"I may as well get more blood from Rogers and Barnes while I'm here," Betty said.

"Bucky isn't out of the hyperbaric chamber yet," Clint said. "And Steve won't leave him while he's in there."

"Another time then." Betty looked up as Natasha came in wearing workout clothes. "Oh good.
Please just get some orange juice for now. I'd like to get a pint of your blood."

Natasha raised an eyebrow but poured herself some orange juice.

"Where's Tony?" Betty said.

Bruce shook his head. "Tony's blood is compromised too."

"All right." She gestured toward Bruce, Natasha, Sam, and Clint. "Let's go to Bruce's lab."

With a sigh Clint handed his untouched mug to Phil and followed Betty out of kitchen.

Down in Bruce's lab, Betty handed out consent forms and personal history forms. Clint exhaled and took the pen Bruce offered him. He began filling out the four page consent form full of small type and special sections. Each page had to be initialed and the last page signed. The personal history form was even worse, and seven pages long.

"Wow." Sam frowned at the pages in front of him. "These forms are extra complicated."

"And long," Bruce muttered.

Betty shrugged. "It is for a research project."

Natasha finished filling out her forms at the same time as Bruce. He put her in a recliner, leaned it back, inserted a needle in her arm, and then got her hooked up so her blood started flowing into a collection bag. She never so much as winced and calmly played with her phone once Bruce had her settled.

Sam finished his paperwork while Bruce was accessing the redhead's vein. Betty ushered Sam to the recliner next to Natasha's. He grimaced when Betty accessed his vein. She got him hooked up and settled then turned to Bruce. "I guess you'll have to lay on the sofa."

"Sure, fine." Bruce flung himself down on the slightly ratty sofa. Betty knelt beside the sofa and began prepping his arm. He cringed. "Geez, that tourniquet pinches."

"Don't be such a baby," she muttered.

When she slid the needle into a vein in his elbow, Bruce's face scrunched up like he'd bitten down on a lemon. "Who taught you how to draw blood?"

"You did."

"I didn't."

"But you did," she insisted, "at my father's lab."

He frowned. "You must not get much practice."

"You whine a lot." She finished the prep and started collecting his blood into a bag.

Bruce clasped her arm. The shadow of hope that passed over his face was painful to watch. "Thank you," he murmured.

She shook her head. "Don't thank me until I get somewhere."

"It matters that you're willing to try."
"The road to hell—"

"That's how I got here." Bruce interrupted her. "With misguided good intentions. Well thought out good intentions are worthwhile in their own right."

Betty stared at him for a moment then nodded. She went over to Natasha whose blood collection was complete. The actual blood collection had taken twelve minutes. Betty deaccessed Natasha. "You should stay here for fifteen minutes." She wiped the faux leather recliner down with disinfectant.

Natasha raised an eyebrow. "I'll let you know if I feel faint. I'm going to Coulson's office." She left.

Betty took Clint's completed forms. "I'll wait on Bruce," he said.

She gave him a hard-eyed look. "Suit yourself."

Behind Betty, Sam mouthed good move. Bruce chuckled. She turned to stare at him. He gave her an innocent look. "Isn't it time to deaccess Sam?"

She huffed, deaccessed Sam and then deaccessed Bruce. Bruce gently but efficiently got Clint hooked up to have his blood collected.

"Thanks," the archer said.

"Don't mention it," Bruce said.

Sam leaned against the lab bench where Betty was packing carefully labeled bags of blood into a cooler. "What is this research you're doing?"

She glanced at him. "Long term effects of supersoldier serum on subjects biochemical processes as evidenced by blood chemistry."

"So," Sam mused, "you want to see how Bruce's blood is difference from ours as well as from the more normal supersoldiers—I use the term normal loosely, of course."

"That's one aspect."

"Uhhuh."

"No need to sound skeptical," she groused.

"Wouldn't dream of it." Sam held his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "I've seen all kinds of weird research trials. Some of them get important unpredicted results."

She raised an eyebrow at Sam before going over to check on Clint. "Just a couple more minutes."

He nodded. Five minutes later Bruce had him deaccessed. "I'm a go have that coffee now."

"You really should have orange juice and something to eat first," Bruce said.

Clint sighed. "Okay, fine."

"Call if you feel lightheaded," Betty said.

"I will," Clint said knowing he wouldn't. Judging from the looks Sam and Bruce gave him, they knew he wouldn't either. Just as Clint closed the lab door behind himself, he heard Bruce say,
"Jarvis—"

Clint went by the deserted kitchen where he had orange juice and a bagel before making himself a cup of coffee which he took to Phil's office. As he approached the open door of the Director's office, he heard Natasha say, "—asked Jarvis to help me locate it on the internet. He spent three weeks crawling through cyberspace, including every obscure corner he could find and a few places he shouldn't have been able to get to, and—nothing. The Kuznetzov report should have been out there with everything else I dumped on the internet. I asked Jarvis to hack into what's left of the S.H.I.E.L.D. intranet and it's not there either."

Clint paused just outside the door, where he couldn't be seen.

"Maybe the file was corrupted," Phil said. "It might be just as well if no more copies exist."

"There might be hard copies," Natasha said. "Either way, you should talk to him."

Phil exhaled loudly. "There are a lot of things I should talk to Clint about."

There was a moment of silence. "I've finished packing."

"I'm really going to miss you." Phil's words were quiet.

"Clint's not the only one that had trouble believing you're alive," Natasha said.

"Not the only one I hurt."

"No." Natasha's tone was matter of fact. "Makes it that much harder to leave, even for a routine mission. I feel like I'll come back and this won't be true."

Clint stepped forward and around into Phil's office. "I'll send photos of him."

"Encrypted," Phil said.

Natasha gathered both men to her. Clint put his mug on Phil's desk so they could do a proper group hug. When they were all clutched together, Natasha turned her face into Clint's shoulder. "I want pictures of you too."

Clint nodded. "I want you to text every day if you can."

"Me too," Phil muttered. "I'll make sure you get pictures of Clint."

Natasha stilled. Clint had the impression that she was blinking a lot. She hugged them hard then stepped back looking deceptively unaffected. "I'll leave in an hour."

"I'll carry your suitcase down." Clint smirked. "I know you won't let me take your weapons case down."

She looked at him askance. "Of course not." She smiled. "I do appreciate the help." She glanced at Phil. "From you too."

Phil nodded. The redhead turned and swept out.

The Director exhaled and held an arm out in invitation. Clint picked his coffee up before settling against Phil's side. He drank coffee. Phil tightened his arm around Clint's waist. "Sometimes I'm doing okay and sometimes I'm not, especially right now."
Clint kissed Phil's neck. "Yeah, I went through a lot of that. Even now when I finally feel strong I know it doesn't mean everything's fine all the time. Mockta said something about getting to a place of processing things faster."

"That sounds good."

Clint bumped his hip against Phil's. "I'm not giving up on you, you know."

Phil blinked. "If you haven't given up on me by now, I guess you won't. A part of me still keeps waiting for you to—to realize it isn't worth it."

"Some days have been really hard and I wasn't sure how much I could take, but it's been worth it."

"So you're sure now that you can take it?" A small smile flitted over Phil's face.

"Mostly."

"How was the blood collecting?"

"Bruce is better at phlebotomy and he stuck me so it was fine." Clint shrugged. "Maybe Betty's a better researcher though, at least less impulsive."

"What makes you say that?"

"Bruce has faith in her."

Phil's phone vibrated loudly. He looked at the screen. "May."

Clint held his hand up. "I'll see you in Natasha's room."

Phil nodded and thumbed over the screen. "Talk to me," he said briskly into the handheld device.

Clint went to the shared office used by the Avengers. The room was empty. He went and fingered the laptop he usually used before deciding he'd look at Nat's electronic files later. Just as he straightened up, Jarvis said, "I hope I'm not intruding, Agent Barton."

"Not at all, Jarvis."

"I couldn't help but notice that you overheard Ms. Romanoff and the Director discussing the Kuznetzov file but you didn't broach the subject."

"Yes, I eavesdropped." Clint grinned then huffed out a breath. "It's just as well if that file was somehow lost."

"The file is not lost," the AI said. "I have it."

Clint frowned. "But Natasha said you couldn't find it."

"Ms. Romanoff asked me to search the internet and to hack into S.H.I.E.L.D. servers. No copies of the file exist in either place."

"Where does it exist?"

"In my multinet attached storage."

"How did it get there?"
"A single pdf of a hard copy is among the material I pulled out of the data stream before it got to the internet when Ms. Romanoff was dumping S.H.I.E.L.D. files."

"You didn't tell that to Natasha?"

"I answered her queries honestly." After a slight pause, Jarvis added, "I rather thought the report belongs to you."

Despite himself, Clint looked at the ceiling. "To me? I think she wrote it."

"So she has said. Even so, it seems appropriate for you to have say over who sees the contents of that report. Of course, if Ms. Romanoff asks me directly if I have a copy of the Kuznetsov report, I will answer that query honestly. If you have asked me not to release the contents of the report then I would tell her she cannot see it. If Sir asks to see it, I will—of course—release it to him."

"Can I see the report?" Clint asked. "I've never read it."

"Certainly, Agent Barton."

A holographic representation of the Kuznetsov report, complete with scans of post-it notes handwritten by Fury and by Phil, flickered into existence above the desk closest to Clint. He sat and read it.

"Thank you, Jarvis," Clint said as he stood. "I would like to restrict access to the report."

The hologram winked out. "Very good, Agent Barton," the AI said. "With the exception of Sir, I will not allow anyone other than you to see the Kuznetsov report unless you authorize. I will notify you if anyone, including Sir, asks to see the report."

"Thank you."

Clint went to Natasha's room. Phil, Tony, Pepper, Maria, and Sam were already there to see her off. Clint's quiet brooding was accepted by everyone as part of his sadness at seeing Natasha go. When he hugged her goodbye, he clung for a moment. "I'll miss you dukh sestra."

*Sister in spirit.*

"I'll miss you too, moy brat."

Sam made a small sound, apparently unconscious, as if slightly clearing his throat. Natasha raised an eyebrow at him. "No," she said. "There wasn't this much tenderness when we were dating. "That happened because of Coulson."

Clint sighed. "And Phil's death."

"That magnified it," she said.

Phil put his hands in his pockets. Natasha planted farewell kisses on everyone's cheek and then chastely kissed Clint's lips. Clint picked her suitcase up, she picked her weapons case up, and they moved toward the door.

Phil grinned at Sam. "It's kind of a European thing."

Sam's eyebrows quirked up. "The French kiss each other's cheeks."

"I'm not French," Natasha called over her shoulder.
Clint couldn't help but snicker. She elbowed him. She spent the elevator ride down with her head resting on his shoulder.

As he watched Happy maneuver the black sedan containing Natasha out of the garage and head toward the airport, Clint put his hands in his pockets as he thought of the Kuznetzov report. *Did you misunderstand that much?* he wondered. *Or were you trying to protect me?*

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As Natasha left from the lowest levels of the tower, Dr. Erin Mockta was greeted by Bucky on the highest levels of the tower which held the residential floors. She gave him a hug. He stood in front of the elevator for a moment, clutching and unclutching his hands before reaching back and wrapping his right hand round Steve's forearm. "Can he join us?"

Mockta smiled. "Of course he can."

Five minutes later, Bucky and Steve were perched tensely on the edge of Bucky's mattress. They sat about a foot apart not touching each other. Mockta was settled in her usual beanbag chair with her notebook open in her lap. She tapped her pen against the page.

Bucky shot Steve a look and held his palm up. Steve shrugged and shook his head. "You can."

"Should I?"

“If you—"

“I don’t want—”

“Whatever you think—”

“Okay.” Mockta cut them off with a roll of her eyes. "Who confessed to whom and how messy was it?"

The two men gaped at her. She sighed. "I'm a couples' therapist, you guys."

Bucky and Steve looked at each other. "I guess that's right," Bucky muttered.

Mockta grinned. "Yes, that's right."  

Bucky slowly raised his hand.

She tilted her head. "You confessed?"

"Not exactly." Bucky winced. "I kissed him."

Mockta raised an eyebrow.

"It wasn't quite that sudden," Steve said. "A big group of us were talking about the trip to Maryland when Bucky started talking about moths and dreaming about Steve Rogers rather than Captain America and he was kind of hands on about it." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "I got bashful and speechless."

"Then Clint dragged us in here," Bucky said. "He left us alone and I realized"—he took the other
man's hand—"this is still my Steve. So I kissed him."

"More than once," Steve said, "but then I assembled with the Avengers."

"So that was Monday night?" Mockta said.

"Yes," the men said in unison.

Mockta made notes as Bucky and Steve continued to describe the past two days. Bucky was pretty sure she was trying not to smirk as he described his discussion in the kitchen with Clint.

"This all seems meant to be but kind of strange at the same time," Bucky said. "Like it's right and wrong too."

"Tell me about that." Her words were soft.

"Doesn't feel wrong if I don't think about it."

"The attitudes from our era." Steve sighed.

"Which I am unfamiliar with the details of but I know weren't accepting," Mockta said.

"They really weren't," Steve agreed. "And that sort of thing, it gets ingrained."

"Of course it does."

Bucky traced a fingernail between segments of his left wrist. "You pretend it doesn't exist, don't talk about it because it's one of those dark dirty things in society that everyone hopes their kids will never have to know about. But I only think of that if I think about it. As long as I don't think about it, it's just Steve and that's okay."

Mockta talked with Bucky about his cognitive dissonance, Steve related the conversation he'd had with Clint all those weeks back, then she talked with them about learning to separate oneself from the values—and prejudices—one was raised with when necessary. Then her alarm started chirping. Mockta turned the alarm off.

"Before I forget," Bucky said, "I seem to be more tired since going on the trip."

"You're processing a lot," Mockta said, "but you also missed a night in the hyperbaric chamber on the trip and not long before that we reduced the amount of time you spend in the chamber. On the other hand, you've been getting in there for months now."

"Sounds like it could be anything," Steve said.

She nodded. "I've got Clint and Phil scheduled for medical workups on Friday. I'll see if I can get you worked in there too, James."

"Thanks," Bucky said.

After Mockta left, Bucky paced. He couldn't shake a slight unease.

"Go for a run?" Steve asked.

Bucky considered him, then nodded. They went to Central Park and stopped for lunch on their way back to the tower. After they showered and dressed, Steve said, "How about we do something
quieter? Maybe finish our timeline."

Bucky shook his head. "I just want to sleep."

After lunch, Clint sat on the divan in Phil's office and went through the folders, papers, and electronic files that Natasha left for him. He alternately focused on the dry bureaucratic material that littered the space around him including the floor, and mused about the Kuznetsov report. Tomi Wise had protected him, had apparently been better than her word.

For two hours, Clint barely looked up as Fitz and Simmons breezed in and out of the office three times, Phil had a call with the NYPD about the interrogations with the gang members, and then a conference call with the Bus. He vaguely realized that Phil and S.H.I.E.L.D. were trying to figure out where those Chitauri tech weapons came from. It all seemed a worse exercise in frustration than trying to untangle the red tape enveloping Clint. Except—

Clint looked up. "We need to talk to Maria, Pepper, and Tony."

"Hmm." Phil was distracted, typing on his laptop. "What about?"

"Money."

Phil stopped typing and looked at the archer

"There's a glaring hole," Clint said, "in all these reports and spreadsheets about S.H.I.E.L.D's organizational structure. You aren't getting anywhere with reorganizing because you don't have the resources."

Phil scowled. "I am not asking Tony for money."

"Of course not. You're going to ask him—and Pepper and Maria—to help us figure out about Hydra's sources of funding. They've been privately financed and self-financed for decades."

"I don't see how that would help S.H.I.E.L.D. Hydra misappropriated and outright stole most of their resources. Where'd we even begin to get seed money to make S.H.I.E.L.D. self-financed."

Clint tilted his head. "We steal it."

One of Phil's eyebrows ticked up.

Clint grinned. "From Hydra."

Both of Phil's eyebrows jumped, then he leaned back in his task chair and considered Clint.

Steve was starting to wish that Bucky was still napping or that, at least, he'd kept his mouth shut, stuck with kissing Bucky rather than trying to talk out of some misguided notion that doing so would somehow make things better rather than—this. He had no words for this, just knew it was a
form of torture.

“I can't believe you let those guys do that to you.” Bucky ran a hand through his hair.

Steve bristled. “It's nothing disgusting, Buck.”

“That's not what I mean—”

“Then what do you mean?”

“I just—I'm being possessive, okay?”

“Okay.” Steve crossed his arms. “Not that you've any right.”

Bucky looked at him quizzically.

“Back then we weren't anything, you showed no interest in me as anything more than a friend. You had no stake in what I did with whom or how or when or where. You don't get some retroactive claim to me then just because we're something now. That's not how these things work.”

“Yeah, how d'you know? Correct me if I'm wrong but you've never had any kind of serious relationship before.”

“You're wrong.” Steve said flatly.

Bucky took a step back. He looked like he'd been slapped. “Really?”

“There was a boy, 'bout my height, had a little black somewhere back in his family, gave him a color I'd never seen on a person before. And y'know what? He was real sweet. I missed him when he moved out west. Never said a word to anybody about it, just got drunk.”

Bucky sat on the edge of the bed. “You had a boyfriend.”

“Yeah, I did.” Steve sat next to him.

“I had no idea.”

“Of course you didn't. You didn't want to know, I never told you, and you were dating Evelyn at the time so you weren't exactly paying much attention.” Steve sighed and put his hands over his face. Their lurching awkward little makeout sessions had been models of ease and confidence compared to this misery.
Chapter 51

"—Hydra chatter," Phil said.

Clint shifted where he sat on the rug in front of the divan in Phil's office making notes for the meeting they'd scheduled with Pepper, Tony, and Maria. He could probably work more efficiently in the Avengers office, or his room, or even the breakfast nook, but he wanted to be close to Phil. The Bus was in California, so he knew Phil was likely to work extra late. Unobtrusively, he thumbed his phone on and engaged a feature.

"Winter Soldier?" Phil's words broke into his thoughts again. "Skye, is it different from the usual pattern?" After a pause, where Phil was listening to Skye, he said, "Sure, you can call Fitz. He'll be in the hyperbaric chamber later but he can talk to you from there too."

Clint filmed Phil's conversation with Skye and then May for about a minute before he put his phone away. Then he finished making a chart of the ten years of S.H.I.E.L.D. funding before its spectacular Hydra induced fall, and what S.H.I.E.L.D.—at least Phil's part of S.H.I.E.L.D.—had been reduced to over the last two years. Fury had something going on too but Clint didn't have any data, or any other information, for that.

Phil hung up and then came over, pushed some paper files out of the way, and sat beside Clint on the floor. He fidgeted with his phone. Clint looked up at him.

"I'm sorry I sent Natasha away," Phil said. "The mission's critical but not especially dangerous, and she should be back in ten days."

Clint smiled a little. "Babe, I've been partnered with Natasha for a long time. I know what she does for a living."

"I know." Phil scrubbed a hand over his face. "You brooded your way through dinner. I know you've been doing better recently and Natasha being gone makes it harder for you."

"Some. But it's also just been one of those days. Steve and Bucky were way crankier than me at dinner." Clint grinned. "Besides, I'm gonna keep in touch with Nat. I already made a video of you for her. You can help me encrypt it later."

Phil's eyebrow ticked up. "Video?"

"Of you talking to the Bus. Shows you're working too much and neglecting me."

"I—" Phil frowned. "I do work a lot."

"You're also still here." Clint smoothed his fingers over the line between Phil's eyebrows. "With me."

Phil slid one hand along Clint's jaw then leaned forward and kissed him, a soft catch of lips followed by a gently teasing tongue which evolved into a full-blown open-mouthed kiss that had Clint shifting closer and sliding his hands over Phil's shoulder and back.

*Phil loves you* Clint reminded himself. *No matter how neurotic he's always been about getting the words out of his mouth, he loves you.*

When the sensuous kiss ended, Clint summoned his inner strength and leaned his head on Phil's
shoulder. He was pretty sure he couldn't look at Phil while saying this. Phil tightened his arm around Clint's waist and pressed him a little closer against his side. The archer wasn't sure whether that made things easier or harder.

Clint closed his eyes and took a slow deep breath. "I heard Natasha tell you she couldn't find the Kuznetsov report."

"I asked her to find it for me." Phil's answer was matter of fact.

"Why'd you want it?"

"Back when you still weren't speaking to me most of the time—you know, three months ago—" Phil's tone was wry—"I had a sudden memory of the Kuznetsov mission."

"So you wanted to see a copy of the report."

Phil shrugged. "Seemed the natural thing to do. I spent years figuring out about us and chasing my memories by reading reports about you."

Clint nodded. "Wish we'd talked more about this when it came up in Pennsylvania."

"There's just so much," Phil said. "It's easy for any one thing to get lost in the flood."

"Yeah." Clint exhaled. "One thing we haven't tried is you telling me what you remember."

"That's true. It'll take more than one conversation."

"I'm assuming we've got the time." Clint raised his head and looked at Phil. "As in we'll be together for many conversations to come."

"I hope so." Phil touched Clint's cheek. "Let's do that later. I'll hustle to get today's work wrapped up in an hour." The director's phone vibrated. He startled, stood up, then answered it. "Talk to me."

Clint gathered his paper files up then logged off and shut his laptop down. He picked everything up and then signed, one handed, to Phil. Going to the gym.

Phil's expression was a little pained but he nodded. Clint went to the Avengers office, dropped his laptop on his desk, and secured his hardcopy files. On his way to his room, he saw Bucky in the hall.

"You look even more unhappy than you did at dinner," Clint said.

"I could say the same about you," Bucky said.

Clint shrugged. "Kinda smacked into something I thought I was over a long time ago."

"Guess that's going around." Bucky put his hands in his pockets. "Wanna go for a run?"

Clint thought it over. "Sure. Was gonna go to the gym but a run will do just as well, maybe better. Let me get changed. I'll meet you at the common area elevator."

Bucky brightened. "I'll get us some bottles of water."

Ten minutes later, they were in the elevator and headed down. Clint cracked his bottle of water open and drank some. "So what's your malfunction?"
Bucky took another sip of his water before answering. "Steve had a boyfriend."

"Of course he did. And you had girlfriends."

"That's different."

Clint raised his eyebrows. "It's really not."

Bucky scowled. "He knew about my girlfriends."

"And you knew about his."

"Not sure he really had girlfriends. Not serious ones. Peggy would've been." Bucky shrugged.

Clint shoved the other man's shoulder. "S'that really the issue? You used to being the worldly experienced one and in this case you're not?"

Bucky looked at Clint. "I don't know. Maybe."

"You may be the virginal ingenue in this case—"

"Ingenue?" Bucky burst out. "I'm a killer with a checkered past."

Clint snorted. "So am I."

They looked at each other and laughed.

"In any case," Clint said, "you're still driving that bucket of bolts."

"Huh," Bucky said. "What do you mean?"

"Steve went looking for you hoping for nothing more than to find you alive. He fought for you and took care of you expecting nothing, not even gratitude. He was just relieved you're still alive. For anything else, he's been waiting on a sign from you and he doesn't even know it, but he is."

"Sign?"

"That you're emotionally stable enough, well enough, interested enough, anything."

"You saying I'm ungrateful?"

"No. I'm saying you need perspective."

The elevator dinged and the doors opened. The two men stepped out into the lobby and headed toward the nearest, least public, exit.

"That why you're going running?" Bucky asked. "To get perspective?"

"Oh yeah," Clint said on a breath.

"Tell me about it."

"I'll tell you while we walk to Central Park. The Cliff's Notes version."

"Cliff's Notes?"

"Um," Clint said. "Short. Summarized, but with analysis and explanation."
"Sounds good."

They shoved through the door to the outside where they paused to drink more of their water. They headed toward the park and Clint started talking.

With a flare of hope, Steve turned away from the disappointingly empty kitchen and toward the footsteps in the hall. He deflated a little when he saw Phil Coulson. Coulson looked around the kitchen and sighed.

"Have you seen Bucky?" Steve asked.

Coulson shook his head. "I'm looking for Clint."

"I haven't seen him either." Steve shoved past Phil and out into the hall. "Let's check the bar. Maybe they decided to drink together. I checked the gym and they weren't there."

"I checked the gym too, and the dojo. Nothing."

They went down the stairs. They found Fitz, Jemma, Bruce, and Sam in the common area sitting on two different sofas.

"Have you seen Clint or Bucky?" Coulson said.

Jemma and Fitz looked at each other, then shook their heads. Bruce and Sam said, "No," in unison.

Steve sighed and dragged Coulson to the tower bar where they found Tony and Pepper.

"Have you seen Bucky or Clint?" Steve asked.

"No." Tony smirked. "But judging by their behavior at dinner, they could both use a drink." Tony lifted his glass. "And you too."

Pepper elbowed him.

Tony looked at her. "What? It's true."

Pepper raised an eyebrow then turned to Steve and Coulson. "Maybe Jarvis can help you."

"Oh, right," Steve said.

"Jarvis," Coulson said.

"Yes, Director?" the AI said.

"Can you tell me where Clint and Bucky are?"

"Agent Barton and Sergeant Barnes are currently in the limited access elevator returning to the common area," Jarvis replied.

"Thank you," Coulson said.

"My pleasure, Director."
Steve and Coulson turned as one and headed back to the common area, Tony and Pepper on their heels. Sam, Bruce, Jemma, and Fitz watched them curiously as they stood in the open area in front of the elevator. Steve crossed his arms. Thirty seconds later, the elevator dinged and the doors opened. Clint and Bucky stepped out, then looked surprised when they caught sight of all of the tower residents apparently waiting on them. Bucky held a plain brown paper bag.

"Was a meeting called that I forgot about?" Clint said just as Coulson said, "I thought you were going to the gym," and Steve asked, "Where have you been?"

"Whoa." Clint raised his hands.

"You disappeared from the tower," Steve said.

"We aren't teenagers breaking curfew," Clint said. "We went for a run."

"I didn't go by myself," Bucky said. "I understand why I shouldn't. I might relapse or something. Besides, hasn't Jarvis been told to alert you if I leave alone or with an unknown party?"

"Uh, yeah." Steve felt mildly chagrined.

"No one knew where you were." Coulson looked at Clint as he spoke.

"Again, not a child." Clint was clearly exasperated.

"I mean, I was..." Coulson exhaled.

"You could have called." Clint waved his cell phone.

Bucky grasped Clint's arm. "Perspective."

Clint looked at him and nodded before turning to Coulson. "Take your jacket off and come to the kitchen."

"Uh, what?" Coulson looked bewildered.

"I am not talking to the Director right now," Clint said as he walked toward the stairwell.

Coulson went after him. "You act like Phil and Director Coulson are two different people."

"And you don't?" Clint shot over his shoulder.

"Boy troubles?" Jemma asked.

"In their case?" Bucky said. "Sort of."

"I'd go help," Jemma said, "but Fitz needs to get to the hyperbaric chamber."

"Probably best not to step into that just now anyway," Bucky said. "It's an old, green, and gooey issue."

Sam nodded. "Unresolved issues are the toughest."

Fitz flushed scarlet.

Sam added, "They tend to get tougher over time."

Jemma wrapped her fingers around Fitz's arm then stepped over to the waiting elevator with him.
The doors closed.

"I got takeout Chinese." Bucky held up the paper bag he was carrying. "Hungry after running."

"Sounds great," Steve said. "Kitchen?"

Bucky nodded and they headed to the stairs.

With his enhanced hearing, Steve heard the two men in the kitchen talking while he and Bucky were still halfway down the deserted hall.

"—scaring me, Clint," Phil said.

"I just need some emotional space for a while," Clint said.

Phil sighed. "I probably gave you too much emotional space when I first came back and now I want to hold you too close. Am I always doing the wrong thing?"

"No, but sometimes I think I am."

Phil had one arm around Clint and the archer's head was on Phil's shoulder when Steve and Bucky walked in. Clint looked up and smiled. Bucky unpacked the Chinese takeout.

Phil's eyebrows went up. "Hence the green tea."

"Yep," Clint said. "There's enough for everyone." He poured two more mugs of the pale lightly aromatic tea.

Phil took a small plate and a small amount of food, Clint took a modest serving, Steve took a large serving, and Bucky heaped his plate up. Bucky also put most of the hot and sour soup into a bowl for himself. They settled in to eat.

Bucky waved his fork at Phil. "Clint said you're the one I should talk to about accepting your sexuality because he doesn't have as much insight into that."

Steve blanched but Phil just made a thoughtful sound before saying, "Unfortunately, that's true. As you heard a few weeks ago, I married a woman when I was young rather than accept the fact that I didn't love her that way." He looked Bucky in the eye. "Rather than accept that I was attracted to men. Did nothing but hurt both of us."

"Some of us," Clint said, "love men and women."

"Huh," Bucky said. "I guess I'm like you in that way."

Clint nodded. "I think it's more common than most people believe. No idea about the statistics though."

"People get labeled by who they're currently with," Steve said. "That's why so many people married into more acceptable relationships for the times."

"The labeling still happens all too often nowadays," Clint said.

Bucky nodded. "So, Director, can I come talk to you about this? Let me know when I can get on your schedule?"

Phil paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. A minute passed.
"Coulson?" Bucky fidgeted. "Do you need to check your calendar? Maybe on your phone?"

Phil shook his head. "I can make time Monday morning—or Sunday if you prefer. I'm just trying to wrap my head around the fact that I really am old enough to be your father."

Clint chuckled and Bucky hooted. Steve was horrified.

"Most people," Bucky said between peals of laughter, "would say I'm old enough to be your father."

"But you aren't," Phil said. "Not really."

Bucky smiled but his eyes were sad. "Depends on how you look at it. Assassin years age you faster than regular years, kind of like dog years. From a lot of points of reckoning, I'm old."

"Hmm," Clint said. "Counting by assassin years, I might be older than you, Phil."

Phil rolled his eyes. "Measuring by harsh life experience, we're all Methuselah. In relationship experience, James, I'd say you're even younger than Steve. Hydra took a lot from you."

"Yeah." Bucky dragged a spoon through his soup. "I'd say that's true but it feels kinda weird."

"Doesn't feel that weird to me," Steve said. "At least not compared to everything else." He put his hand on Bucky's right forearm. "I'm glad to have to deal with it because it means you're alive."

Bucky looked at him. "Even when I hurt your feelings because I can't seem to control my mouth?"

"Even then," Steve said. "Maybe especially then because it means you've come far enough for that to be a problem. At least when you're doing that, you're you. A little scuffed up and chipped, but you."

Clint growled. "I know what you mean."

Bucky gulped down some tea. "God, Steve. Keep that up and you're going to make me cry."

Steve shrugged. "That'd be okay. I'll bet Mockta would say it's a good thing."

"These broken toys over here," Clint said, "are heading to bed." He got up and took his dishes with him. Phil followed suit. They put their dishes in the dishwasher.

"We'll see you young whippersnappers tomorrow," Phil said.

Bucky and Clint laughed. Steve grinned. Clint looped his arm through Phil's and they left.

"So you're not too upset with me?" Bucky asked.

"Nah," Steve said. "For a long, long time, I figured I'd never see you again because, well, you weren't alive. Kissing you is a great big bonus. I certainly never counted on that."

Bucky smiled. "Me either."

They ate in silence for a while.

"I'm still trying to adjust to being Bucky Barnes instead of some deadly programmed creature."

"I know," Steve said.
They finished eating and cleaned up the kitchen. Together, they went to Bucky's room. Steve sat in one of the beanbag chairs and sketched while Bucky showered.

Bucky came out of the bathroom wearing sleep pants and a Tshirt. He sat on the floor beside Steve.

"Can we just sleep together tonight?" Bucky asked. "And I mean sleep."

"Sure." Steve ran his left hand through Bucky's damp two-toned hair. "Going slow is fine."

"So many times, in my worst moments, I just wanted to curl up with you and I didn't know how to ask."

"Aw, Bucky." Steve felt like his heart was being squeezed. "I'd love to curl up with you. Any time."

Bucky's open, happy smile made him look young.

"Sleep in here?" Steve asked.

Bucky nodded.

"I'll get ready for bed," Steve said. "Be right back."

Fifteen minutes later they were both getting settled in Bucky's nest of pillows. Bucky reached up and turned the lamp off. His fingers found Steve and then skimmed up the side of his neck and over his face. He leaned down and gave Steve a lingering kiss that was soft and all lip.

Bucky burrowed into his pillow beside Steve. Once he was comfortable, he pulled the bigger man close for a deeper kiss before nestling against Steve's side with an arm thrown over the blond's chest. Steve stroked his hand over Bucky's back until long after the other man had relaxed into sleep.

When Steve had brought Bucky to the tower—broken, terrified, lashing out—he would not have guessed this sweet moment was possible, certainly not so soon. That thought made Steve hold Bucky a little closer until finally, curled together like kittens, they were both asleep.
Chapter 52

Wearing sweatpants and a Tshirt, and looking not quite kempt, Fitz trailed into the kitchen behind a bright eyed looking Jemma who looked very put together in demure polished cotton pajamas of the palest green that would have done a 1940s screen siren proud. The blond young man handed Phil a sheaf of communiques. "These are mostly from Skye," Fitz said. "Some are commentary by Bobbi or speculation by May."

"Mm," Phil said around a swallow of coffee. "What about?"

"That stuff from last night," Jemma said as she made a latte. "It doesn't completely make sense."

"It doesn't," Fitz agreed. "Hydra suddenly amped up their search for the Winter Soldier's body to the point that they have teams swarming Central Park. Skye is hacking into the nearby security and traffic cameras and the number of search personnel is stunning."

"How do you know they're Hydra?" Phil asked.

"They aren't being subtle," Fitz said.

"They're not." Jemma smirked and handed the latte to Fitz. "Some of them are being so obvious they might as well be wearing Tshirts that say Team Hydra."

Fitz thanked Jemma. She nodded and turned back to the coffee machine.

"Ooh," Clint said. "We need Tshirts that say Team S.H.I.E.L.D."

"No, we don't," Steve said.

"Don't you go ordering any from CustomInk," Bruce said. "Too much of a red flag."

"Aww, Dad!" Clint whined.

"Dr. Banner makes a good point," Phil said. "Right now, we're flying under the radar with remarkable success."

"Never get to have any fun," Clint grumbled.

Phil raised an eyebrow.

Clint grinned. "Well, for some things."

*For troublemaking* Phil signed.

"Exactly." Clint burst out laughing.

Steve and Fitz looked at each other. Jemma eyed Clint. He waved his hand. "Don't mind me."

"Yes," Phil said sternly, "please don't mind him."

Steve put his dishes in the dishwasher. "When Bucky gets up, let him know I went to the police precinct."

"Of course, Captain," Jemma said just as Clint said, "Sure thing, Cap."
Steve nodded in their direction.

"Sorry I can't go with you," Phil said.

"You're just one man," Steve said. "We're all happy to do our part, help you keep the toehold the good guys still have. Besides, I'm kind of looking forward to talking to a couple of the suspects myself."

Phil nodded. "That might go better if it's just you."

Steve thought about that for a moment. "It just might." He turned on his heel and left.

"Where's our meeting?" Clint asked.

"Library." Phil put his and Clint's breakfast dishes in the dishwasher.

"How about I make us some large dolce coffees," Clint said.

"Great idea. I'll help you make large mugs for Pepper, Tony, and Maria."

"Awesome. Let's bring some of these pastries."

Fitz snagged a muffin. "Don't take them all."

Bruce put a cruller and a lightly sweet blueberry tart on a plate along with some cheese and a fruit cup. "Good thought, Leo. I'm going to take these to my lab."

Fitz beamed. "I'll join you in an hour."

"Appreciate it." Holding his plate close to his body, Bruce left.

"Jemma," Phil said, "keep analyzing those communiques. Come up with a couple of theories as to what's going on."

"Yes sir." Jemma took a bite of strawberry laden pastry.

Twenty minutes later, Phil pushed a tea cart laden with fruit, cheese, pastries, and large mugs of fancy coffee. Clint carried a thick sealed envelope with cover sheets front and back festooned with bright markings indicating several layers of deep classification. They joined the three meeting participants already seated at the largest research table in Tony's old fashioned private library.

"Is that an Americano?" Tony groaned in appreciation as Clint handed the mug of dark rich coffee to him. "It's only Thursday, the week's already been too long, and nine o'clock seems too early this morning."

"It's the only time I had open in my schedule." Pepper took a deep whiff of the latte in her hand. "That's heavenly."

"The food's appreciated too," Maria said. "I only managed half a yogurt this morning." She piled a plate up.

When everyone was settled with snacks and coffee, Clint passed out hardcopy charts, spreadsheets, and fact sheets.

"Jarvis," Phil said. "Classified protocols please."
"Yes, Director," the AI responded.

Clint glanced at the ceiling then looked askance at Phil. "But leave the door where people can get in and out."

Phil grinned.

"Instructions, Director Coulson?" Jarvis asked diplomatically.

"Leave the door open," Phil said.

"Understood," Jarvis said. "The room is soundproofed and emanation dampened but the door is open."

Pepper raised an eyebrow. Phil raised one back. Tony chugged half his coffee and then began doodling in the margins of the fact sheets.

Clint leaned toward Maria. He tapped a finger on the set of charts. "This is what I was emailing you about yesterday. You're more familiar with the background for all this, which is why I asked if you'd start."

"Understood, Agent Barton." Maria's tone was crisp. "The charts and spreadsheets show ten years of budget information for S.H.I.E.L.D. The budget went up slightly every year then spiked upward by $1.8 billion when Captain Rogers was found alive. After that, the budget was stable in the last three years of operations before the Hydra disaster."

"The last three years were quite stable," Clint said. "I'd say it's reasonable to call those years normal operating levels for S.H.I.E.L.D."

Pepper made a noncommittal sound. Tony drank the rest of his coffee then reached for the carafe on the tea cart and poured himself a refill.

"In those years," Maria continued, "S.H.I.E.L.D. had a budget of $16 billion a year--$12 billion acknowledged, $4 billion in the black budget."

Clint flipped to a different page. "Current S.H.I.E.L.D. resources are down to less than $1 billion a year which comes trickling in from the shell companies that are actually making money which were set up as covers for various activities over the years, and some money from offshore accounts that Fury quietly set up in the last three years, and some money from selling off S.H.I.E.L.D. property including buildings and aircraft."

Phil cleared his throat. "GSA normally handles acquisition and management of all Federal agency real property, but S.H.I.E.L.D. didn't do that. We had an exemption."

Pepper flipped through the pages of all three sets of information. "This is all very interesting but why are we here?"

Feeling a little nervous, Clint lowered his eyes as he answered her. "S.H.I.E.L.D. is now sort of in the position that Hydra's historically been in of needing to self-finance."

Eyes sharp, Tony—who had spent the entire meeting up to that point looking like he was paying no attention—looked up. "That's a good point. What do you propose, Robin of Sherwood?"

Clint felt his face heat. "I think we can probably learn something from Hydra. And maybe figure out a way to siphon off some of their illicit resources as a way to provide S.H.I.E.L.D. with seed
money for rebuilding. Part of the reason we're struggling so much as we try to rebuild is that we just don't have resources."

"I agree," Maria's said. "Let's take something. Who are they going to complain to?"

"They're making money on weapons production," Pepper mused. "Maybe not on those inadequate prototypes you saw Monday night but on something. Their factory must be nearby."

"Not in the same burrough," Phil said. "They'd go for some misdirection. The factory might be in another burrough or New Jersey."

"Let's look for that factory," Tony said. "Then skim off funds and make it look like the Hydra managers embezzled the money."

Clint gave him a high five. "That is genius."

Tony preened. "It is me after all."

Phil frowned. "What's the point of that?"

Pepper smirked. "We reappropriate the misappropriated funds, anonymize them, then redirect them for S.H.I.E.L.D. use."

"That's what I was hoping for!" Clint said.

"It's a way to hit them twice, sir." Maria addressed Phil. "Once physically and once financially."

"Three hits," Clint said. "Also sows suspicion in the Hydra ranks."

"Four hits," Tony said, "because it will give you a quick resource injection to help you rebuild."

"Even if it's a relatively small resource injection," Phil mused, "we can make it count. I like it."

"Gun running?" Maria ticked an eyebrow up. "It'll be some number of millions."

"A billion or two if we're lucky and good," Tony said.

"We'll make that number as high as we can." Pepper turned to Phil. "Find us some targets to assess. We'll need some first rate forensic auditors to look for signs of dirty money, a couple of hackers, some support resources and"—she looked at Tony—"Jarvis."

Tony showed his teeth in a feral grin. "Yes. Enhanced speed and maximize the hit when we make it."

Clint leaned forward. "You make it sound like being a sniper,"

Pepper laughed. "In some ways it is."

At the sound of a commotion at the closed library door, all five seated at the table automatically flipped their charts and other papers facedown. Fitz pushed through the door dragging a bewildered Bucky behind him by the metal wrist. A grim-faced Jemma followed the two men. She closed the door.

Fitz spoke. "I think I figured out what set Hydra off."

Phil stood.
"It's the most logi—" Jemma said.


Maria said, "What?"

Fitz and Jemma snapped their gazes to one another. Tony's eyes went straight to Bucky. Bucky took a loud breath and stumbled back one step, pulling out of Fitz's grasp.

Clint stood up in one smooth motion. His swift move toward Bucky was so controlled he didn't startle the other man. Clint put a hand on his shoulder. "You didn't ask for this thing to be shoved onto your shoulder, didn't ask for anything they did to you,"

Bucky turned fear-filled gray eyes toward the archer.

"You didn't deserve any of it either," Clint said. He was vaguely aware of Phil typing on his phone.

Pepper put a gentle arm around Bucky. "Have you had breakfast?" He shook his head. "Sit." She spoke softly as she led him to the table. "Eat something."

Maria set a laden plate in front of him and Clint set a freshly poured mug of coffee beside it. Bucky's hand trembled as he started to eat. Restless, Clint began to pace.

"Jarvis," Tony said, "did the signal you picked up come from Bucky's arm?"

"Sergeant Barnes' biomechanical arm is the most likely source," the AI replied. "When I combine my observations with Agent Fitz's information, the likelihood is 98.8 percent that the artificial arm is the source."

"That's good enough for me," Tony said.

Bucky tensed. "I've led Hydra here."

"No." Phil was adamant. "The most stringent security protocols were active in this room so you were shielded."

"But the door wasn't locked," Bucky choked out.

Phil smiled. "Because Clint's paranoid."

"Maybe." Clint ducked his head. "A bit."

"All worked out for the best." Phil glanced toward the ceiling. "Jarvis, confirm that the signal from Sergeant Barnes' arm did not leave this room."

"Confirmed," the virtual butler said. "The most stringent security protocols were deployed to protect his room including vibration of the windows, and the door was closed at the time of the blip. The energy emanation was shielded and could not have been picked up outside of this room."

"Thank you," Phil said. "Please maintain those same security precautions in any area of the tower that Sergeant Barnes is in."

"I will do so until further notice from you or Sir," Jarvis said.

"There." Phil turned to Bucky. "You're safe and so is everyone else. You just can't leave the tower
for now."

Bucky flinched. "I have an appointment with Dr. Kelly tomorrow afternoon. Dr. Mockta made it."

"He'll have to come here," Jemma said.

"We have appointments just before his," Clint said. "If Dr. Kelly's making a housecall for him he
may as well see all of us here."

Jemma nodded as she slipped her phone out of a pocket. "I'll ask about all three appointments." She
left the room to make the call.

Phil gestured for Fitz to sit. "Tell me what you figured out."

Fitz sat and waved his handful of papers around. "Hydra picked up two blips in Central Park
yesterday during the times that Bucky was there, after lunch and after supper."

Phil took the sheaf of papers. He perched on the arm of the nearest sofa and flipped through them.
"Interesting. I think you're right."

Clint paused next to Bucky's chair. "So that's why you got away from Hydra in March."

Midway through taking a bite of croissant, the erstwhile Winter Soldier turned toward the archer.
"Hmm?"

"The tracking device in your arm wasn't working," Clint said.

Bucky's eyes went wide. "That makes sense." His words were muddled because his mouth was full.

"That does make sense," Tony said. "It also sounds like the tracking device is sending out signals
more frequently than it was."

"Can you disable it?" Phil asked.

"Probably," Tony said. "I'll have to study it a bit."

"Meanwhile, you've taken the right precautions." Maria addressed Phil.

The Director nodded as he read something on his phone. "I also texted Steve and told him, no
emergency, but don't linger at the precinct. He just texted back that he should be able to get back
mid-afternoon."

Bucky groaned. Pepper patted his shoulder. "We'll make sure you're all right." He looked at her
with eyes full of gratitude.

Jemma strode back in. "Dr. Kelly will be here at eight a.m, tomorrow."

"Thank you, Jemma," Phil said.

She nodded and gestured at Fitz. "I believe you're overdue for your meeting with Dr, Banner."

Fitz stood. "Oh, right." He tugged on Bucky's arm who responded by refilling his plate before
standing. Clutching his freshly laden plate, Bucky followed Fitz and Jemma out of the library.
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

Hey! I hope everyone will excuse the long silence, I took a creative writing class that left me with very little time to write.
I have the story plotted out almost to the end and now predict that it will end up right around 75 chapters final length. Those chapters will get written and posted as real life allows.
Thanks for sticking by.

Clint took copious notes during the rest of the creative-approaches-to-finance meeting. Afterwards, he retreated to the Avengers office to polish his notes up and compose a summary email for the group. Jemma was in the office when he arrived, typing away at a laptop, but left after an hour.

The Avengers office was a windowless interior room that was easy to secure. The walls were festooned with framed photos of the Avengers, many of them action photos from missions, some were more like portraits.

After Clint finally finished and sent his encrypted email, he leaned back and flattened one hand on the desk beside his laptop. He stroked his hand over the smooth wood. This is where he'd read the holographic version of the Kuznetsov report. Tomi Wise had specifically stated that Clint was not emotionally compromised by the Kuznetsov mission even though the mission had been difficult and traumatic, as many missions were. Tomi's wording was careful. He was sure she was protecting him, more sure than ever that she had gleaned what he did not say, was certain she knew he had actually been emotionally compromised before the mission.

As he ruminated, Clint stared at a blank space on the wall that was between artfully grouped sets of photographs. When he heard the door open, he didn't turn his head, just kept staring at the wall.

Phil paused in the doorway before walking over to Clint. He touched the archer's cheek. "Hey. Where have you gone?"

Clint looked up at Phil. "Memories."

Phil frowned.

Clint stood. “You should date me, sir.”

“What? We dated—are dating.”

Clint shook his head. “We never really did. We started fucking and hanging out together more, but we didn't date. We do more things now that resemble dating.”

Phil stared at him and then blinked. “Point taken.”

“I wish—” Clint sighed. “I wish I'd said something to you then. I thought about it but—” He shrugged. “I thought about those exact words even but could never make myself say them. First I was too worried about...let's call it rejection. Then I was worried about losing what we did have, whatever that was.”
Phil clasped Clint's arm and coaxed him to his feet. “All I know for sure is it was a more serious relationship than I was willing to say out loud.”

“That's still true,” Clint said. “At least a little.”

Phil considered him for a moment and then nodded. “I remember settling more into myself somewhere after forty, more of a midlife revelation than a midlife crisis, and starting to really let go of old baggage—finally able to do that. I see you doing that right now. As I approached fifty, I could feel everything sliding into place, at least as far as being me. And then Loki happened. And TAHITI. And my mind was scrambled. And all of that got derailed.” He exhaled audibly.

“And yet”—Clint smoothed one hand over Phil's shoulder—“things are better now.”

Phil raised his eyebrows.

“Better for me at least.” Clint looked away. “Our relationship is openly acknowledged, even if—if I didn't give you much choice about it.”

”Yeah, but it's good that everyone knows.”

“You accepting that is good, and we're actually working on it.”

“Yeah,” Phil breathed. He pulled the archer close. “How about—how about I take you to lunch, to our favorite diner across the street, but this time we make it an actual date.”

Clint grinned into the older man's shoulder, then leaned away enough to look at him. “What makes it a date?”

“Other than me asking?” Phil took his hand. “I'll hold your hand the whole way over.”

Clint kissed their interlaced fingers. “Okay.”

They left the Avengers office and headed toward the elevator. “Everybody got to Disney World a little while ago,” Phil said.

“Oh yeah?”

“They're already in Epcot and my sisters've started sending photos to my phone. I'll show them to you while we eat.”

“That's awesome. I woulda thought the kids'd be too tired to go straight to the parks.”

Phil shrugged as they stepped onto the elevator. “Shannon says the kids slept in the car. I think you'll get the biggest kick out of some of Maddy's texts and photos though.”

“Oh, why?”

“Gabby, who was always interested in archery, is now positively obsessed. Maddy says you get the blame for that.”

“Credit!” Clint chuckled. “I get the credit for that.”

Phil smirked. “If you say so.”

Clint elbowed him.
“I hate this thing.” Bucky snarled at Bruce as the doctor examined his arm and made notes. “I want it off.”

“I know,” Bruce said patiently. “We're working on it.”

“And deactivate the fucking tracker.”

“We're working on that, too,” Tony called from across the workshop.

“I know I just want it fixed now. I don't want to lead hydra here where they'll hurt people and ruin everything all over again.” He yanked away from Bruce. “I'm nothing but a threat to all of you but I can't leave or I'll end up dead and I sure as hell don't want to have gotten away and done so much just to get killed for nothing. And I can't do that to Steve. I don't want to know what that would do to Steve. He—I'm really bad at being with him I don't know what I'm doing. I can't fucking shut up today. Couldn't shut up yesterday either.”

“You have impulse control issues.” Bruce shrugged. “Or it might just be Tony rubbing off on you.”

“Hey!” Tony exclaimed.

Bucky shook his head and began to pace. “Tony's just a chatterbox. It's different. Unless he's got brain damage from all the drinking. Which is possible. Sorry. Fuck.” He slumped against the window and slid down it. “I'm so sick of everybody doing so much to help me and I can't do anything in return. I'm just in the way, sucking up time and money being obnoxious.”

“No,” Bruce began gently.

“Yes I am! Are you hearing me right now? I cannot fucking shut up and I do it all the time and I piss off Natasha and make Jemma uncomfortable and I hurt Steve. I always say the wrong things to Steve and I hate it. Then I don't say the things I should say. Though sometimes that's because I don't know what I should say because I don't know what our relationship is anymore. I—we were always friends, best friends, but now we're something else, something more, and it freaks me out. I'm not used to it. And it's weird that it's not weird to him. And I think Clint is getting fed up with dealing with me being weird about it 'cause it seems like it's always him that deals with me being weird about it.

“Steve swears I was never interested in him before and I'd think he'd know, I'd like to think he'd've noticed if I was, but I don't remember.” Bucky scrubbed a hand through his hair. “And I don't know if I hope I was attracted to him then or not because either way I'm not sure how I feel about the implications. I don't like to think that I might just find him attractive now because he's—big. That's not my Steve. My Steve is little Steve. But I can't tell him that because he's already uncomfortable and I don't want him to think there's anything wrong with how he is now, there's not, he's—well, Maria said it after we went to the theatre—he's perfect. But he's different. Unnaturally different. I don't like it. He's taller than me and that's just, ” he let out a breath, “I don't know. From the first time I saw him after, I've hated it that he's taller than me and I hate how shallow and petty that sounds but there's more to it than the height. Ever since that first time in Germany he's been rescuing me and he just keeps rescuing me.” He patted his chest with both hands. “I used to rescue him. If we were rescuing each other now that'd be one thing but that's not
what's happening. He got jacked up and suddenly I'm useless to him, can't do a damn thing he can't do on his own. But at the same time I'm so glad he's not sick all the time anymore. All the time growing up I was so sure I'd come home one day to find out he'd just up and stopped breathing. It's such a relief just to listen to him breathe without wheezing.”

But shut his eyes hard. “I'm really fucking protective of him, but I can't fucking protect him anymore, and that's making me possessive. At least, I think that's what's making me possessive. I don't know. But the possessiveness is pissing Steve off, which I don't want to do. And Steve had a boyfriend. A colored boyfriend—”

“That is not PC phrasing, my friend,” Tony interjected

“I'm ninety-four years old!” Bucky shouted. He slammed his left fist on the floor. “I'll phrase things however the fuck I want!”

“James,” Bruce said softly. He crouched in front of the sergeant. “James, look at me.”

Bucky glanced up to meet the doctor's gaze.

“Take a deep breath.”

Bucky did so then let it out on a sigh.

“Well,” Tony said slowly, “no more sugar or caffeine for you today.”

Bruce and Bucky both glared at him. Tony shrugged. Bucky took another long breath, curled up, pressed his forehead to his knees, and said, “I did not mean to tell anybody any of that.”


Bucky glared. “I was a sergeant.”

“I can't think of any movies about sergeants.” Tony stroked his beard. “There's Sergeant Pepper but that's a Beatles album.”

“Excuse me,” Jarvis interrupted politely, “but Captain Rogers has just returned.”

Bucky slid the rest of the way down the window, his back on the floor.
Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

Back from the twilight zone otherwise known as upper level coursework!
Many thanks for your patience.

Steve was in the kitchen talking to Coulson when Bucky got there. Bucky lingered unnoticed in the doorway for a moment, then walked up behind Steve and hugged him hard. Steve twisted awkwardly to look at him and put an arm around him. "Hey."

Bucky didn't say anything.

"You okay?" Steve rubbed his shoulder, frowning.

"That's something we need to talk to you about, actually," Coulson said. "Fitzsimmons figured out what's been causing the blips Jarvis has been picking up: there's a tracker in Barnes's arm."

Steve straightened sharply. "We have to get it out."

"Stark and Banner are working on that."

"It's not going well," Bucky muttered.

Steve tightened his arm around Buck. "How long do we have until Hydra gets here?"

"Actually," Coulson said, "we caught a lucky break. He was in a room Jarvis was maintaining classified security protocols in, so when it transmitted, nothing made it out of the tower. Now Jarvis is under orders to maintain those protocols wherever Barnes is."

"That's good," Steve said quietly.

"Means I can't leave the tower," Bucky huffed. He shook his head, silencing Steve and Coulson's responses. He stepped toward the door and tugged feebly at Steve's arm. "Can we just— I'm tired of people."

"Yeah, yeah. Of course." Steve glanced at Coulson as he walked out, hand on Bucky's back.

They walked to Steve's room in silence. Once they were there with the door closed behind them, Steve asked, "Are you okay?"

Bucky flopped on the bed and groaned. "No." He sat up. "This day sucks and I'm frustrated and tired and I can't seem to shut up to save my life today so I'm trying really hard not to ramble right now."

Steve sat next to him and gently smoothed his dark-rooted hair. Bucky shrugged him off, and turned away. Steve reluctantly folded his hands in his lap. For a long moment, they sat quietly. Bucky grabbed a pillow and flopped over onto his side. After another moment, Steve got up, moved to his desk, grabbed a sketchbook, and started drawing. He'd filled four pages with sketches of Bucky as he lay—sprawled on the bed, right arm in a strangle hold around the pillow, left arm
dangling off the edge of the mattress—before the man himself spoke again.

"I'm sorry for what I said," Bucky whispered. "About you and your, uh, past relationships."

Steve stopped drawing. He tapped his pencil on the desk, sighed, then turned to lean his elbows on his knees and look at Bucky. "It's okay."

"No, it's not!" Bucky sat up.

"We already talked about this—"

"Not really, no we didn't. You pretty much just said that you think this," he gestured between them, "whatever the hell this is, is worth putting up with my bullshit."

"Well, yeah." Steve shrugged. "It is."

"I don't even know what it is!" Bucky threw his pillow at the wall with an unsatisfying *thwunk*. "We have to, I dunno, communicate 'n' shit," he huffed and burrowed back into the pillows against Steve's headboard. "If we don't do it ourselves lord knows Mockta will figure out how to make us and that probably won't be fun but I can never tell what we have to talk about until it's happening and I *always* say the wrong shit and I can't figure out how to say the right shit and God fucking damn it I'm doing it again!" He banged his head back against the headboard.

"Whoa! Hey, hey, hey." Steve quickly pulled Bucky forward away from the wall. He settled cross legged on the mattress in front of him, holding his mismatched hands. "It's okay," he said again, firmly. He leaned in to kiss him, but Bucky pushed him away so hard he wound up slamming himself back against the headboard again.

"I can't. Right now." He pressed his palms to his forehead. "I just—gyah! I don't know, I can't. Shit. Did I just break your collarbone?"

"I don't think so," Steve gasped breathlessly.

"I thought I felt something crack but it might've just been my wrist. It pops sometimes. I don't really know why, I think it might be a ball bearing. I don't know. I'm glad it wasn't bone. I'm sorry. Shit." He banged his head back.

"Stop doing that!" Steve hauled Bucky away from the headboard again. "You're going to hurt yourself."

Bucky huffed, got up, and started pacing. He clawed at the star on his shoulder. "I want this thing off of me!" He looked at Steve desperately. "I don't understand why they can't just take it off."

"Because they don't want to hurt you."

"I don't care!"

"Yes you do." Steve stood. "And so do I. C'mon." He crossed the room and yanked the door open. "You clearly need to blow off steam and we don't have a good way for you to do that here."

Bucky stared dumbly at the open door. "Then what—"

"I don't know, we'll figure something out. Come on." Steve gestured out the door and waited for Bucky to go ahead of him before closing the door and heading down the hall. "You're the one who's keyed up, how do you wanna deal with it?"
"I don't know, Steve," Bucky huffed. "I'm tired—"

"Not tired enough to keep you from nearly putting your head through the wall."

"If I may," Jarvis interrupted politely, preempting Bucky's response, "the glass recycling from the bar hasn't been taken out recently and the level three parking is currently empty. Dr. Mockta did suggest that smashing things can be cathartic."

The two men looked at each other. Bucky shrugged.

Five minutes later they were in the parking deck with a big heavy bag of recyclables from the bin in the tower bar. They found a secluded corner on level three where two walls angled together in a way that would help keep the soon to be busted-up glassware from scattering too far.

Bucky dug an empty beer bottle out of the top of the bag. He eyed the cinderblock walls. “We’re too close.”

Steve nodded and they moved back several feet. Bucky wound up like a major leaguer and lobbed the smooth brown bottle toward the targeted corner. It shattered with a satisfying crash. Glass shards sprayed outward from the point of impact and landed in a fanshaped pattern on the concrete floor.

The sergeant whooped.

Steve chuckled. “You could have been a contender.”

Bucky eyed him. “I was a contender.”

Steve clapped him on the shoulder. “Of course you were, Buck.”

Bucky hurled seven more beer bottles at the unyielding walls before he pulled out an empty vodka bottle. He hefted it, assessing the weight in his hand. He moved back several more feet. Steve followed him, bringing the still-heavy bag along.

The larger, heavier bottle burst even more dramatically than the beer bottles had. Bucky grinned fiercely and reached into the bag for another glass projectile. Many empty wine, Scotch, Kahlua, gin and other bottles later, and a mere twenty minutes after the two men arrived on parking level three, the bag was empty.

Bucky stood beside Steve, a fine sheen of sweat glistening on his forehead as he caught his breath. They gazed out over the large irregular semi-circle of glittering multi-colored slivers of smashed erstwhile liquor containers.

“Huh,” Bucky said. “I think that helped.”

“Good.” Steve wadded up the now empty bag. He took a couple of photos of the colorful glass detritus. Bucky gave him a look. “What?” Steve said. “It’s actually kind of pretty. If I had time, I’d make it into a mosaic.”

“Always the artist.” Bucky grinned.

Steve shrugged. “Guess it’s ingrained.”

“Makes you who you are,” Bucky said softly.

Steve took Bucky’s arm. “Let’s get cleaned up and find something to eat.”
Bucky sighed as they walked toward the exit sign. “Not really hungry.”

“Ya gotta eat,” Steve said. They stepped into the elevator. “Jarvis, please let maintenance know there’s broken glass to clean up.”

“I’ve already alerted them, Captain,” the A.I. said. “Sergeant Barnes, you might be interested to know that Agent Barton is in the kitchen doing what he calls stress cooking.”

Bucky grinned crookedly. “I guess that’s the silver lining to Clint missing Natasha.”
Chapter 55

Clint was most of the way through cracking an entire tray of eggs into a giant glass mixing bowl, a large pot of noodles bubbling on the stove when the supersoldiers got to the kitchen. He glanced up when they came in. “Hey.”

“Jarvis said you're cooking.” Bucky, freshly showered and hair still damp, dragged himself up onto a stool at the island.

“Yeah.” Clint cracked another egg. “Spaetzle mit Eier. Coulda made the noodles by hand but there were pre-made so….” He shrugged.

“I love German food.” Steve sat next to Bucky.

Bucky rhythmically tapped the fingers of his left hand against the island countertop. He found the rolling pattern of metallic clicking sounds oddly soothing. “Sooo, did you and the Colonel have another fight?” He flinched when he realized what he'd said. Fucking nonfunctional memory. “I mean…” With a sigh, he looked up.

Clint was regarding him with an indulgent half smile. “I know who you mean.” He shook his head as he turned back toward the enormous bowl of eggs. “Not this time.”

Bucky frowned. “What then?”

Instead of answering, Clint turned the restaurant style electric mixer on, scrambling the eggs with the whisk attachment. Then he started butter melting in two large woks before he drained the noodles. Short minutes later, he had each of the two woks filled with spaetzle and still liquid eggs.

Steve got up and poured a cup of coffee for himself.

“Clint?” Bucky prodded.

The archer exhaled but didn't look up from the two pans he was tending. “Phil didn't do anything.”

Steve handed Clint a mug of coffee which he accepted with a muttered, “Thanks.”

Bucky went and poured himself a glass of cold orange juice before hovering at Clint's shoulder, watching him salt and lightly pepper the noodle and egg mixture in each pan and then resume stirring. “So, why're you cooking?”

“It's dinner time?”

“But you're stress cooking,” Bucky pointed out.

Clint took a breath and held it for a moment before speaking. “This...” He fully released his breath. “This is more about old secrets that I've kept.”

Bucky frowned. “But you and the Director have been doing really well. Mockta even said so.”

“Yeah, with all this more recent stuff that Mockta made us deal with, and I was feeling really good about it. But then something old leaped up and bit me in the butt.”

“I know what you mean.” Steve crossed his arms and studied the floor. “Some secrets make you feel poisoned, even if you don't realize it at the time.”
Puzzled, Bucky tilted his head and looked askance at Steve. “What kind of poisonous secrets could you possibly have?”

“Trips to the Village. Seeing men.”

“You kind of had to keep those secrets, Steve.”

“Sometimes it felt like it might kill me to keep not telling you. You were my best friend and I—I loved you. But I wasn't sure you wouldn't beat me down if I said...” The younger blond man trailed off with a shrug.

“Said—” Bucky frowned. “Said you were keeping time with guys instead of dolls?”

Steve nodded.

There was a stretch of silence and Bucky almost jumped when Clint suddenly said, “Would you have?”

“Would who have what?” Bucky said.

“D'you think you'd've beat him up?”

Bucky blinked. “I like to think I wouldn't, but...not sure I know.”

“You were a boxer,” Steve said.

Steve's voice triggered an image in Bucky's mind of a teenaged Steve with big blue eyes in a too small face. Wide eyed, half in shock from the thought of really hurting Steve, Bucky whirled toward him. “I'da never turned my fists on you like that.”

“Not even for my own good?” Steve's words sounded bitter.

Bucky curled his right hand around Steve's arm. “I might've smacked you in the back of your head, tried to scare you, because I'd have wanted to protect you from anyone else turning their fists on you.”

“A lot of bad stuff was done in the name of curing inverts, protecting society.” Steve clenched his jaw.

Bucky ran his fingers over the tense muscles in Steve's cheek and neck. “You don't even know how beautiful you were, do you? Fierce, and a smartass punk with an overdeveloped sense of justice, but soft and young at the same time.”

Steve's gaze was steady as he looked at Bucky. “You turned your fists on me in March.”

Reeling, Bucky jerked away. “That was the Winter Solder! That wasn't”—he blinked and glanced back at Steve—“wasn't me.”

The two men out of time just looked at each other.

“You're right.” Two knobs on the stove made a snapping sound, one after the other, as Clint turned the burners off. “That wasn't you.”

Bucky looked at Clint, nodded once, and looked down. “I didn't know who I was, I didn't know who you were, I didn't know I was working for the bad guys—didn't know the difference, just knew what I was told.” He took a breath and grabbed Steve by the shoulder. “I wouldn't have beat
you up,” he said firmly, half to himself.

Steve studied his face a moment, then nodded.

“Food's up,” Clint interjected. He went to the fridge and pulled out a big bowl of nectarines he'd sliced earlier. Steve got out dishes.

Halfway through his second bowl of spaetzle, Bucky pushed his food away. He'd only had about one nectarine's worth of slices, too. Steve and Clint both looked at him. He shrugged. “I told you I wasn't all that hungry.”

“Okay, pod person,” Clint said skeptically.

Jacket off and tie askew, a tired looking Coulson wandered into the kitchen. “That smells great, and it looks like there's enough to feed everyone in the lab.”

Clint gave Coulson a little half smile. “Is that where everyone is?”

“Yeah.” Coulson sighed. “I'm not really able to help at this stage. They're deep into science and biomedicine.”

“So, the labrats need delivery dinner?” Clint asked.

Coulson nodded.

Clint pushed himself off his stool. “Guess I better find that rolly cart.”

“That won't be necessary, Agent Barton,” Jarvis interrupted coolly.

With a confused frown, Clint glanced up. “What do you mean it won't be necessary?”

“Dum-E can bring dinner to Sir and the others in the workshop when he returns.”

All four men exchanged looks and Steve said, “Dum-E?” just as the robot trundled in, a sturdy tray bolted to his arm. On the tray was a single, bright pink sticky note. Clint walked around to grab the note, read it, rolled his eyes, then held it up for the others to read.

In Tony's blocky engineer's scrawl it said: SEND CAFFIENE. AND BARNES.

Bucky groaned and ran a hand over his face. “Do I gotta?”

“It's your arm they're trying to figure out what to do with,” Coulson pointed out. He got up and started dishing up food to send back with Dum-E. Steve petted the bot's arm, earning a purr-like whirr from Dum-E's servo's, then went to help Coulson with food while Clint made coffee.

Bucky made a face. “Coffee with spaetzle sounds weird.”

Clint shrugged. “I don't see a problem.”

“And I doubt Tony cares in any case,” Steve said.

Once the coffee was all dealt with, Bucky trudged out into the hall, following Dum-E.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Steve offered.

Bucky waved him off. “Me and the robot got this.”
With dinner done, Steve sat at the island and doodled in the sketchbook he kept stashed in the kitchen: cartoon animals in the team's combat suits. He was working on a kitty in Natasha's catsuit when Clint shut the dishwasher and smacked Coulson on the thigh. “We should play cards.”

Coulson looked up from the email app on his phone. “Okay.”

“Great.” Clint went to wash his hands. “Join us, Cap?”

“I think I'll pass, thanks.” Steve started outlining the Iron Ferret.

“Suit yourself.” Clint dried his hands on a towel, then on his pants, then he dug through the drawers for a deck of cards. “So, what're we gonna play? Not blackjack.”

Coulson frowned. “Why not?”

“Your memory's too good, you count cards without even trying, and it gets too competitive and stops being fun.”

“You do the same thing,” Coulson countered.

“Hence why things get too competitive.”

Steve closed his sketchbook around his pencil and got up. “I'll see you guys tomorrow.”

He went and showered, redressed, then sat on the bed in the pressure chamber room, sketchbook on his lap, doodling Dr. Moose Banner. He was partway through Labra-Thor when Buck's entrance made him look up. “Hey, Buck—you're kinda pale.” Steve half stood. “You feeling okay?”

Bucky shrugged him off and shook his head. “So much poking and prodding,” he muttered.

“That's gotta be stressful.”

Buck nodded, stared at the curved glass wall of the barometric chamber for a second, then climbed in, controller in hand.

Steve sealed the chamber and started the pressurization cycle. “Wanna play something?”

“Wanna sleep,” Bucky responded before pulling a pillow halfway over his face.

“Wanna sleep,” Bucky responded before pulling a pillow halfway over his face.

Steve pressed his lips together, turned out the lights, and climbed into bed himself. His mind churned and he was sure he just wasn't going to be able to sleep. This thing with the tracker in his arm seemed to have thrown Bucky for a loop. Not that he could blame him. Steve flipped over, then he curled up. Then he flopped onto his stomach and tried not to worry about this causing Bucky to regress. Despite his best efforts, the snarling face of the Winter Soldier floated across the back of his eyelids, followed by images of Bucky, fists raised, lashing out at him. Steve shuddered and twisted around a pillow.

He startled awake with his heart racing. Somehow he'd dozed off, or maybe even slept long but restless. A snatched memory of a nightmare eluded his attempts to capture it. A low moan broke
into his ruminations. Steve sat up. “Buck?”

The medical cot in the chamber rattled as Bucky rolled over. He cleared his throat wheezily and snuffled wetly.

Steve frowned to himself and then got up. He held his hands out as he made his way to the barometric chamber in the dark, the faint glow of the control panel the only illumination in the windowless room. He turned the light on in the pressurized chamber to its lowest setting. “Bucky,” he whispered.

“Mmm?” Bucky hummed groggily.

Steve wasn't sure if it was an answer or another moan. “Buck, are you okay?” Steve asked. He made the light in the chamber a little brighter before going over to lean against the cool glass separating him from Bucky.

Beads of sweat were scattered across the other man's temple and dampened his two-toned hair. A pained grimace crossed Bucky’s face as he shifted toward Steve. A nightmare—Bucky must have had a nightmare too. Steve flattened his hand against the cool curved surface he was pressed against.

Bucky turned toward the movement and opened his eyes with a groan. He was half cross-eyed as he tried to focus on Steve. “I don't—” Bucky paused to cough. “—feel so good.”

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