Interagency Cooperation

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Interagency Cooperation

by Jersey

Summary

Before SHIELD, before coming to America, Natasha Romanov had simply been the Black Widow, assassin and spy, working efficiently on her own. Then, her handlers assign her a curious partner in Agent Washington, and everything changes.
Chapter 1

INTERAGENCY COOPERATION

He tells her his name is Agent Washington, but Natasha knows that is not his name any more than Black Widow is hers. It matters not. Agent Washington does not even lift a brow when she tells him her codename. This comfortable nonchalance and easy acceptance suits her just fine. It means no irritating interrogations, no fabrication of complex back stories, no complications now or later. It means that Agent Washington is a professional like she.

It also means that Agent Washington understands when Natasha does not pretend to enjoy his company or banter over meaningless drivel to prove cooperative with whatever organization holds his leash. It is rare that her handlers feel the need to saddle her with a partner; few individuals in this world can keep up with Natasha Romanov on a good day anyway. Black Widow works better on her own.

When she meets him, Natasha is introduced not to a person, but a veritable walking suit of armor. A tough material covers nearly every inch of the man, obscuring his shape, size, and build beneath black plating marked by yellow highlights in a way that unsettles the assassin. Worse still is the helmet, which Agent Washington does not remove in her presence, concealing his features and reactions beneath a gleaming, gold visor. It hides expressions and characteristics that otherwise telegraph thought, intent, and action to Natasha in any other human. She initially distances herself from the man, thinking him a wannabe putting forth too much effort to be truly sincere.

However, Agent Washington is nothing short of surprising. Despite the bulky armor, the man moves with a cool, practiced ease like her own. He keeps comm chatter to a minimum aside from a few, cutting puns that threaten to draw a smirk from even Natasha’s carefully school features. Agent Washington has fast reflexes and a particularly deadly set of combat skills that rival her own.

At the end of the run, with their package acquired and delivered, before splitting off from one another to go to ground and return to their respective handlers, Agent Washington pauses and quips, “Well, thanks for a lovely date.”

She wants to make a comment, but nothing comes to mind before he slips away. Natasha is unaccustomed to flirtation on the battlefield, as it is. She has no idea how to respond.

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The next time she is assigned Agent Washington, he is her backup for a routine assassination of the political rival of a well-paying backer in Central America. She does not see him after they part ways close to their target; she does not need him. Natasha slips into the politician’s loop by the simplest of means; a pretty face, a slinky dress, and a smashing physique. She draws her target close with whispered sweet nothings until the target draws her into the bedroom – or so Natasha allows him to believe.

When the deed is done and the target deceased, Natasha tiptoes to the window, but not fast enough. The target’s bodyguards spy her lithe form gracefully sliding down the drainpipe and are on her in a flash. They do not make it far; single, scarlet dots burst on each of their foreheads in rapid succession
before a one of them can draw a weapon upon her. It takes her an utterly embarrassingly long moment before she realizes that it is Agent Washington’s handy work as her eyes spy the familiar silhouette of his armor in the shadows.

When it is over, she tells him, “I owe you one, Agent Washington.”

He offers a small chuckle, oddly telegraphed by his helm. “It’s just Wash.” That golden visor turns to her, and Natasha feels his eyes upon her as he breathes, “Maybe I’ll collect next time.”

Back with her handlers, Natasha wonders briefly if there will be a next time and knows that there will.

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Another mission comes and goes smoothly with mysterious Agent Washington at her side, his coy jests in her ear, and another. He is assigned to her at random, with no seeming connection between the missions. The only connection is that Wash’s varied skills prove as indispensable at the close of each assignment as her own.

She finds herself warming to him oddly, this stranger with no face, only a featureless helmet. Natasha grows to expect and almost appreciate his jokes, coming to fire back with her own jests. They fall easily into stride with one another on each and every assignment of them, even if neither knows a damned thing about the other.

He touches her hand once, only once at the end of a particularly trying mission. It is only the faintest graze of a strong gauntlet against pale, soft flesh. The scant contact leaves Natasha briefly unsettled.

The next time Natasha is partnered with the soldier, it is to collect intel on a potential terrorist cell hiding out in the frozen mountains of Norway masquerading as a research facility. It is not like Natasha’s usual assignments, and the assassin wonders if this is the work of Wash’s handlers. Either way is inconsequential to her. She has a mission to complete, and it matters not from whom specifically the orders originated.

High in the mountains, they lie side by side on a frigid rock, watching the facility below for the better part of a day in silence beneath a ragged camo cover. Natasha is bundled up in warm leathers and a lush coat, while Wash wears his customary armor. She wonders if it has built in insulation like neoprene, or if he has added insulation to guard against the chill. Either way, neither moves as they both stare down at the base – Wash through his helm and Natasha through binoculars.

Midway through the afternoon, Wash takes a break from his surveillance to tug off his helmet. Natasha tries not to obviously look, but she is curious after all these missions partnered with a man she has never actually seen. Wash is a handsome man beneath the armor, it seems. He has strong features, uneven tufts of dirty blonde hair mussed by the helmet, and cheerful, blue eyes that catch the light. He is younger than Natasha’s estimates from his voice alone. Wash catches her wary glances and offers a quick wink before tucking into an MRE. Afterwards, the soldier replaces his helmet, concealing himself from Natasha once more.

Day passes to night in vigilant silence as they continue their surveillance, only taking brief respites. It is only under the cover of night that he teasingly asks, “So, come here often?”
“Just to make out with all the cute boys,” she purrs back; the banter comes so much more effortlessly and fluidly to her now.

Wash chuckles. “Please tell me that includes me.”

Natasha blinks, dumbfounded for a moment. Many men have flirted with her through the years as a career assassin, deniable and disposable asset. It has had little effect upon her save to serve as a devastating trap for her would be suitors now come victims. From Wash, however, it feels different, genuinely flattering. Perhaps it is because he sees her – truly sees Natasha for what she really is, unlike any of the fools that fell to her charms.

There is no time after that to chat. A transmission comes through, piped directly into Wash’s helmet. Natasha does not hear the words or even the voice on the other end. All she hears are the soft responses from her partner.

“Well, isn’t that just a mood killer,” Wash grumbles bitterly. “Orders have changed.” When he looks to Natasha, she can almost feel him smirking under the helm. “To be continued?”

She smiles. “Perhaps.”

Wash relays their new orders – infiltrate and acquire intelligence from within the facility. They move swiftly and efficiently, breaking into the facility with ease. Wash takes point, keeping watch for Natasha as she copies as much of the files from the building’s main server. She raises a brow at the name “CHARON INDUSTRIES” but refrains from comment. It is not a target she knows from any of her own missions, so the Widow assumes it must be a target of Wash’s handlers.

They slip out without trouble.

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“So, what do you do for fun, Wash?”

Missions with Wash have become something of a staple in Natasha’s world. It is disquieting. Her handlers have told her nothing about his, nor have they divulged why they should continually rely upon Agent Washington’s assistance when any number of parties in the espionage arena could serve equally well. However, they ask about him; curiously not about his skills, training, or technical abilities. They inquire about his personality, his thoughts. It is as though they are studying Washington’s psychological profile through her in a way.

She finds her own interest piqued the more she operates with Wash. Natasha asks him when they are in the middle of a mission, often in the middle of action. The fight serves to set him off axis, makes him more likely to answer honestly by her estimates. This time, the woman waits until they are briefly pinned down by hostiles to inquire about more personal matters.

As Wash quickly slams a clip into his rifle and takes aim, he laughs. “Oh, you know, the usual. Picking off my enemies one at a time and trying not to die.” He takes out two of their opponents with slick shots. “Same old, same old.” The soldier tips his head to her. “You?”

“About the same, I guess.”

Then, abruptly, Wash admits as though an afterthought, “I skateboard sometimes, too.”
It is an honest answer, the first of many to come, but none of which are anything her superiors would like to know. They are the fleeting glimpses into Wash that Natasha desires, nothing more and certainly nothing of value to her handlers. However, they of value to her.

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Over the course of several months and nearly a dozen missions, Natasha comes to know Agent Washington. She finds him to be a funny sort of guy. He enjoys his skateboarding more than initially admitted. He gets motion sick in flight at times. He believes in his causes. He watches bad science fiction films in his downtime. He has been training for years with his rifle, preferring it to anything else, but has also studied other weapons, vehicles, and combat skills closely. He has coworkers that he considers to be something akin to friends, but not completely. He is an only child, mildly jealous of a pair of unnamed twins in his squad. He prefers working in pairs or teams to solo projects. Washington is quite capable on his own, but he has more fun with others. Natasha finds out all this and more, but she shares none of this with her handlers.

Then, one day, Natasha is hired on for an entirely different mission; to save Agent Washington.

The mission dossier states that Agent Washington has been captured by a renegade faction known only as the “Insurrection” and held prisoner. It is not any faction that Natasha knows. The files indicate that they are a splinter group of a top secret U.N. military project, an offshoot with incredibly detailed training and utterly impressive firepower. Wash’s squad – their names botted out – had attempted to raid this location and apprehend or execute Insurrection members when the mission went foul. During evac., Wash had been separated from the group and taken by the Insurrectionists.

Her handlers tell Natasha that she does not have to take this mission, that another Black Widow could equally perform this operation. However, they stress that Agent Washington’s employers have specifically requested her with the promise of high rewards for her services. She does not need the added incentive to rescue the man she has come to think of as a friend of sorts, but Natasha feigns her disinterest all the same. Neither her handlers nor Wash’s need to know anything of the sort.

The Insurrection has installations and cells throughout the world – even one apparently at a facility in Norway that Natasha recognizes as the one she and Wash broke into once before. They are keeping Wash in a facility in the deserts of outer-Mongolia. It is a highly isolated area, well outside the reach of anything resembling governmental oversight or control. Natasha studies the dossier right up until about three minutes short of her drop point.

Her handlers ferry Natasha into the area by way of stealth chopper. At the drop point, she parachutes to the ground under the cover of night. She swiftly strips off her parachute and stows it under some rough scrub. Under a cursory aerial surveil, it would appear as nothing more than debris caught amid the dried branches. She hikes the rest of the way through the mountains to the facility.

The Insurrection is better supported than any other terrorist organization Natasha has ever seen. The facility is large, heavily fortified, and well-staffed. That will make things more difficult, but not impossible. The soldiers patrolling the perimeter all wear dark, burgundy armor and leather, bulky and concealing. Natasha selects one that is close to her size, brings him down with her garrote, strips him, and dresses in his uniform. It makes it much easier to break into the facility. Once inside, a few wary guards almost blow her cover, but Natasha takes them out and dumps their bodies in an empty office, jamming the door behind her.
She finds him in a dank, six by six foot cell that looks like something from a cheap slasher flick. His is seated in a sturdy chair, his back to her and his bloodied hands bound behind him by crimson stained wire ties. He has been stripped of his armor down to dark underclothes that appear wet – with what, Natasha does not care to identify. He has struggled, valiantly. His head hangs low; she does not know if he is conscious of not.

Natasha wastes only a millisecond in looking at Wash, barely a heartbeat. Before she approaches, she clears the room, closes the door behind her, and disables the security camera hanging in the corner. Only then can the assassin dare check on Wash. She reaches for his neck to check his pulse, and Wash springs into action, pouncing upon her and tackling her to the floor. Natasha instinctively brings one of her pistols up, digging it under his chin but grinning madly as she does. She had thought him bound and unconscious. The blood on his wrists makes sense now that she knows he must have slipped one of the ties by force. Natasha wonders just how long Wash has sat playing possum in wait.

“Well, well, aren’t you just full of surprises?”

Wash blinks slowly and uncomfortably for just a second before shifting back and releasing her, a mute apology scrawled upon his features amid the grimace of pain. “What took you so long?”

Natasha shrugs and gestures down at her stolen Insurrection uniform and armor. “You know how it is when a girl’s got to get dressed for the party.” Wash nods stiffly, and Natasha softens. “C’mon. Let’s get you out of here before Daddy grounds you for missing curfew.”

It is difficult getting Wash out of the Insurrection base. He is beaten and exhausted, of little help to her. It is work enough to keep him moving. Every few moments, much to Natasha’s great dismay, she is forced to dump him in favor of taking down another member of the Insurrection in their way quietly. However, he assists in his own way, acting as a distraction for Natasha, allowing her to silently dispatch any unwary Insurrectionists to come their way and think Wash has simply escaped.

Once they are out, it is a ten click hike through rough, unforgiving terrain to the extraction point. Wash has no shoes, his bare feet cracked and bleeding as he limps along. She shoulders his weight, mindful of his warmth, his bulk, and his labored breaths against her neck. He grunts occasionally, clutching his midsection with the arm not slung over her shoulders and stumbles repeatedly, but Wash never complains outside of a few, gasped snide remarks about their situation in general.

When he goes eerily silent and truly begins to flag, Natasha finds herself encouraging him in soft, meaningless platitudes. “Keep moving, Wash. You can do it. One foot in front of the other.”

“David.”

She blinks. “What?”

The man at her side swallows hard, perhaps forcing down another groan before he confides, “It’s David.”

“Oh.” Natasha half-carries and half-drags him for another few strides before those forbidden words sneak through her traitorous lips. “Natasha.” He stops, forcing her to stop, but Natasha only meets his confused and possibly concussed gaze firmly and repeats as though scoring a private pact, “My name is Natasha.”

He nods, and they continue on in silence only broken by his increasingly desperate sounds.

When they reach the extraction point, Natasha gently eases her charge down so that he might rest.
He grits his teeth against whatever private agony he suffers while she radios for evac. and medical services. While they wait, an explosion rocks the night, sending balls of red flame up into the heavens from where they have just hiked. The Insurrection base. Natasha furrows her brow; she had heard no plane, no helicopter, nothing; she secretly ponders aerial drones and satellites while they waited, listening to Wash’s heavy breathing.

When the evac. finally arrives what feels like a lifetime later but Natasha will find in debriefing is only nine minutes, it is a strange ship unlike anything she has ever seen. His handlers, then. It drops low from the sky almost soundlessly before hovering in front of them. The rear hatch drops down to a ramp, and a soldier in heavy, teal-blue armor strides confidently out.

A female voice greets them. “Need a lift?”

Wash winces as he struggles to get to his feet. “Something like that, Carolina.”

He places just the tiniest of added stress upon the name, and Natasha instantly understands. What has been shared on the path through the mountains is taboo of sorts, not to be shared with anyone else. No one can know what they know about one another, not even each other’s teammates. Natasha rides in studious quiet as the craft takes her back to her handlers before ferrying Wash back to wherever it is he calls his home base.

When they touch down, Natasha looks to Wash and offers a strained smile. “Well, this is my stop.”

He nods and waves her off with one, tired hand. That day, when she sleeps, Natasha dreams of that strange moment of humanity and honesty. When she wakes, Natasha’s lips move soundlessly about the name, tasting the feel of it with delicious, forbidden pleasure.

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For the next few months, whenever they call in assistance from outside agencies for Natasha, Agent Washington is predictably absent. Instead, she is partnered with others who must stem from the same outfit. Agent York, a shockingly skilled infiltration specialist and lock-pick in his golden armor who speaks to himself oddly and makes wise-cracking jokes at the drop of a hat. Agent North, with that ridiculously garish purple and green armor and almost fatherly tones. Agent Maine, with that strange, rounded helmet that appears oh so alien and his barely intelligible grunts and growls like some sort of feral beast. Agent Wyoming, who never shuts his mouth for even a minute. Agent Carolina, for whom everything is a competition.

It is not suspicious. York shatters any illusions of doubt almost immediately, apologizing for his presence in Washington’s absence. He explains that Washington is still under the care of their medical officers, but he divulges no specifics. Only once they are on own and well away from prying ears does York admit that Wash sends his regards and his gratitude for his rescue. York also offers his own thanks for saving Washington with a tenderness that Natasha had not quite expected from anyone in their line of work, nor did she expect North’s appreciation as well when a second agent gives it.

All of the agents are professional, but none fit so well in stride with Natasha as Wash. A few do not mesh with her at all, even though their missions remain successful. Carolina and Wyoming grate on Natasha’s nerves, but they are still highly capable and entirely qualified operatives without measure. Her superiors routinely inquire about each during debriefings, but Natasha has little insight into the
agents aside from field assessments of the skills demanded by the mission specs.

When she and Wash finally work together again, it is a relief.

Afterwards, still high from the adrenaline of success and awaiting extraction on a quiet rooftop, Wash rips off his helmet, swiftly steals a kiss from her, and apologizes hastily. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

Natasha kisses him back, fiercely. He freezes initially but wraps his arms about her and returns the gesture. Later, Natasha will wonder when things had gone from simply kissing one another to actually fucking or who really initiated what. At the moment, it does not matter. Nothing matters but the feel of his lean, hot flesh pressed against hers in the cool chill of the night air, the warmth of his lips as they worship every inch of her. It is a violent frenzy, a frantic act that almost startles Natasha…. almost. His touch is desperate and perhaps a bit needy, but she is as well, drinking in the feel of David, the taste of his salty skin. Perhaps it is the intimacy, the only real intimacy Natasha has ever known. Afterwards, there is no awkwardness; there is only a delicious tingle humming through her as each tidies themselves before their handlers can know any better of their affairs.

Before he replaces his helmet, Wash – David – looks to Natasha and asks, “We good?”

Natasha snorts, honestly snorts. “Yeah. We’re good.”

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The sex is good. No, it is better than good; it is earthshattering, transcendent, and every other poetic word she has previously lied in description of relations with her marks in order to get closer to them. After every mission, she and Wash find a quiet place for a quick fuck if possible. It is hot and dirty, but oh so delicious. It is a soaring high untouched by any narcotic. She knows it is the adrenaline still coursing through them from their missions, but a part of Natasha secretly admits that it is also likely from the danger of being caught by either their handlers or any onlookers.

It is not love. No. Natasha does not think it love. Instead, it seems a mutual agreement that this is theirs and theirs alone. These hasty couplings belong to no man. Not their handlers and certainly not their enemies. She says nothing to her handlers, and Natasha knows Wash says nothing to his.

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“Does it hurt?”

He quirks a brow, but Natasha knows this is just a feigned action. There can be no mistaking of what she speaks. On the back of Wash’s head is a patch of bare skin where the blonde hair has been shorn away. There, at the very base of his skull, a curious implant has been affixed. The skin around it still flushes slightly pink, fresh from the scalpel. She had felt it beneath her palms as her hands ghosted over his skin, but, now, it is all too evident.

When it is clear that Natasha is unwilling to offer him any ground, Wash shrugs half-heartedly. “Not
“What’s it for?” she presses, curious now.

Wash smirks. “Well, if it works, it’ll help me keep up with you.”

The pair shares a private laugh, but they do not speak of the implant after that.

Something has changed in Wash since last they saw one another, since Natasha asked about the implant in his head. He seems different, quieter somehow, subdued and maybe distracted in a way. Natasha cannot put her finger upon it. Yet, there is something she knows lies there, something behind his eyes. She shrugs it off.

“Wash?”

At first, he does not respond, does not flinch. Not a muscle even so much as twitches in recognition of her voice as Natasha calls him. He remains frozen in his own, private little world, closed off from Natasha and from their targets below. It is not until she reaches out and shakes him gently by the shoulder does the man jerk back to reality.

“Sorry.” He shakes off the disorientation and brings his rifle up to aim. “Let’s do this.”

Natasha does not truly begin to worry until whatever has happened begins to affect Wash’s ability to work. He begins to hesitate more, as though second guessing himself. Wash’s stealth fails him, leaving him loud and clumsy in a way that does not befit him, as though suffering brief lapses. His aim – usually so sure – slips as well.

She asks him once, but Wash just shrugs it off like so many other oaths against him, quickly changing the subject.

He begins to have greater lapses in judgement and capabilities, leaving her to wonder. It is not entirely unheard of for someone in their unique profession to have a break down. In truth, Natasha herself has often reconsidered her work and the repercussions time and time again, weighted down by the heft of her crimes against the world when compared to the rewards.

Then, in a heated moment of post-mission sex, he calls her the wrong name; he whispers in her ear, “Allison.”
Just as abruptly as the name falls from his lips, something snaps in Wash. He jerks back and tears himself away from her, in a brief, blind panic. When her eyes meet his, they are wide and unseeing for but a millisecond. The color drains from his face, and his cock wilts almost instantly, the mood irreparably spoiled by three syllables. She frowns, but, just as quickly as that queer, shattering moment began, it is over. Wash composes himself, schooling his features and muttering a token apology before offering a petty, vague excuse. Natasha hears him but does not listen. She has seen true fear in his eyes, and it shakes her to the core.

After they part ways shortly thereafter, Natasha chews her finger and contemplates just who Allison might be.

They do not sleep together after that horrible moment.

He is talking to himself, whispering strange nothings. York had spoken to himself as well, but that had been different. York had been funny and almost self-deprecating. York had laughed at unspoken plays and finished jokes of which Natasha had only ever heard half. Wash’s hushed ramblings offer no such humor. His whispers bear half-hinted horrors, and within those horrors, the agent sometimes drifts for spells. It frays Natasha’s last nerves.

The last time Natasha sees Wash is when everything goes from just weird to completely FUBAR in a few seconds. They are moving through an Insurrection facility, darting through corridors with armored assholes hot on their heels.

Natasha loses Wash somewhere in a maze of corridors, cut off from one another by Insurrection forces. This should not be a problem. She and Wash have split off from one another countless times in the past. They have always kept in close radio contact with one another, relaying positions and statuses, keeping the other abreast of any necessary intelligence before regrouping. Both can handle themselves well enough on their own.

This time, however, Wash goes eerily silent after a few moments. Natasha calls to him over their radio. She does not beg, not outwardly, but her voice does. Her tone pleads him to answer her where her words cannot, strained in a way that feels uncomfortable to the assassin and spy. Her handlers have often told her that should any of her partners named for the American states be killed in action, Natasha is to reclaim the body so long as it does not interfere with her primary objective. The spy does not turn back for Wash because of this. Instead, Natasha circles back at the incessant pull upon her chest, prying at her own heart.

She finds him tucked in a corner – a precarious position at best. At first, Natasha thinks that Wash is wounded based upon how he curls up. Yet, when the Russian approaches, she notes that there is no blood, no sign of outward injury. Instead, Wash is holding himself, gripping his head in both hands and clenching his teeth. He rocks, swaying ever so slightly where he sits. It unnerves her, but not nearly as much as the tears gleaming as they run down his cheeks.
The assassin contemplates the various hallucinogenic compounds that she has personally employed on her many missions. There are any number of chemical agents that could be easily introduced to the body and act swiftly. The Insurrection certainly has enough of a budget to acquire any of the possibilities, or expand research to new agents.

“Wash?”

He does not respond. Natasha feels the hairs rising on the back of her neck. The woman tries again, but there is simply no reaching Wash from whatever personal hell holds him bound. She rears back and slaps him across the face, hard. He blinks, stupidly, gaping like a fish out of water.

When his eyes finally meet hers with seeming coherence, Natasha asks, “Are you with me?”

Wash swallows convulsively and nods tentatively, as though still numb from whatever has just happened to him. Natasha does not question. It will not matter what has happened if they do not get moving and get out of there, not when the Insurrection catches them. He gets himself together as best he can, but whatever lapse has occurred has left him vulnerable and unstable. His hands tremble and shake as though with palsy; Natasha covers for him.

They fail to meet their objective. The Insurrection cuts them off from the package that is their target. It is the first time in many years that Natasha has not completed her mission; she does not know if this has happened to Wash before, if he has ever tasted the bitter tang of failure and defeat. When they are out and free, he mutters an apology devoid of any real emotional context.

Natasha tells him it is nothing, but both know it is a lie. Whatever has happened today is the exact opposite of “nothing.” She wonders if this is the culmination of the changes she has seen in him, a climax in essence, or if this is merely still the tip of a terrible iceberg.

It is the last time she sees Agent Washington.

Some months after, when the blood is too much and the horrors she has committed too pervasive, the Russian spy and assassin known as Natalia Alianovna Romanova, also called Natasha Romanov, also called Black Widow, defects. She abandons her life and everything she ever known, turns her back on what has been her world. The U.S. is not entirely keen to welcome a former spy, even with the intelligence and skills the woman has to offer in trade. Yet, Nick Fury and Phil Coulson are there for her, greeting her in their own way, so long as she remains amenable to their needs.

As she settles into her new life in America, Natasha finds her thoughts drift occasionally back to the blonde soldier in the dark armor. She wonders what has become of him. Natasha keeps her ear to the ground, listening sharply to the few contacts that remain friendly to her for any news of Agent Washington.

When all her efforts yield nothing, not a clue about Wash’s whereabouts or status, Natasha asks Coulson. Despite being decidedly inappropriate, it seems somehow more appropriate to inquire of Coulson than of Fury. Fury would question, but Coulson does not. Coulson respects her need for discretion in the matter and investigates in his own way.

What Coulson finds is disappointing at best, but he at least has the good sense to share this in private. “From what I’ve been able to gather, your ‘Agent Washington’ belonged to a World Securities Council splinter agency known as Project Freelancer.”

Natasha feigns nonchalance, but she knows it is a paltry display for someone as intuitive as Coulson. “Still active?”
“Too little information to say for certain, but this is everything I’ve been able to turn up.”

Coulson hands over what little he has been able to glean about Project Freelancer and its operatives. Natasha waits until she is alone to peruse the information he has brought her. It seems Project Freelancer is the pet project of one Director Leonard Church. Project Freelancer has spent several years embroiled in various affairs, most notably a lengthy matter with Charon Industries – a name that Natasha recognizes. There is little in the file, certainly nothing to compare with what she knows from her brief experiences with Wash and his compatriots.

Then, she spies the burn notice. Project Freelancer has been officially disavowed. It is almost comical how the vocabulary changes beyond that. From a side project to a splinter cell and rogue agency. She stays up for hours wondering what has become of Wash in the wake of the burn.

It is a question that will haunt her for months.

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Time passes, and Agent Washington fades from her thoughts. Her memories of him blur, watered down to brief glimpses and fleeting fancies. She dreams of him, sometimes, in the dark of the night, longing for those warm hands and gentle touch.

Then, Clint comes hurtling into her life on some bland back alley in Budapest. Clint is funny, sharp, and formidable. She falls into step just as easily with the archer as she had with Agent Washington. It is a comfortable familiarity after months adrift in a sea of pop culture, of late night cable tv, and overly sugared manufactured foods. He is a rock, a firm foundation amid the hustle and bustle of American life. And, most importantly, Clint is perhaps the only real friend Natasha has found since leaving Russia, the only man that sees Natasha as she truly is and admires her as she is, for all her many flaws and sordid past.

They become partners and, perhaps, something more, replacing Agent Washington even in her thoughts and dreams.

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They come from a great hole in the sky. Natasha stares up in mixed awe and terror at the sight of it. Monsters and beasts swarming from a veritable tear in the fabric of time and space, a bore hole right to another part of the universe or another dimension entirely. They are the stuff of nightmares, lumbering creatures that span longer than any New York City subway driven by masked warriors. Yet the spy knows she has no time to marvel at the coming of these creatures, nor at the mighty mass of the space whales as they come crashing through office buildings and the like.

Yet, Clint is at her side, along with Tony Stark, Steven Rogers, Bruce Banner, and the demigod known as Thor. They can do this. No, they will do this.

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After the debacle of Project Insight, Natasha finally admits to both herself and Clint that there is something more between them than mutual respect. At first, he blinks and stares dumbly, like a gawky teenager. It is endearing, such genuine surprise from a man as confident and deadly as Clint Barton. It takes him close to ten minutes to pull himself together to confess the same.

They pick out a modest apartment together in D.C. The place is quaintly older, small, and secure, easily upgraded to the sort of security that operatives of their caliber require. Quick escapes are plentiful, either from the actual apartment or the rooftop, communal garden. There are several windows, but there are plenty of places to offer cover, and even a cast-iron claw-footed soaking tub in the bathroom. It is perfect for a pair of spies.

When Natasha packs her own things, she finds the files provided to her by Agent Coulson regarding Project Freelancer and Agent Washington. Natasha gives no small amount of pause. She should destroy the files, burn them to ashes. It is the only way to be certain that the information not fall into the wrong hands. Yet, she cannot, not when a familiar pang twists at her heart. Natasha cannot discard Agent Washington so lightly, even after all this time that she has not even thought of him. Natasha packs the file away in her lockbox, mindful that Clint could simply pick the lock but would not.

After they move in, Natasha tucks the lock box under the bed they share and forces it out of her mind once more.

Natasha sees him as she walks from her car to the front door of her apartment building. He is a stranger to her eyes, but he is unmistakable. He is tall and lean, built like an athlete or warrior. He wears a yellow shirt that jars against the eyes in the dark. The left side is a mass of scars all centered about his ghostly, white eye. His other eye – his good eye – surveys Natasha in a way that makes her skin crawl. The stranger might just be oogling her, but it unnerves her all the same.

She passes him with a quick step, hunching over as the spy has seen other women do. Natasha knows the message this curries and embraces it. *I am a woman. I am weak. I am no threat.* It is a behavior and appearance Natasha has cultivated over the years to lure potential enemies into a false sense of security.

Only once Natasha is safely past him does the man speak, seemingly on his phone. “Package is delivered.”

Natasha spins about on her heel. Years may have passed, but there is no forgetting that voice. Agent York. When she looks, he is gone. It would figure. York was an infiltration specialist; logic should hold that so long as he maintained his skills, he should still be capable of such vanishing acts.

Natasha shivers to herself at the thought. York has delivered something to her, but the spy has no idea what. It might be a trap. No, upon further consideration, it is likely a trap. Her last missions with York had been a cooperative between her handlers and Project Freelancer; it is rather unlikely in her estimations that Project Freelancer would bear her any glad tidings.

She phones Clint and relays as much of the situation to him as Natasha feels prudent. Nothing about
Freelancer, of course, and certainly nothing about her past. She offers only enough to describe the situation, and Clint, for his part, does not press. It is a tenuous balancing act between them. He asks not a thing of her past; she does not dare ask of his time at Loki’s side, held captive by the demigod’s magic. It is an unspoken agreement.

“I’m on my way. Don’t go in there without me,” Clint begs over the phone despite already knowing her answer.

She makes no promises. Natasha scales the fire escape with ease and without a sound, up to the window of their apartment. The spy takes a moment to listen with a keen ear pressed to the window for any movement, any sound in the dark apartment. She finds none. Either there is no one in the apartment or they are as good as she; any of Project Freelancer’s agents could be capable of such. It is a bad sign. Natasha waits there, perched upon the metal fire escape at the window by the living room, pondering what might await her in the silent confines of the apartment.

When Clint arrives, he gestures to the front door and holds up two fingers. Natasha nods and begins to count as Clint enters through the front, climbing the stairs. When she reaches a count of one hundred, Natasha eases the window open. By the count of one hundred and twenty, she leaps inside and lands soundlessly, a pistol already drawn from a hidden holster at her side. Clint also has a sidearm up and at the ready when he simultaneously slips through the front door equally as silently. Together, they sweep the apartment, finding not a sign of an intruder until Clint spies a piece of paper stuck on the fridge with a garish take-out magnet.

Natasha and Clint have been acting the part of a happy, normal, American couple for some time now in this building. Their neighbor in the next door apartment had asked them once to cat-sit; the bitty old woman had left a note like this same one taped to her fridge as well. That note had contained instructions for caring for the cat – Missy – who likely could have done just as well without half of her owner’s notes. Natasha knows this note will bear none of the bland recommendations and tips scrawled in loopy, feminine writing.

Instead, it is a simple, terse letter in hastily scrawled and decidedly masculine print.

*I’m sorry. I didn’t have anywhere else to take him. – York*

And, just like that, Natasha knows. “Wash....”

He is there. She scrambles to her feet and searches the apartment with Clint chasing uncertainly on her heels. Natasha knows Washington is there, and she continues to look until she finds him curled up in the claw-footed tub. Only, this is not the Wash she remembers. This is a smaller, fragile creature, with skin as colorless as milk, clad in sweatpants and a grey t-shirt like pajamas. He slumbers so still that it is deathlike, but Natasha can spy the telltale rise and fall of his chest, the slow and deep respirations of unconsciousness. His knuckles are blooded and raw, as though Wash has fought his way out of somewhere, and scarlet stains beneath his fingernails. There are long, red gouges running from the back of his neck down the sides, all ominously radiating from the implant at the base of his skull, as though Wash has tried to claw the device out of his own body.

Timidly, Natasha reaches for Wash, hesitant to touch him. Yet, she cannot bring herself to do it, for to touch him is to make this impossibly real. It will mean that he is real and here, after whatever has happened to him.

As she does, Natasha notes something tucked beside Wash – a file folder. Her hand veers from seeking physical contact and snatches the folder, swiftly flipping through it. Inside is a jumble of documents and files clearly stolen in haste – all referencing Agent Washington and something called Epsilon. There are medical files, x-rays, psychological profiles, all sorts of information – all
specifically about the implant in Wash’s head and all documenting the apparent deterioration that 
Natasha had witnessed all that time ago. All of it pointing to something going terribly wrong with the 
implant, but Natasha lacks the knowledge and skill to discern exactly what.

“Shit.”

Clint’s swear rips Natasha back to reality, and she knows what to do. “We have to take him to 
Stark.”
Chapter 2

INTERAGENCY COOPERATION

Wash does not wake, does not even stir when Clint carries him down the stairs and manhandles the pliant, unconscious soldier into the backseat of Natasha’s car. It is no wonder granted the angry dark marks and welts marring the soldier’s arms. The assassin’s mind whispers of repeated, chemical restraint of some form, a sedative of some kind holding Wash involuntarily down. Natasha silently questions whether York or another has doped him and for what reasons as she tucks both the file and her lockbox in the foot well behind the passenger seat.

Clint wordlessly slips into the driver’s seat. Generally, Natasha prefers to drive her own vehicle, but she prefers this now. With Clint at the wheel, she can keep a wary eye on the man in the back seat.

The drive from D.C. to New York is long and awkwardly silent at best until New Jersey. Natasha knows Clint wishes desperately to question all of this, burning with curiosity. He screams it in his every feature, from the tightness of his grip upon the steering wheel, to the odd way the man occasionally works his jaw. While his unspoken comments grate at Natasha, Clint remains mercifully, verbally silent. At any rate, Natasha has little to no answers to offer him anyway.

She spends much of the ride glancing nervously back to the slumbering Wash. It has been so very long since Natasha saw him on that last, disastrous mission that it feels almost surreal to be in the same car with him. The spy wonders what has befallen her once partner and more that he should be left dumped and abandoned in her bathtub.

Natasha wonders what has become of Wash after all these years, her mind turning the events of those last, fateful missions over and over again. He had been so strong, so sure of himself, and, then, all that had unraveled right before her eyes. Then, he had simply vanished. She had thought, then, that the weight of their clandestine world had broken him, but, now, granted those strange events and the files York has gifted them, Natasha finds herself considering the implant; everything had changed not long after the implant.

Wash makes a small, abortive sound as they cross the Delaware Memorial Bridge. Natasha darts a quick look over her shoulder at him, but he stills once more. He looks almost peaceful under even the sickening green lights of the towering suspension bridge. Natasha wonders precisely what Wash has been given, what dose and when; without such information, there is no telling when the soldier will rouse or in what condition.

There are two more incidents of what might be whimpers or grunts from the man. Each time, when Natasha looks to him, Wash appears to stir for longer, his eyes fluttering beneath the lids. He is fighting, always fighting as he had. It warms her to know that the same, fierce man she knew all those years ago still resides in him for however weakened and bowed he might appear.

Fortunately for them, Wash does not truly wake until they are well into the southern bounds of New Jersey, deep into the woods and far between exits. Natasha whips about just as Wash begins to emit the soft, incoherent mumbles of the barely conscious, just before he bolts upright. He snatches her by the wrist and squeezes with a white-knuckled grip as his wide, bleary eyes dart wildly back and forth. Natasha tenses but does not flinch a muscle, allowing the soldier the courtesy of a moment to gather whatever remains of his wits.
Yet, when Wash speaks, it is to gasp that name again. “Allison?”

She furrows her brow and shakes her head ever so slightly. “No.”

“Allison….” He breathes with a sigh, loosening his hand upon her slender wrist and blinking back what might be unshed tears. “Allison…. I’m sorry.”

Natasha gives another shake of her head. “No.” She peers deeply into those dark, blown out pupils, wondering what they must see in the dark when they stare at her. “No, Wash. It’s me.” She fumbles for the right words. “Don’t you remember me?”

Wash blinks a few times, slowly and uncomfortably before frowning. “Black Widow.” He swallows, his jaw working about the words. “Natasha.”

Clint raises a brow, but, under a sharp glare from Natasha, he refrains from comment. The archer knows Natasha does not freely share her name and credentials. She is best and most politely described as “intensely private,” carefully guarding her identity and her past records.

Wash screws his face briefly, clenching his teeth and grunting, “Stop. Stop.” When neither Natasha nor Clint seem to react quickly enough, he grinds out, “Stop the fucking car.”

Clint slams on the brakes and veers the car to the shoulder. From anyone else, it would be an uncontrolled, reactionary maneuver. From Clint Barton, it is a swift and expertly executed move, bringing them across the empty lanes and right to the shoulder in a flurry of motion. Natasha knows it is a childish move, fueled by Clint’s mounting irritation, but she has greater worries as Wash bolts from the car and staggers like a drunk out into the tall, dried grass beyond the shoulder.

However, Wash does not get very far. Not more than ten or twelve paces from the vehicle, the soldier crashes down to his knees. There, he begins to vomit, copiously amid the weeds in deep, racking heaves that appear painful judging by how the man hugs himself. He coughs and sputters, until he exhausts whatever is left in him. Then, Wash spits, as though to clear his own mouth before sitting back on his heels, still clutching his midsection.

Natasha unclips her seatbelt, but Clint stops her with just a hand upon her thigh. “I’ll get him.”

She nods. It is better this way. Clint knows just as much as she that Natasha’s judgment is clouded by Wash’s current condition in the tinted light of their shared past. Clint bears none of the messy emotional bias that she does. She watches intently as the archer gracefully exits the vehicle and strides about the vehicle and through the tall grass to the soldier.

“You done? Because I don’t think the lady would like you hurling in her nice, pretty car,” Clint drawls.

Wash hocks another mouthful of sputum and growls, “Fuck you.”

The archer grins smugly, folding his arms across his chest. “Seriously, though. You done?”

There comes a long pause, broken only by the sounds of crickets and other nocturnal insects before Wash nods. “Yeah.”

“Then, let’s keep on this show on the road, shall we?”

Wash shakes his head tersely, looking down to where his right hand clutches his side. Clint takes a step closer as the soldier lifts the hem of his shirt, revealing a wide, white bandage plastered to his skin. Clint watches as Wash’s eyes go wide at the sight of it, as though this is the first time that the
man has seen his own injury. Terrible urban legends filter darkly through Clint’s mind of stolen kidneys as Wash peels the edge of the bandage away to find an inch and a half long, ugly wound sutured with neat, black knots. A few have snapped; blood seeps slowly from those spots, almost black as ink in the dark of the night.

“Fuck,” Wash hisses through his teeth as he tenderly probes the area about the surgical site.

“Probably shouldn’t do that.” Clint turns back to the car and gestures quickly for Natasha. As she quickly scrambles from the car, and the archer calls, “Can you grab a pressure dressing from the kit?”

She does not utter a word, merely leans into the car, pops the trunk, and swoops around to the rear of the vehicle. The spy is always prepared for any eventuality, an endearing and useful trait, Clint has found. Tucked in the trunk is an amply stocked first aid kit, and, beneath the spare tire and a false bottom, there resides a veritable stockpile of firearms and weapons. She fishes around in the kit and finds a suitable dressing before crossing the grasses to the kneeling soldier.

“Wash…” she breathes, almost tenderly to warn him of her presence as she drops to her own knees. “I’m going to put this on you now, okay?”

When the soldier does not move, Natasha takes his hand in hers and begins to pull it gently but firmly away from the wound. She freezes briefly when his hand squeezes hers tightly, but Natasha forces herself to focus on the matter at hand. Wash grits his teeth as she presses the dressing down on the wound above the old bandage, wraps it about him and ties it tightly about the wound once more. It will hold, for now. He will have to wait until they reach Stark Tower, where Natasha can safely clean, suture, and rebind the wound in something resembling a sterile environment.

“Does it hurt?”

Wash shakes his head. “Only when I breathe.”

A motorcycle rumbles in the distance, barreling down the highway towards them. Clint stiffens, watching as the lone driver speeds up the road. They do not need any would-be good Samaritans stopping to lend a helping hand. That could create certain complications that Clint is certain Natasha would also rather avoid.

“Nat,” the archer presses in a hushed tone. “We should be going.”

She nods for Clint but maintains her focus upon the injured man before her as he begins to visibly flag once more. “Wash….. we have to keep moving.” He nods and moves to stand, but Natasha slides an arm about him and tuts him. “Let me help you.”

She takes his right arm to sling it over her shoulders, but Wash grunts loudly in protest of the movement. Natasha pauses to allow him to gather himself once. She pulls back the collar of his t-shirt and finds another bandage at his shoulder. She presses her lips together; this will hurt no matter kindly they handle Wash.

“Natasha…..” Clint beckons as the motorcycle draws nearer.

She nods and helps Wash to his feet. Despite her care and ease, he still grunts and grimaces through the affair. There is nothing to be done for him, not yet. The first aid kit is well stocked with a range of medications and painkillers, anything she might need to weather the storm of a mission run afoul, especially now that SHIELD is gone. However, Natasha cannot chance giving him anything for fear of reaction to whatever might linger in him.

She gets Wash to the car just as the motorcycle slows to pass, setting him at the edge of the back seat.
Clint stands at the front of the car, illuminated in the headlights, smiling amicably. Just as the motorcycle with its single rider comes near enough for him to spy the details of the black helmet he waves the rider off. His expression and gesture are friendly.

‘Nothing to see here. Just a carsick traveler.’ His demeanor and movements say. ‘Or maybe a drunk.’

It seems enough; the motorcyclist does not stop at all. Instead, as soon as he or she sees Clint, they take off, thundering down the highway. Natasha breathes a sigh of relief that the passing stranger did not spy Wash or recognize either of the two spies from the Battle of New York.

“Where are we?” Wash slurs, the tiny spurt of energy clearly waning already.

“New Jersey,” Natasha replies as she helps him back into the car. “On the way to New York….”

She would continue, but Wash appears out once more, thoroughly spent. Natasha wonders if he even truly heard her answer. There is no way to be for certain.

New Jersey passes slowly about them. First, it is as the dark forests of the South, a wild, almost primeval land of gnarled pines silhouetted in the night as skulking shadows and monstrous figures. Then, it is as the gentle, rolling hills and grassy fields of the farms that fade away as the houses begin to draw close and huddle together as lost children in the central lands. That, too, gives way to the rise of a sickly, gray, industrial landscape of hulking factories and squat scrap metal yards crammed along the highway as though clinging to keep themselves from the wet, stinking marshes and swamps that spread behind them, golden kissed in the predawn glow.

When the light rises enough to read, Natasha studies the files York has left for them as best she can. The files contain medical notes and psychological profiles – all of Agent Washington, and all detailing a slow deterioration of the man’s psyche. They document a seeming failure of the neural implant. There are notes regarding a second series of psychological profiles for whoever or whatever Epsilon is. It is confusing and jumbled, particularly when the files begin to refer to Agent Washington and Epsilon interchangeably, referencing an ‘Allison’ without any real information regarding the unknown woman. She gives up, though, finding the information too jumbled and too cumbersome granted the situation.

Through it all, Wash slumbers, but not quite as still as before. He whimpers and mutters in his sleep, twitching in ways that make Natasha’s skin crawl. It is as though he lives in private nightmares, too exhausted to wake or perhaps still bound in some small way by whatever drugs linger in his system still.

When Clint passes Newark Airport, Natasha calls Stark from a secure burn phone. He does not answer immediately; she expects as such. Her acquaintance with Stark has been strained in the past. It has vastly improved after the Battle of New York, but he often still makes petty jibes at her expense under the guise of comeuppance for her ruse those years ago as his assistant.

When Stark does answer, his voice is thick and tired. “Some people do like to sleep.”

Natasha ignores the comment, opting to stroke his immense ego instead. “I’m in a bit of a bind and could use someone of your expertise.”
“Doesn’t everyone?” Stark groans as though stretching.

“Not like this.”

“Well, miss, what seems to be the problem?”

Natasha shakes her head, even though she knows Stark cannot see her. “No. Not on the phone.”

“Where are you?”

“Newark,” she answers simply and cautiously.

Stark sighs heavily. “I’ll get Jarvis to put on the coffee.”

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Natasha rouses Wash in the secure parking lot below Stark Tower; he blinks owlishly at her, his pupils wide and his eyes dark. She tells herself it is because of the dark, but the spy knows it is not. Tiny beads of sweat gleam at his brow in a fine sheen, and he trembles slightly. She knows whatever narcotics have held him captive for so long are slowly degrading in him; he will be detoxing shortly enough.

As he struggles to rise, Wash manages to grind out a single word through clenched teeth. “Where?”

“Stark Tower, New York,” she answers softly.

Wash’s eyes go wide. “What?” He scrubs his eyes with the back of his hand and demands, “Why would you bring me here?”

She decides to avoid the myriad of concerns rattling through her mind of the neural implant and the mental decline the files insinuate. “Wash, you’re hurt.” He blinks at her, and Natasha insists with nearly maternal care, “We need to stitch you back up somewhere clean, somewhere safe.”

He nods slowly, as though this is somehow an acceptable answer. It is further testament to precisely how far Wash has slipped from anything resembling reality. She helps him from the car, gingerly now. Natasha knows better to be mindful of the soldier as he shuffles alongside her, wary of the potential lurking within him. Even as they ride the elevator to the penthouse, Natasha keeps a weather eye upon him where he leans heavily against the wall.

Stark greets them from the kitchen, raising a steaming mug to the trio in greeting. “Morning.” He raises an eyebrow at the stranger amid them and smirks. “So, what seems to be them problem?”

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While Stark reads the files, Natasha deposits Wash on a plush bed in a spare room and tends to his wounds. First, she deals with the wound on his side. She peels away the soiled bandages, frowning at the scarlet stains before discarding them. Then, she cleans the wound with antiseptic from the first aid kit Stark provided before neatly re-stitching the wound. Wash clenches his teeth and balls the
sheets in his fists to admirably keep from screaming. As she works, Natasha cannot help but note with a twinge of distaste that the wound is small yet deep, the work is familiar to her eyes. Someone has dug a bullet out of Agent Washington’s abdomen recently. When she checks the wound at his shoulder, Natasha finds a similar surgical site there.

As she applies fresh bandages, Natasha murmurs, “Want to tell me who put two slugs in you?”

His features falter, for just a moment, as something akin to grief flashes through them before he quickly composes himself. “North.”

“North?!?” Natasha blurts in shock.

Wash offers a tight nod in return, yet the spy still finds it impossible to believe. The North she remembers from all those missions ago had been a professional yet caring man. The North she knew had been kind and funny, warm in an almost fatherly way that did not befit his line of work. He hardly seemed the type to fire upon his own compatriots, let alone double-tap like this. Yet, the aim is impeccable, incapacitating wounds without killing or permanently crippling, unquestionably the mark of a master sharpshooter like North or Clint.

She purses her lips together in a thin line. “Why?”

Wash turns his head away and only mutters, “I deserved it.”

He rolls away from her fully now and hugging himself. It only further unnerves her, as it presents her with the neural implant and the long gouges in his neck from what could only have been his own fingernails judging by the angles and depths. It disturbs her to see such damage, such raw, angry and obviously self-inflicted wounds.

Yet, he will say no more. After a time, his breathing slows and settles, taking on the low, even draws of sleep once more.

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“You sure do know how to pick ‘em.”

The jibe from Stark garners a sharp, deadly glare from Clint and a wince from Natasha. Clint has been quiet about this entire matter, mercifully so. She knows he loves her, desperately so, and that Agent Washington is something a threat; the shadow of her uncertain and decidedly unsavory past.

Stark waves the file at her. “You know how dangerous he is?”

Natasha does not say a word. She has always known precisely how dangerous Agent Washington is. She has seen him in action, in battle. She has seen him dispatch enemies with swift, cold, calculated blows and deadly aim. Natasha has never entertained any illusions about Wash’s capabilities.

“And you know he’s bat shit insane, right?”

Again, Natasha refuses to be baited. She has known, on some level, that there must always be a measure of insanity to those in her line of work. No one simply elects to become a spy or assassin without it. She has also always known the Freelancers to be somewhat off balanced based off of her interactions with the mercenaries, in their own ways, Agent Washington included.
“You know these files say it was a friend who shot him?” Stark continues in his sing-song voice.

“Yeah,” she breathes, shaking her head. “He told me.”

“Do you know why?”

“He didn’t say.” Natasha frowns, turning away. “Does it matter?”

Clint raises a brow, and Stark continues at his gesture. “He tried to kill his boss.”

That does give Natasha pause, but not outwardly. She had known the Freelancers had their own sets of handlers, much like hers, doling out supplies, weapons, intelligence and missions. However, he had never mentioned his handlers or employers. It is something of taboo to speak of such things.

When that fails to rouse Natasha, Stark admits in something of a hush. “I knew the guy.” She blinks, stupidly, and Stark slaps the file down on the counter. “Well, I met him once at a conference. Dr. Leonard Church.” He meets Natasha’s gaze knowingly. “You don’t forget a guy like Leonard Church that easy. Made Loki look like a pillar of sanity.” The inventor touches his fingertips to the files and asks in what is perhaps the first serious statement she has heard from him, “Do you have any idea what they did to your friend in there?”

Her eyes narrow. “I can read.” When Stark says nothing about the comment, Natasha sighs, “They installed an artificial intelligence into his mind, codenamed EPSILON.”

The inventor folds his arms across his chest, and he corrects her steadily, “An unstable fragment of an artificial intelligence complex associated with personal memory components.”

Something clicks in Natasha, stirring deep within, but she shoves it back. “Who’s memory?”

“Someone seriously messed up, if these psyche profiles are any indication.” There is a quiet, uncertain moment where Natasha does not know what to say, but Stark goes on, “So, why’d you bring him here, to me?”

Natasha shrugs solemnly. “You’re the only person other than his old handlers who might know to deal with whatever he’s got going on.” She runs her fingers through her long, auburn hair. “York left him with me for a reason. He made sure we had those files. He had to have expected us to bring Wash to you, that you could help him.” She pauses and shakes her head at her own mistake. “North, too.”

“The guy that shot him?” Clint gapes.

“I overheard York taking with someone before we found him. My money’s on North.”

Stark lets out a small chuckle. “What is it with you guys and terrible codenames?”

“Codenames keep the people you love safe through anonymity,” Clint states firmly. “Not something I’d expect you have much experience in.”

“Not entirely…” Tony rubs the back of his neck and yawns. “So, what’s the end game, Agent Romanoff, if it is still ‘Agent’ these days?” When Natasha does not answer immediately, Tony speaks to the room at large. “I had Jarvis pull up everything he could on your friend there. Jarvis, be a dear and fill Agent Romanoff in on what you’ve been sharing with the rest of the class about Project Freelancer.”

“Certainly, sir,” the artificial intelligence answers as it begins to draw up several holographic displays
all around them, projecting videos and files in a ring. “Project Freelancer. Originally a subsect of the World Securities Council, later disbarred following the findings of unethical practices and failure to follow UNSC protocol by Oversight Sub-committee Chair Malcom Hargrove.”

Natasha revolves slowly about her heel, staring at the files Jarvis displays, much more than she has ever seen. There are videos and pictures, news articles and diagrams. They display horrors, crimes she knows she participated in before defecting to the U.S. There are even photographs of the Freelancers in their garish armor, barely discernable but unmistakable to her eyes from her own experience.

Jarvis displays an image of a cold fellow with steely hair and drones on, “The Director of Project Freelancer, Dr. Leonard Church, a noted specialist in artificial intelligence, robotics and arms technology, as well as military strategy, his most recent research focused on enhanced soldiers employing artificial intelligence units to resolve battlefield strategy and operate tactical equipment beyond human capabilities.” Jarvis pauses while a video is brought up before Natasha. “For example….”

Natasha watches, awe struck, as the brief video displays a York, in his golden armor, in battle. York is precisely as quick and fierce in the video as she remembers, but there is something else. He impossibly seems to know precisely where his enemies are and exactly how they will react to his actions. York anticipates and reacts with improbable speed and accuracy. No man could be so knowing, even one as well trained as a Freelancer.

Stark levels a stern gaze upon Natasha. “You know this is some seriously illegal stuff, right? Even if your buddies agreed to this sort of experimentation, no ethics protocol would ever allow anything like this. Someone has seriously messed up your friend like a bad sci-fi mad scientist.”

Natasha hardly hears his words, ignoring the petty snipe as best she can. “So we get the AI out, Wash should be fine, right?”

The inventor soberes once more. “That’s several ‘ifs’ rolled into one.” He sighs. “Even with all this, I’m flying in the blind. This is years – decades – beyond even my own work, and psychology has never been my strong suit.” Stark rubs the back of his neck with one hand. “I can’t make any promises, but I bet Legolas here could tell you just how mentally unhealthy it is to be sharing your mind with another consciousness, even if it is artificial.” Barton glares, but Stark continues, “There’s no way to know what removing the AI will do.” He fixes a wary gaze upon her. “And, even if I did, are you even so certain it’s a good idea? If we should be helping this guy?”

Natasha feels herself reeling back to the past, to all those missions ago with Agent Washington at her side. He had been strong, cool, confident, but warm. He had been honest and good. He had truly believed himself to be on the side of good, much as she had. The delusions of sheep.

“Nat….” Clint breathes.

She feels herself rending at the thought. “I thought I was on the side of good before I defected. Even after, I thought I was joining the good guys when I joined SHIELD.” Clint flushes at the thought of his own actions as a SHIELD agent, but Natasha goes on, “Wash thought the same thing about Freelancer when I knew him.” When she lifts her sight once more, she looks to Stark and to Stark alone as the woman begs with but one word, “Please.”

“And if this doesn’t do anything for him, if it doesn’t help?” Stark presses, a brow quirked. “If I ruin him worse than someone else already has?”

“Then, we find the bastards that did this to Wash and bring them down.”
By midday, Wash is slowly falling to the throes of full withdrawal from whatever chemical cocktails have been pumped into him over who knows how long. Fever grips him, leaving him shivering and shuddering, his skin flushed and sweat soaked, while his stomach roils with a deep, fierce nausea. Natasha sits with him, bathing his brow with a damp cloth and cradling him against her while he vomits noisily into an ornate trash pail liberated from the en suite. He frequently tries to shrug her off, but the soldier’s limbs remain too tense and uncoordinated to muster much of a fight against the Russian. Wash sags against her as he dry heaves again and again over the edge of Tony Stark’s elaborately dressed guest bed.

Natasha takes his physical symptoms in stride; she has seen and experienced worse in her day. The day the Winter Soldier – Bucky Barnes, she corrects herself ruefully – shot her through the side, Natasha had been forced to dig the slugs from her own flesh in the field along the side of some back country road. The agony had been a feral, all-consuming thing, turning her our stomach against her and violently so. She had to be careful during and after not to contaminate her wounds with her own leavings.

No, what truly sickens Natasha is how Wash looks at her without seeing her, how he continues to call her by the wrong name. She holds his hand as he does and gently assures him that she is not Allison, reminding him softly of who she truly is. In the rare moments her words penetrate the thick fog of withdrawal, Wash alternates between staring at her in wide eyed wonder and feebly attempting to flee her presence.

As unsettling as that might be, nothing is worse than the dreaming, for, when Wash dreams, he screams. He shrieks and writhes, reaching and clawing for the neural implant at the base of his skull. In those dark, terrifying moments, Natasha can only grip his wrists fiercely, squeezing as hard as she can in some hope that the discomfort will rouse him while she firmly states meaningless platitudes. The nightmares come and go without warning, followed by long quiets during which Wash sits and stares sightlessly but mercifully silently.

In the early evening, during one such lull, when Wash seems somewhat lucid, Natasha finally dares ask after all these years, “Who is she?”

He blinks stupidly at her before bitterly growling, “Who?”

“Allison.” When Wash continues to stare, Natasha presses, wringing the washcloth she has used to dab his brow just to offer her hands something to do. “You keep calling me ‘Allison.’ Who is Allison, Wash?”

Something flickers across his features. What it is, Natasha cannot tell. It might be regret, but it might also be irritation. It is pain, and it is anger. Natasha is well schooled in reading the expressions of her targets, but that brief moment is tarnished by too many muddled emotions for her to get a clear read of whatever it is that Wash feels at the name.

Then, his features turn to a pained grimace as Wash grips his head and groans. Natasha winces in sympathy. Headaches are a common withdrawal symptom. She allows the subject to drop for now, but the spy cannot shake the unsettling feeling that she remains in the shadow of another woman.
Pepper Potts would be so proud of Tony. He spends his day data mining for more information on Project Freelancer, but this is little more than a ruse to keep Clint busy and away from the guest bedroom. Tony is no fool; he knows Clint will not find anything more on Project Freelancer or Agent Washington than the files that Jarvis has already assembled.

While Clint taps idly away and skims the files, Tony does the real work with Jarvis on the side. He directs Jarvis to monitor this Agent Washington’s vitals on a data conservative subroutine, privately alerting his personal phone through the day with updates on the stranger’s status. Then, he spends hours combing through what little of the research of Dr. Leonard Church he can find for any clues towards exactly how the man might have managed to install an artificial intelligence into a human brain.

Out of the blue, Clint sighs and stretches before idly asking of no one, “Why is she doing this for him?”

Tony blinks, honestly blinks. “Wait…… you don’t…..” The inventor chuckles to himself and shakes his head in disbelief. “You seriously can’t see it?”

“What? You think they were seeing each other?”

Tony gives another quick toss of his head. “No, I know they were.” Clint makes a noncommittal sound, and Tony folds his arms across his chest. “Oh, come on. You’re a spy. You can’t be that naïve to say you haven’t been thinking the exact same thing.”

For a long moment, Clint remains silent, contemplative before admitting in a huff. “I have.”

Tony feels a smirk spreading across his face, smug and warm, reaching high into his cheeks and his eyes despite the chagrin so clearly scored upon Clint’s features. Of course Clint would have come to the same, natural conclusion when the evidence has been laid so neatly before him. There can be no other easy conclusion to be drawn from the matter before them. Occam’s razor.

The tiny plugs in Tony’s forearms vibrate soundlessly within his flesh, just the faintest of electric tickles and nothing more. It is a silent alert from Jarvis directing his attention to his phone. The inventor plucks the small device from his pocket and surveys Jarvis’s notes. It seems that both Nat and Washington have dozed off, but, based off of the agent’s current condition, the artificial intelligence is recommending rather primly that Tony offer his guests dinner shortly, something simple in particular for the agent.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Stark purrs lightly to himself as he steps briskly from the lab.

He has been waiting for this moment for some time now. Natasha has kept such a wary eye on Agent Washington that it has been almost impossible for Tony to inspect the implant as closely as he should like. Jarvis can scan the exterior body, but Tony has been concerned about any internal scans without a clear enough understanding of how the device is imbedded and what material it is made from. Different implant materials react oddly based on the nature of the scan; he will need a baseline inspection before risking a scan of any sort.

Tony orders a sparse meal to be delivered to the penthouse. A basic soup for the stranger, something easy on the stomach, and something more substantial for the two spies and himself. It is as easy as dialing a number and making the request of the Tower’s culinary staff.
While he waits, the inventor steals into the room on tiptoe. Natasha sits in her chair, curled to her side and lightly slumbering. Washington lies on his side, his back conveniently to the door and to Tony, as though presenting the implants in the base of his sweat-slicked neck to the inventor. Convenient. Stark crosses the floor silently, stealing towards the soldier to more closely survey the damage. He leans over the bed, peering at the queer implants amid the raw, angry red marks clawed into Wash’s neck. It is a tiny device, with a small slot clearly intended for some sort of media along with a port of some kind. The implant is a curiously small device, but Tony has a hunch that it penetrates deeply, integrating directly with the nervous system, possibly the spinal column or brain entirely.

Tony gently probes the device with a single finger, just the tiniest brush of his fingertip, but it is a terrible, glaring mistake. Wash surges up in a start, whipping about and catching Tony by the wrist. The sick man moves with a surprising speed and force, fiercely dragging Tony about and slamming him down to the bed. Wash twists Tony’s arm back, far enough that the shoulder screams in agony and protest, drawing a grunt from the inventor through clenched teeth.

He opens his mouth to cry out, but Natasha is up in a flash. “Wash! Let him go!”

“No. Not again. Not _ever_ again,” Wash growls hotly, wrenching Tony’s arm far enough to illicit a moan from the man before planting his palm firmly against Tony’s elbow as though intending to shatter it with one blow. “Never.”

“No, not again,” Natasha agrees softly in placation when she spies the febrile gleam to the soldier’s eyes, the wetness spiking his lashes partly from fever heat and partially from tears the spy is not ready to admit noting. “Just let him go. He’s not here to hurt you. He’s here to help you, I swear.” When Wash does not release the man but instead tightens his grip, Natasha bellows with authority, “Agent Washington, stand down!” When even that does not stop him, she calls, “David, stop!”

That does it. Something snaps in the man, and, just like that, the aggression instantly drains from the man along with the fight, the feral tension that had held him upright. Wash slumps down, his hold loosening just enough from Tony for the inventor to scramble back and away. As Tony jerks back and stumbles away on the floor, Natasha steps neatly between Wash and the inventor, mindful of the potential for a further fight. However, Wash just sits there, blinking dumbly and breathing heavily, gulping at the air as a half-drowned man. His hands grasp impotently at nothing, opening and closing awkwardly with every inhalation.

Without taking her eyes from the soldier, Natasha drops her voice low and asks, “Are you alright, Stark?”

“Yeah, yeah…” He breathes, rubbing the shoulder that is beginning to flare with a dull ache.

“Good. Then, do me a favor?” When Stark makes a sound something akin to agreement, she growls, “Don’t do anything that stupid again.”

“Duly noted,” Stark whispers.

When Wash’s ragged inhalations seem to slow and calm once more, Natasha takes a single step towards the soldier, her hands up and palms out in a pointed gesture to demonstrate the lack of threat. The gentle pad of her footstep draws his attention, his head whipping about. He stares, wide eyed at the spy, his body trembling almost imperceptibly.

“Wash?” she croons sweetly. “You back with us, Wash?”

The soldier swallows almost convulsively, licks his lips, and nods. “Yeah.”
“Do you know who I am?” the woman asks tenderly.

Washington blinks and shakes his head in disorientation before grumbling out, “Of course I know who you are.”

She shrugs. “Indulge me.”

He drops his gaze, perhaps in shame. “Black Widow.”

It does not escape Tony’s notice that the soldier shoots him a sidelong glance and elects to address her by her codename. He wonders idly if it is a gesture of distrust towards the inventor or of protectiveness towards Natasha. Either way, it suggests a calculation behind the soldier despite the withdrawal, one that Tony has to respect.

She points to the inventor crouched on the floor. “And him? Do you know him?” When Wash turns his glossy eyes towards Stark in survey, Natasha presses, “Do you recognize him?”


He trails off, as though uncertain of what exactly to call the awful display from just a moment ago, but Tony quickly dismisses the soldier without flinching. “Water under the bridge.”

“I wasn’t,” Wash pauses, as though searching for the right word.

“You yourself?” Tony interjects sharply. When Wash says nothing, Stark slowly climbs to his feet and goes on, “That is what you were going to say, right?”

Wash grips the bed linens so tightly that his knuckles white from the effort. “Something like that.”

Natasha’s heart softens, melting for the man she knew all those years ago, but the inventor seems hardly phased by the dejection in Wash’s tone. “So, tell me, when you’re not yourself, who are you?”

“Epsilon, or something like him. I don’t know,” Wash sighs in frustration, rubbing his forehead. “It’s like I’m him and someone else, too.”

“Cognitive overlap,” the inventor mutters in what might be awe. “Are you aware at all when you’re….. having an episode like that?” Tony questions cautiously, curious now but mindful of the precarious ground he broaches.

Natasha interrupts protectively, cutting like a knife. “Maybe it’s best to let Wash settle down a bit.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Stark sneers sarcastically. “I was under the impression that you wanted me to get this think out of your friend’s head without killing him, giving him irreparable brain damage, or worse? Or maybe you’d like me to just pry it out with a Philips head screwdriver and hope for the best?”

Natasha winces at the thought but holds her ground. “Knowing too much about people like us can be dangerous.”

“Yeah, well, it’s dangerous for me to go messing around in his head without a better idea of what we’re dealing with,” Stark retorts sharply.
Wash mumbles something under his breath, something utterly unintelligible at that and seemingly not to either the inventor or the spy as he looks away and shakes his head. For a sickening flicker of a moment of doubt, Natasha entertains the notion that the soldier has gone insane, but she buries that thought just as swiftly as it bubbles up. She refuses to allow herself such thoughts, no matter how rational and truthful the woman knows they may be.

Stark, however, is obviously not as sensitive to hold such notions as he quirks a brow and questions, “Something you’d like to share with the class?”

“I said,” Wash grinds through clenched teeth, his voice talking a strange, alien pace and his body quaking as he speaks. “Don’t talk about me like I’m not in the fucking room,’ cockbite.”

Natasha blinks and talks a single step back, absolutely dumbfounded, but Stark merely leans forward and asks with an eerily knowing yet eager tone, “Am I speaking to Epsilon now?”

Although Natasha will never admit it to any other living soul, Clint Barton is a secret fanatic about old, bad horror movies. She often watches them with him, cuddled up on the couch on those rare, quiet nights spent at home, simply enjoying one another’s company. They laugh and joke at the worst of them, at the cheesy actors and actresses with their ham-handed lines. She has heard such lines in many of Clint’s particular favorites, often uttered by mediums to unseen spirits shaking chandeliers and slamming doors; Natasha herself has chuckled at them. Yet, there is no humor when Stark speaks the words; it sends shivers down her spine.

Wash meets Stark’s gaze with a cutting glare, but, somehow, the woman knows his eyes do not see. Stark must see this as well, for the tensing of his body does not escape Natasha’s notice. Nor does she miss it when the inventor leans back under the guise of a deep breath, putting a bit of extra space between himself and the soldier. Natasha feels her heart stammer slightly to realize that Stark does respect the threat that Agent Washington poses, for however his sniping might suggest otherwise.

Then, Wash draws in a shuddered breath, and all the anger and rage that had previously occupied his features melt away, leaving him trembling and mumbling, “My name is Washington. My name is Washington. Washington.” He licks his lips, a desperate action as he reminds himself of who he is. “I’m…. no…. My name is Washington…”

Stark’s face softens slightly, and he reaches across to touch Wash’s hand out of what might be sympathy from the last person Natasha expected. As soon as his fingertips grace the soldier’s hand, Wash jerks it away as though burned. He looks to Stark, his eyes wide and frightened in a way as his mutterings cease. There are tears in his eyes, fat, stupid tears rolling down his cheeks.

“Look, Wash, is it?” When the solider nods, the inventor goes on, “I’m sorry.” Stark frowns and points sternly in Wash’s face. “I don’t say that often, so you should know I’ll deny any allegations of apologizing ever.” That draws a small, timid chortle from the soldier, and Stark nods encouragingly in a show of surprising empathy. “Better?”

Wash gives another quick nod before blurtting out, “I didn’t…?”

“Go crazy and try to kill me again while under the influence of an artificial consciousness?” Stark prompts swiftly. “Nah. Just spaced and used language that would have Captain America shaking in his star-spangled britches.”

Natasha feels the tension that had knotted in her stomach loosening, easing. There is something to Stark that has always put her oddly at ease, no matter how irritating he insists on acting. Perhaps it is because the billionaire speaks his mind so plainly, leaving no question as to his intentions or thoughts, no lingering shades of gray. It is disarming to be met by such open honesty.
“Dinner’ll be in a few,” Stark offers plainly. “Come out and be human. Let’s talk about getting this thing out of you.”

Chapter End Notes

Have a happy and safe Fourth of July to everyone who celebrates! If you don't, well, hopefully you have a delightful day either way.
INTERAGENCY COOPERATION

Dinner can be aptly described as awkward at best; however, in all honesty, it is an utter disaster.

For the three Avengers who have gathered, the meal is a lavish fare. Stark’s personal chef from the Tower’s culinary staff has outdone herself, yet again. Three plates of fine, bone white china rimmed in gold have been sent up, bearing roasted chicken perched atop seasonal vegetables and drizzled with a sauce that Tony cannot name. It appears homey and hearty to match the taste, but Tony knows it is all a delicate arrangement, each piece carefully placed by the chef to ensure the illusion.

Sadly, the inventor hardly notes the taste; instead, Tony focuses almost entirely upon his three quite curious houseguests. Natasha eats, but it is almost mechanical and forced. Clint resolutely abstains, preferring instead to practically glare across the table at Washington, who prods idly with a spoon at the creamy potato soup that the chef has prepared for him. Washington does not seem to notice Tony’s studious survey as he stares at the bowl before him.

The silence that yawns between them is a trying thing, pressing upon him; when Tony cannot stand it anymore, he dares ask, “So, Agent Washington, tell me, how exactly did you come into the company of someone as loony as Leonard Church?”

Wash blinks almost owlishly, as though starting from a dream at the mention of Church. His eyes take a strange haze, which does not escape Stark’s notice. He works his jaw in a way that seems unnatural upon him, clenching and unclenching his left fist. Stark takes it all in, waiting patiently as whatever fugue holds Washington dissipates. The inventor wonders whether it is Epsilon or Washington’s own memories even as Natasha’s gaze flickers briefly to him.

When Wash comes back to himself, it is with a shake of his head. “You know the Director?”


Wash winces, but it is Jarvis who speaks, arguing in his posh, disembodied voice, “Dr. Church’s studies pose rampancy not as a question of insanity within an artificial intelligence construct, but as one of core instability projecting to an advanced state of self-awareness typically considered unique to human life or otherwise attempting to do so.”

The agent’s grey eyes briefly widen, but neither Natasha nor Clint even flinch. They have known Jarvis for some time and have become accustomed to such interjections. Yes, curiously, Washington does not react as most other newcomers do when first encountering Jarvis. It surprises Tony, even though he know it should not granted Leonard Church’s own obsession with A.I. and his limited published studies on the matter that Tony has secured and perused. Tony ventures a guess that Agent Washington has spent time with a similar system to Jarvis.

“I wasn’t talking about you, Jarvis, but thanks for the input,” Tony says with a chuckle before needlessly explaining, “Jarvis runs the place, I just live here. Don’t let him bother you.”

Wash smiles softly, almost nostalgically. “Reminds me of home.”

Natasha perks up at that. The Agent Washington she remembers had never spoken of a home, or anything resembling that. Nor had she. None of the various safe houses or bases of operation
employed by her handlers could be construed in even the vaguest of sense as “home.” At best, Natasha might have called them “bunking” or “lodging,” but nothing more, and certainly nothing deserving of such an intimate title. It had been neater, more efficient. It had kept her from becoming overly emotionally invested in one location, ever ready to move as her missions demanded. She has always assumed that Wash’s handlers would have been of the same mind as hers, offering bland, relatively featureless safe havens to prevent overly emotional attachment to any specific quarters.

Tony’s phone buzzes in his pocket, a distinct tone signaling Jarvis requesting his attention. The inventor discretely peeks at the device as best as possible in the presence of three spies. There is an incoming call, it seems, from a number that Jarvis cannot seem to trace. It unsettles Tony for there to be a stranger who can hide under even Jarvis’s scrutiny, especially with such strangely coincidental timing as this night and this uncomfortable dinner. He declines the call and looks to the agents warily.

Fortunately, they seem too distracted to have noticed, as Clint practically snarls at the agent, “And where exactly is ‘home,’ Agent Washington?”

“No nowhere, now,” Wash mutters, rubbing his forehead as though stemming an oncoming migraine. “Gone.”

“Any family to speak of?” Clint continues to almost interrogate even beneath Natasha’s sharp glare.

Wash shrugs oddly but gives no answer. Natasha is not certain what to make of that. She can read any man in this world, but not Agent Washington. At least, not anymore. He has changed too much, shifting back and forth between whatever or whoever Epsilon is and himself. It makes it almost impossible to catch his patterns and intonations accurately enough to assign any logic or sense to him, especially when viewed in the light of their shared past.

Clint’s questions have only served to further sour the already glum mood, enough that even Tony senses the need for an abrupt change of subject. “So, want to give me a little insight into why you opted to let a lunatic jam some highly experimental tech in your own skull?”

“Enhanced combat.” Wash gestures vaguely to his head before gripping it between his hands. “The AI, they’re faster than us. Smarter. They can run the numbers and the stats faster than we can in battle.” He frowns deeply, his dark eyes staring intensely at the table before him, almost through it. “North and York told me it’d be like a partnership, a team. That was the point of it all, at least.”

“Well, clearly someone missed the mark in your case,” Tony teases lightly.

The low, measured drawl that escapes Washington’s lips sends shivers down each of their spines. “On the contrary, Mr. Stark.” When Wash lifts his gaze, the intense eyes that stare out do not seem his own in some intrinsic way, not really. “I never miss my mark, for even failure can yield surprising results.”

Tony jumps back from the table and swears. He knows that tone, bearing and gaze. It feels inexplicable familiar even if it is coming from the mouth of Agent Washington. It is like peering into the past, into that night so very long ago when Dr. Leonard Church breezed into and out of his life for just a few entirely freakish moments at a conference. Dr. Leonard Church had spoken with the same prim restraint of barely constrained civility, as though every syllable underscored a hidden threat.

However, in the blink of an eye, it is gone once more, leaving Washington shaken and wide eyed, breathing heavily and clinging to the table as though holding himself together. Beads of sweat prickle at his forehead. He is whispering to himself, muttering personal things, only audible through close
concentration and keen ears.

“When you were five, you broke your arm climbing the stupid oak. You met Allison in colle- No. That’s not you. That’s him. You never broke your arm. You met Connie in basic and Natasha in Monaco.” Washington clenches and unclenches his fists, licking at his lips nervously. He chuckles awkwardly and tightly to himself, an eerie death rattle caught in his throat. “York and North would be schooling your ass right now about this, so get your shit together and stow it, Rookie.”

Natasha waits patiently for Wash to bring himself back around, increasingly impressed with his restraint and internal control. She cannot imagine the will it must require. She glances to Clint, mindful of the time that Loki spent occupying his consciousness and the same battle he must have fought against the demigod’s command. However, Clint’s face has gone stony and cold, devoid of any scrap of clear emotion or thought for her to read.

Tony’s phone vibrates in his pocket once more, Jarvis tugging for his attention. Tony does not need to look at the screen to know it is the same unlisted, untraceable number once more. He knows better now.

Eventually, the soldier brings himself back to some semblance of control with a shaky, “I’m okay.” He looks to Natasha and gives her a nod. “I’m okay.”

“No, you’re not,” Tony hisses through his teeth. “We’ve got to get that thing out of your head. Now.”

“Okay,” Wash mutters, still shaken from the incident.

Tony shakes his head. “No. I mean right now. Now, now.”

“Yeah, sure.” Washington’s voice drops off at the thought, and his eyes widen with a sudden clarity, staring beyond the windows. “Shit!”

“Sir, motion alarms have been triggered on the East balcony,” Jarvis announces flatly.

In the blink of an eye, the solemn, somewhat addled, and rather meek man known as “Wash” is gone in favor of the hardened soldier that is Agent Washington. The soldier leaps to his feet and jumps over the table amid in the split second it takes Natasha, Clint and Tony to stand in surprise. Before they can react aside from that, Washington has grabbed the edge of the hefty dining table and tipped it over. The table slams to the floor with a tremendous thud that shakes even the marble tile as the elegant dishes and silverware tumble to the ground and shatter. When the first round smashing into the glass of the balcony windows, Natasha grabs Stark and pulls him down behind the improvised shelter of the table while Clint instinctively ducks as well before the round explodes, blasting the windows inward. They take cover mere fractions of a second before a rain of shattered glass pelts the table.

Tony throws out an arm, calling to the suit gauntlet in a flash as he dares take a small peek over the table. He cannot help himself. Someone has struck out against him and his home, and he knows who. Beyond that, the inventor must also sate his own natural curiosity over what sort of incendiary round could so easily blow right through the supposedly impenetrable synthetic polymer custom made for the Tower. Yet, there is nothing to be seen, not even when the gauntlet from the suit slams into his arm at the ready.

“Wash?” Natasha breathes hesitantly.

The second volley hits the table square on, cracking the thick, once elegant thin in two. The
explosion knocks Tony off his feet like a ragdoll, but he is hardly aware of it until his body collides with the wall behind him, crashing down with lightning flashes of pain blossoming at every point of impact. His skull connects with a sickening thud that frightens him as it scrambles his thoughts. When he lands, Tony tries to rise but finds himself dazed, confused, dizzied, his vision swimming and his ear ringing painfully.

Then, there is nothing; there is only a stillness and silence so deep, so pure that it hurts. New Yorkers – like Tony Stark – are so accustomed to the hum and drone of the City that it is oddly painful and unsettling to go without. Even in the Tower, for all its sound dampening and quiet tech, a faint electric tingle is always on the air. It is disorienting to feel and hear the Tower so utterly disabled about them. There is only the faint crackling of a fire, and the soft kiss of a cool breeze let in by shattered windows. They are too high for the cacophony of the City below to reach their heights.

As his senses begin to settle once more, Tony glances about wildly, instinctively seeking out Barton and Romanov. Barton crouches to his side, utterly dazed and seemingly enraged by it. His hearing aids sit a few feet away, clearly discarded and damaged from the blast. Natasha stands by Washington’s side, both pressed close to one another and crouched for cover behind a sizeable chunk of the once lavish table. Natasha holds one of her Berettas close, ready to fire, while the other rests in Washington’s hand, trained over the edge of the ruined stone tableau.

Tony shakes off the last dregs of his disorientation and joins the spies and assassins behind the cracked remains of his table, swearing as he does. “Shit! Friends of yours, Agent Washington?”

The agent furrows his brow and shakes his head. “Not sure. Doesn’t seem like it.”

“On the contrary,” a smooth, male voice purrs from beyond the shattered windows on the balcony. “I am unquestionably your ally, Agent Washington. Perhaps the most valuable one at your disposal.”

“Allies don’t fire on friends,” Tony growls bitterly, clenching his fist about the Ironman gauntlet.

The newcomer steps lightly through the windows, his footsteps crunching on glass meant to withstand nearly anything, speaking evenly and coolly as he does. “I had to get your undivided attention, Mr. Stark. A man of your…. unique hobbies must surely understand the need for such dramas and expedience.”

“Consulting hours are by appointment only,” the inventor quips sharply.

The stranger chuckles, a haughty sound. “I’m not here for a consultation, Mr. Stark. I’m here to offer my services to Agent Washington.”

Tony glances to the man in question. Washington kneels behind the table as a statue, his pistol trained on whoever stands beyond. There is no recognition in his eyes, but there is also no anger, no hatred. There is no indication that Washington is even there, or if it is Epsilon in control. It leaves Tony no room to know or even guess what Washington might think of this newcomer.

Natasha answers for him. “He’s listening.”

“Somehow, I doubt that very much indeed,” the stranger intones oddly. “Considering his psychological profile and that of the Epsilon unit, I’d be hard pressed to believe Agent Washington is even capable of anything beyond basic combat functionality.”

“And how would you know that?” Natasha shouts over the table.

“I’ve been rude,” the stranger remarks without answering the spy. “Perhaps I should introduce myself. My name is Aiden Price. For years, I assisted in the development of Project Freelancer under
Dr. Leonard Church and am currently been working with the UNSC Oversight Subcommittee Chair, Malcolm Hargrove, to investigate and reclaim lost, highly experimental and highly dangerous tech before it falls into the wrong hands.”

Washington blinks, stirring in a way at the name behind the stoic, stony faced veneer of the soldier. The Beretta slips from his grasp, clattering to the floor. Something flickers in his features at the mere mention of Leonard Church.

Washington is not the only one who recognizes the name. Tony has heard of him, oddly. The inventor thinks he may have even crossed paths with Hargrove during his wilder years, but nothing since then and nothing to warrant such aggression. Natasha knows the name as well. She stumbled across it after defecting, while still trying to cobble together any information about Project Freelancer.

“Agent Washington, I’d like to make you an offer, if you truly are listening,” Price practically sings. “I will arrange the removal of the Epsilon unit from you and provide a chance to make amends for your own involvement in Project Freelancer.”

“Sounds like blackmail and not an offer,” Tony snipes back as he considers summoning the rest of the suit.

“It’s a chance at a clean slate in every sense of the words.” He can hear the sickly smug in Price’s voice. “Mr. Stark, you have no idea what Agent Washington has done in the name of Project Freelancer, nor the crimes he has committed. The UNSC has authorized me to make the offer to Agent Washington in exchange for his freedom. Otherwise, I am similarly authorized to take him into custody and turn him over to the UNSC, along with anyone else who stands in my way.”

Natasha cocks a brow at Tony and laughs, “I don’t think you know who you’re talking to here.”

“Oh, but I do. Mr. Stark’s tower is impressively stocked, but do you think he has the tools necessary to remove the Epsilon unit without damaging the surrounding nerve tissue? Do you think he has the sort of medications to ensure that the procedure is not utterly agonizing for Agent Washington? Does Mr. Stark have the training necessary to perform the sort of delicate neurosurgery Agent Washington requires to effectively and safely remove the unit? Can he promise safe reduction of cranial pressure as the site heals? Can he assure rigorous neuro testing, monitoring and medication after the procedure? Does Mr. Stark have psychiatric expertise and direct experience with Agent Washington’s profile to ensure appropriate mental health monitoring and care?”

Natasha’s stomach turns at the thoughts. Price is right. Tony is good, but no one man is that good. There are thousands of ways it could all go wrong and leave Agent Washington crippled, dead, or worse.

However, Washington takes the decision from her, asking, “What do I have to do?”

“Pending the successful removal of the Epsilon unit, you would work to recover weapons and other AI units from Project Freelancer.” Price pauses knowingly. “I would hate to see what would happen if any of Dr. Church’s projects fell into the wrong hands.”

Washington’s jaw twitches, a minute clench constrained and concealed forcibly. Most people would never have noticed for the subtlety, but Natasha Romanov is not most people. Price has hit a rather distinct nerve in Agent Washington, a calculated blow delivered by an expert marksman. He is considering the matter, and that bothers Natasha immeasurably. There is no way to be certain that there is any truth to Price’s words, any merit to his promises of safety, security, and forgiveness.

“Wash,” she hisses. “Don’t listen to him.”
It is too late. He is drifting upwards, rising from behind the relative safety of their cover. Natasha reaches for him, but Washington moves mindlessly, wordlessly, away from her.

“What about the others?” Washington demands, his voice dry and emotionless.

“Mr. Stark, Ms. Romanov, and Mr. Barton are internationally recognized heroes and potential allies in the matter,” Price explains flatly. “It would be foolish to terminate them.”


“The other Freelancers?” Price offers in an almost warm and paternal tone, the sound of which twisting Tony’s gut with uncertainty. “Well, that depends entirely on them, doesn’t it?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Price smiles, a slick, coy, and knowing grin spreading across his features while the seeming mirth never truly reaches his eyes. “They will be offered immunity in exchange for their aid in securing Dr. Church and any evidence leading to a successful prosecution.” When Washington does not answer, Price adds, “I give you my word.”

Clint glances to Washington, mindful that the agent seems already beyond their reach and reason. “Aw, c’mon. You know that’s bullshit, right?”

But Washington’s mind has already been made up for him as he takes a step from behind the table; Natasha cries out, “Wash, don’t!” Washington slips from her reaching, clawing hands once more, and she calls, “David, stop!”

The Freelancer pauses for a minute, glancing back to the spy and breathing, “I have to go, Natasha. Stark knows why.”

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Natasha waits as Wash goes, a sinking feeling steadily welling in her belly as Aiden Price puts an arm around him and escorts him through the smoke and fire and into the night. Wash does not even look back. The spy does not expect him to look; she knows better than to think he would yield even the slightest hint of weakness or sentiment. Only once they are long gone does Natasha demand answers of Stark.

“Why did you just let him go?”

Tony frowns, a deep scowl as he prods at the glass strewn about the floor of his penthouse with a toe. “I couldn’t stop him.”

“You could have called the armor. I know you could have,” Natasha argues, mindless of the glares from Clint in her desperation. “You could have stopped him.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Tony asks incredulously. “You don’t see it? Who Epsilon is based off of?” She shakes her head, and Tony honestly laughs at the spy. “He had to go.” Tony gestures wildly at his head. “That thing they put in him? They based it off of Leonard fucking Church.”

Natasha’s blood runs cold. “Church?”
“Yeah. Leonard Church,” Tony underscores the name like a profanity. “Which means all of Leonard Church’s dirty little secrets are now rattling around in your buddy’s head. Do you have any idea how dangerous that kind of intel can be? How big of a target that would make this Tower and everyone in it?”

When Natasha cannot bring herself to answer, it is Clint who says it. “It’d be no different than everything you know, Stark.”

“Exactly.”

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The next day, a check for a downright ludicrous amount arrives at Stark Tower slated for repairs. It is accompanied by a letter of apology and gratitude for his discretion, signed by Malcolm Hargrove of Charon Industries. Tony does not mention it to Natasha or Clint; they already seem too strained from the night before. He takes the check and the apology down to his lab and blasts it to ash with a blowtorch; it is strangely satisfying.

Natasha and Clint excuse themselves that afternoon, but something awkward remains between them. They break up some indeterminate time later. Stark knows it is because of Agent Washington, but he says nothing. It doesn’t merit comment. Both Clint and Natasha are professionals, and they do not let their personal grievances affect their performance as Avengers.

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It only takes five weeks for repairs are completed on the penthouse.

Only a few days after that, a new villain attacks on Midtown, followed shortly by another threat to the entire world. Tony forgets about the Freelancers and everything that happened on that day in the craziness. It’s almost appallingly easy to forget when the universe seems dead set on hurling peril after peril at New York.

Months pass, but, then, abruptly, Jarvis announces that he has received a secured data packet. The packet is triple encrypted, with multiple layers of security measures. The amount of security actually impresses Tony briefly before annoying him.

When Tony finally does get the file open, he finds it is a video file of Agent Washington staring back at him from a plain, grey cell of some kind. His eyes look tired. A fine layer of golden stubble mars his features, as do heavy black bags beneath his eyes. His clothes look drab at best – wrinkled, mussy scrubs that might belong to either a patient or a prisoner. He seems better than the strung-out, barely functional soldier Tony had briefly met and hosted, but this is only a minor improvement at best.

“Stark. For what it’s worth, thank you, for what you did and for your silence.”

Tony sniffs to himself hotly. Of course a mercenary like Agent Washington wouldn’t think of
apologizing for the damage to his home. Although, Tony did appreciate the chance to remodel a few things, but that is beside the point.

“I owe you.”

Tony shakes his head and murmurs, “You have no idea, Agent Washington.”

There is contact information in the video, hidden in the stream. It is a phone number to what is most likely a secure line. It is the hidden offer of a hand whenever necessary. Tony knows better than to use it. He can surmise that the AI is gone from the Freelancer’s head, but that doesn’t change anything. Stark knows better than to contact an operative like Agent Washington freely. Even if he didn’t, Tony needs nothing of the Freelancer.

At least, that is what he thinks.

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Tony monitors the chatter through the web. He follows the stories and the leads where they take him, and he settles on a name. Recovery One. Recovery One is what they are calling the rumored agent who has been investigating artificial intelligence units and recovering unusual technology and weapons.

A part of him feels somewhat better to know that Washington must have made the right decision. He is functioning as an agent. He does his work with professional care and discretion. And, since Agent Washington has been on the prowl as Recovery One, there has been less and less incidence of experimental and advanced weapons technology from causing harm. As Recovery One, it seems Agent Washington is a success.

He says nothing to Natasha, especially not after she moved into the Tower. Stark suspects she knows, but it is not his place to say.

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A year later, after SHIELD and HYDRA fall apart and after the three helicarriers came down in the Potomac, Tony finds himself thinking of the number Agent Washington – Recovery One - left him. It takes him several days of consideration before he finally punches the number in his phone. After that, it takes no less than five attempts to pen a simple, succinct message that doesn’t sound too horrifically needy.

In the end, after Steve is released from the hospital with the proviso that he move into Stark Tower for continued care, Tony knows he must send the message, no matter how it pains him to reach out. He can see the pain in Steve’s eyes that he cannot continue the hunt, that he must send Sam Wilson out in his place. It hurts Tony to see those blue puppy dog eyes begging for any manner of assistance. That is what drives Tony to finally hit ‘send’ and chuck his phone aside before he can take it back.

“I need to cash in a favor.”
The answer that comes is almost immediate. “I’m not exactly in the position to be granting favors right now.”

“Not even if it’s for an old friend?”

Tony can almost feel the annoyance from the Freelancer. “I’m not exactly certain I’d call you a friend, either.”

“I’m hurt.”

“That’s because it was supposed to hurt,” the text replies. Then, a second message follows. “I have limited resources right now.”

“I wouldn’t have contact you unless it was absolutely necessary, and it is absolutely necessary.”

There is a long gap before the next message arrives, and Tony can almost hear the resignation.

“What do you need?”

“Ever hear of the Winter Soldier?”

“Fuck.”
INTERAGENCY COOPERATION

Neither Steve nor Sam can believe it when Tony calls the base to inform them that Bucky is being brought in as they speak. Steve almost thinks it is an incredibly sick joke, but even this would be too inappropriate for Tony. Tony would never have such incredibly and unapologetically poor taste to fake something this serious.

Sam drives, leaving Steve to argue in exasperation on the phone with Tony until the inventor gives up and just hangs up on him. It is easier to drive, to focus on the road ahead of them and nothing more, spanning the long distance between the upstate facility and the Tower. It is somehow better, letting him banish the unwelcome thoughts at every turn that Sam knows must plague Steve as well. Thoughts about how Bucky managed to evade them all this time. Worries about what Barnes must be like now. Questions about what will remain in the tattered psyche that is his mind when the Winter Soldier comes face to face once more with his target, with Steve.

When they arrive at the Tower, Tony awaits them with little to no answers of his own. All he can say is that an operative by the name of ‘Agent Washington’ has apprehended Bucky and is bringing him in. All he knows is an estimated time of arrival; 7 pm EST. There is nothing else.

Steve grimaces at the name uncomfortably. “‘Agent Washington?’”

“Yeah,” Tony breathes, shaking his head and rubbing his neck. “First name Agent. Last name Washington. Something like that.” When Steve just continues to frown, Tony rolls his eyes. “Aw, c’mon. I thought you spies liked all that cloak and dagger stuff?”

“That’s not what I meant,” Steve sighs heavily, shaking his head. “Can we trust this Agent Washington?”

Tony seems to consider the matter for a few moments before nodding gravely. “Yeah.”

“What makes you think that?” Steve demands in a low tone; he has learned better than to trust as readily as he once did.

“Because I’ve got some serious dirt on him.”

Steve folds his arms across his broad chest, his features twisting into an intense scowl. “Blackmail isn’t trust, and you know it, Tony.”

The inventor smiles softly. “Just…. Just trust me on this one, Steve.” He slaps Steve on the shoulder. “Besides, Agent Washington is an old friend of Nat’s.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel any better about this?”

Tony smirks. “Not in the slightest.”
The last hour or so before the deadline is spent reading a room. Tony can provide all the security necessary, but he has no construct of what mental or physical condition Bucky will be in – providing it is Bucky that this Agent Washington has secured. Steve and Sam are better suited for that sort of preparation. They select one of the smaller, disused apartments towards the interior of the building from a bygone day when Tony had envisioned the Tower as something of a campus for superheroes – a dormitory in many aspects and a community in others. The apartment is small, nothing more than a one bedroom with a tiny kitchenette and bathroom, and they remove any and all possible hazards or weapons from the space. It is a distraction Steve relishes.

After that, there is nothing to be done but wait. They watch as the seconds and minutes tick by, ever approaching the hour prescribed by Agent Washington’s humble messages. They wait in the penthouse, uncertain or where exactly Agent Washington will show up. The roof or the garage. Either is possible. At least in the penthouse, Steve can alternate between staring out over the city and pacing nervously in privacy until the hour arrives.

When time continues to slip away, Steve looks nervously to Tony. “You’re sure he said 7?”

“Absolutely,” Tony answers quickly.

“PM?”

“Just wait,” Tony assures him firmly. “He’ll be here.”

Almost a full hour passes tensely before Jarvis announces, “Sir, there is a call for you from an Agent Washington on the secure line.”

Steve jerks in surprise at the announcement, but the inventor merely rises and answers with a phone from his pocket. The super soldier watches keenly as Tony walks away. He knows better than to listen in, but he is desperate for anything, any scrap of information about Bucky after all this time with nothing. It matters not, for Tony returns within a minute or so, announcing that Agent Washington will be meeting them in the garage shortly. Sam grabs his first aid kit, and they all ride together down the elevator wordlessly.

It takes another fifteen or twenty minutes for Agent Washington to pull into the garage in the smoking, mangled remains of an unusual vehicle. In another life, it may have once been a Jeep of sorts, with two massive tow hooks in the front like tusks. Steve has never seen anything quite like it, and, judging by the quirk to Sam’s brow, neither has the paratrooper. The truck sputters and steams, not far from death as it limps into the garage, but Steve hardly has eyes for the damage.

Instead, Steve’s eyes go to the stranger in the driver’s seat. It is a man – or so he believes it to be a man. Whoever it is, it can only be Agent Washington. The stranger is decked out in unusual body armor unlike anything Steve has ever seen. It is lighter than Tony’s armor, built for speed and agility in addition to power and protection. Most of the armor is grey, but yellow highlights adorn the suit in small pops of color. A few stray splashes of scarlet and black streaks of scorch marks mar the otherwise neat paint job. A mighty looking helmet with a sleek, gold visor rests atop the stranger’s head, concealing all of Agent Washington’s features and expression.

“Ah, Agent Washington!” Tony greets too warmly. “What kept you?”

As the stranger climbs from the vehicle, he sighs and shakes his head in what might be chagrin. “Car trouble.”

“So it seems,” the inventor muses, surveying the massive dents and scraps along the driver’s side. “Welcome to Stark Tower. You know the Steve Rogers, the Star-Spangled Man, I assume,” Tony
announces, gesturing to Steve before pointing to Sam. “That’s Sam.” When Agent Washington does not react, the inventor claps his hands together. “So…. where’s the belle of the ball?”

“You’re an asshole, you know that, right?” Agent Washington asks gruffly.

Steve feels himself bristling in irritation, his hands balling into tight fists. “Where’s Bucky?”

Agent Washington holds up his hands in what is meant to be a calming, placating gesture, but the many weapons including the massive rifle strapped to his back do not escape Steve’s notice. “Relax. Relax. He’s here.”

Agent Washington climbs easily on the running board of the vehicle, gesturing to the back. There is a tarp there, a thick, heavy sheet of canvas. Agent Washington pulls the canvas back, revealing a body curled up in the back. Bucky. The soldier in the grey armor reaches in and pulls Bucky out the back, hauling him up by his arm. Bucky twists and fights, but the movements are sluggish, lax, and entirely uncoordinated. He is drugged. Worse, when Agent Washington lets Steve shoulder Bucky’s weight, the super soldier finds that Bucky is bruised and battered. His mechanical arm hangs limply, but both his hands have been bound with thick, hefty, metal manacles.

“What did you do to him?” Steve snarls venomously.

“Me?!? He’s the one that fucked the Warthog.” Washington turns to Stark. “Nearly killed us both.”

Steve stands tall, ready to argue, but Sam slides between him and the agent to interject, “It’s over, Steve. The important part is that we’ve got Bucky. We can take care of him.”

The rage wells over in Steve, replaced by the grim truth of the matter; Sam is right as always. It isn’t important how Agent Washington came to find, subdue, and secure Bucky. That is in the past and cannot be altered. Now, he needs to focus before Bucky comes around enough to be aware of what is happening around him. They need to get him to the apartment and tend to his physical wounds before the drugs wear off, before they have to worry about whether it is Bucky or the Winter Soldier who will awake.

Steve nods primly. “Agent Washington.”

The stranger gives an informal two-fingered salute, but Sam stops him. “You, too, Agent Washington.” The soldier freezes stiffly, but Sam continues, “That’s not all Bucky’s blood, is it?”

“No. It’s not.”

Sam nods slowly. “That’s what I thought. Come on upstairs so I can take a look at you, too.”

“I’m fine,” Washington grinds out.

“Wash can handle himself,” Tony insists strangely. “If he says he’s fine, he’s fine.”

“Like hell he is,” Sam snaps. He takes a step closer to Washington, jabbing a finger towards one of the seams in the armor near Washington’s shoulder, to a particular spot where the blood is still glistening. “Something tells me this isn’t just a scratch, is it?”

Washington hangs his head. “No. It’s not.”

Sam nods slowly. “That’s what I thought. Come on upstairs so I can take a look at you, too.”

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Washington hangs his head. “No. It’s not.”

“What is it?” Sam presses.

“He caught me between the armor plates. It’s minor. I can stitch it myself later.”
“Bullshit. Come on upstairs and let me clean it,” the former paratrooper demands.

Agent Washington exchanges a look with Tony, and the inventor shrugs. Sam is serious, and there is no crossing him, no denying him now. He will make sure that whatever injury Agent Washington has sustained is properly examined, cleaned and treated.

“Fine.”

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First, they tend to Bucky. Together, they bring him up to the secure room. Steve tries to carry him, but Bucky squirms and fights uncomfortably in his grasp. Bucky does allow them to shoulder his weight with limited complaint. He does not lean against Steve in the elevator, but, instead props himself up against the rear wall, murmuring to himself as he does. Agent Washington does not look, but Steve knows from the incline of the helmet that the agent’s full attention remains on Bucky at all times as the elevator rockets to the upper, residential floors.

When they do finally arrive at Bucky’s apartment – or cell, as it seems - Agent Washington does not follow them inside. Instead, he stands guard outside as the others bring Bucky into the bedroom. Tony helps Sam and Steve get Bucky to the bed and get the cuffs off of him. After that, Tony excuses himself to let Sam and Steve deal with Bucky.

Steve tries not to listen, but curiosity burns at the back of his brain. His mother taught him better, Steve knows, God rest her soul, but he cannot stop himself.

“So. How’ve you been?”

“Better,” comes the flat response from the agent.

“You don’t look it. You don’t sound it.”

Washington repeats himself, sternly this time, as though willing it. “I’m better now.”

“And the….” Tony trails off briefly. “Your… thing?”

“Gone.”

Tony makes an appreciative sound. “Any residual effects?”

Steve’s ears prickle, his interest piqued. Tony sounds genuinely concerned for Agent Washington and invested in whatever it is to affect the stranger so. Steve wonders at it, the hairs standing on the back of his neck.

“Nothing we should be discussing in mixed company.”

Tony sighs heavily. “We’ll chat later, once everything’s settled down and we can ditch Steve and Sam.”

“Fine.”

After that, the two outside the door say no more.
Steve works diligently at Sam’s side as they take care of Bucky. Sam checks over Bucky’s vitals, ignoring the way the man beneath him bats at his hands with only his flesh hand; the metal arm refuses to budge. Sam peeks for any obvious, lingering wounds, but it appears that any damage he has sustained in the fight with Agent Washington has already healed. Steve reminds himself not to be surprised; he knows Zola’s handiwork is to thank for this small mercy. They do not remove or change his clothes, for however filthy they may be and for however foul they may smell, as that feels like too much of a violation against Bucky’s privacy.

Before they leave him to rest, Steve pens a simple note, welcoming him, offering brief instructions, and vaguely introducing himself. It reminds him of all the notes Bucky left to him while sick. However, midway through, Steve feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. He looks down to find Bucky’s stormy eyes staring up at him.

“Hey, Buck,” Steve greets gently. “Rest now.”

But the distrust is too deep. Bucky swings initially, his movements uncoordinated and graceless from the drugs; he misses by a mile. However, as Steve leans back, Bucky uses the distance as an opening to move and shoves himself away, sliding off the other side of the bed and curling into the corner. His eyes stare with wide panic at Steve and Sam. Steve’s heart twists at the sight of his friend so terrified of him, but he tries to rationalize that this is still the pull of the drugs acting.

He sighs to himself and rises slowly, careful to appear as nonthreatening as possible. “There’s a note here when you’re ready.”

Steve slips from the apartment, with Sam close on his heels. Outside, Tony and the impassive Agent Washington await. A part of Steve wants to just beat the shit out of Washington for whatever he may have done in his pursuit of Bucky, but another part of him is desperate for any information Agent Washington has to offer as to where Bucky has been and what he has been up to all this time since the Potomac. So, when Tony gestures for Sam and Agent Washington to follow him to a place where Sam can work, Steve follows as well.

Tony brings them back up to the penthouse and gives vague permission for Agent Washington to sit at the dining table for Sam to work on him. He excuses himself to the far side of the room to the bar. It is early, but Steve sympathizes, mindful that he would want a drink if alcohol could actually affect him like any other man.

Instead, Steve lingers between the bar and the table, watching as Agent Washington eases into one of the chairs, unlatches his helmet, peels it away, and sets it on the table. The man beneath the helmet is surprisingly unlike what Steve might imagine. He is young, younger than Steve, but impossibly aged in the eyes. Agent Washington runs his fingers through his blonde hair, mussing the short locks and lifting what had otherwise been crushed flat by the helm. A faint line of stubble marks his cheeks and jawline.

“You going to finally get on with the Full Monty so Sam here can do his job?” Tony quips from behind the bar between sips of scotch.

“Working on it,” Washington grunts as he struggles to reach and loosen the catches to his shoulder pieces and chest plate.

Sam reaches out a hand. “Let me.” Washington jerks back briefly, but Sam is the very image of cool and composed. “It’s ok. I’ve got this.”

It takes same a few minutes for Sam to figure out the catches and buckles at the tops of the chest plate. When the plate finally gives and begins to slide away, Sam catches it easily and pulls the thing off to the side and sets it on the table. Beneath it, Washington is wearing what appears to be a steel grey knit shirt of some kind. The entire left side appears darker than the other, wet with blood, all stemming from a slice in the shirt below the collarbone. Beneath the shirt, Washington’s chest heaves with clear effort of remaining upright. Steve winces at the sight, a reminder of what Bucky is still capable of as the Winter Soldier.

Sam shakes his head. “And you said it was nothing.” He prods at the hole in the shirt but pauses. “I’m going to need to cut this.”

“Fine,” Washington concedes, his head sinking closer to his chest.

Sam fishes about in his kit for a pair of sheers. He reaches for the neck of the shirt for an easier starting point, and Washington jumps. His gaze goes stony and cold, disconnected from them. He is a soldier still in fight-or-flight modem high on adrenaline from whatever happened on the drive to nearly total the vehicle in the garage.

Tony chides from the bar, “Hey, Wash, do us all a favor and stand down, yeah?”

Washington nods once more, forcing himself to be still and allow Sam to work. As soon as Sam is away from his neck, it seems Washington can breathe easier. Sam cuts down and away, slicing a wide enough hole to work and peeling back the edges. The wound beneath is long, deep, and angry. A lesser man would not have been able to lift his arm, left alone fight.

“This is deep,” Sam comments idly before rinsing the wound with saline. “You wouldn’t have been able to stitch this.”

“I’d have managed.”


“Don’t knock it ‘til you try it,” Wash replies, a faint hint of mischief in his eye.

Sam expertly cleans, tidily stitches, and bandages the stab wound before asking, “Anything else I should be taking a look at?”

This time, Washington admits it easily. “Took a good shot to the kidneys.”

“Lean forward,” Sam guides him before freezing with a gasp.

Steve looks and gapes as well at the sight of a small port located at the base of Agent Washington’s skull surrounded by a ring of long scars and newer scratch marks. The newer ones look raw and inflamed, weeping lightly. Sam brushes his fingers alongside the area, probing ever so slightly, but the effect is instantaneous. Agent Washington is in motion in a flash, whipping about grabbing Sam and swinging him around into a headlock with one hand while his other hand produces a rather deadly looking knife to jam under his chin.

Steve springs towards Sam, but Tony is too quick for once. He must have known, must have seen this coming, for the inventor snatches Steve’s wrists and jerks back, hard. Steve is strong, but he knows better than to pull against his teammate, his friend, so naked, vulnerable, and downright fragile without the suit. Steve reels back to question, but Tony is holding up his hand in a clear gesture to stop.

“Steve, no,” Tony orders softly. “Sam, don’t move. Don’t do anything stupid.”
Sam grits his teeth and works his throat. “That was the plan.”

“Wash?” the inventor calls. “Wash? You with us, Wash?”

The grip on Sam’s throat tightens; Steve crouches, as though preparing to spring. “Tony….”

“Just stand down, Cap. Let me handle this.” Tony steps slightly forward. “Wash, c’mon man. You said you were ‘fine.’ Sam wasn’t going to do anything to you. I swear.” When the agent didn’t respond nor react, Tony takes another stride. “C’mon, Wash. No one is putting anything in your head again.” Steve starts at the statement, but Tony ignores him and just keeps speaking evenly, “So, you can just let go of Sam….”

There is a hitch in the breath behind him, and, then, the operative drops his hold on both Sam’s neck and the knife. The blade clatters to the floor as Sam springs away from him. He turns quickly, not wanting to put his back to the agent, but Washington simply sags where he stands, his eyes downcast.

“I’m sorry,” he mutters.

“Don’t be, man. It was my fault,” Sam apologizes in return.

Steve wants to bicker, wants to argue otherwise, but the soldier knows Sam speaks the truth and means every word of it. Sam has had years of training in the VA, and Steve has been around enough veterans and fellow soldiers to know well enough for himself. The signs were all there; they both should have seen them sooner. They were right there in front of them the whole time. Washington’s jumpiness at any hint of movement by his neck, near whatever this implant is. The tightness to his posture and expression. The exhaustion and strain to his eyes.

“I should be going.”

Sam shakes his head. “I’m not done checking you out.” He points to the chair. “Have a seat. You tell me when you’re ok.”

Yet Wash is already gathering his armor, pulling it back on. “I’ve overstayed my welcome.”

The words come from Steve automatically. “No, stay. Let Sam finish checking you out.”

However, Agent Washington has already made his decision, it seems. He has already replaced his chest plate and reaches for his helmet. He hisses through his teeth at the motion, the skin likely stretching and pulling along the fresh stitches in his upper chest. Sam moves to help him, but Washington skirts his assistance.

Sam plucks one his business cards from the VA from his wallet and holds it out to the stranger. “My number. Call me anytime you need anything.” He eyes Washington’s implacable visor knowingly. “Anytime.”

It is the same offer Steve has witnessed Sam offer many times before. It is an open invitation. Sam is opening a door for Agent Washington. Right now, it may seem like he is merely offering medical assistance. In the end, that may be all that Agent Washington needs. However, should he need anything else, even if it is just a friendly ear to listen, Steve knows Sam will be there; Sam will always answer the phone.

Washington takes the card without looking and stuffs it into a pocket; he gives a quick nod to Tony. “Stark.”
“Agent.” Tony gives a mock salute before teasingly waggling a phone sign beside his ear. “Call me.”

“On my next day off.” Washington pauses. “Do me a favor? Don’t tell Natasha I was here.”

Tony purses his lips together. “Sure. Secret’s safe with me.”

And, just like that, Agent Washington exits the penthouse – albeit impressively by leaving through the balcony doors and tipping right over the edge.

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The argument that follows goes predictably, as does the resultant stalemate of sorts. Steve knows he should be thoroughly and righteously pissed at Tony for bringing in the third party of Agent Washington. However, his heart is not in it, not after everything that has gone on that night and especially not when said agent has so successfully brought Bucky to him.

The morning heralds the predictable disaster when Bucky regains full consciousness and awareness of his situation. He destroys his room as best as possible granted one functioning arm. He shreds the bed linens and hurls the nightstand against the wall. Bucky tosses the entire apartment, clawing through each and every inch of it. Why, Steve cannot know. Perhaps it is in search of a viable weapon or bugs. Or it may simply be to rebel, to spend his rage upon anything within range.

When Steve arrives bearing a simple tray of breakfast, Bucky vents silent, seething fury upon him. Steve lets it happen, not fighting at all. Bucky has suffered impossibly all these years. Steve can take more for him, more from him. Bucky’s fight is a quiet, deadly thing, the aggression of a feral cat or master assassin. Steve lets him. In time, Bucky quiets and retreats to the shattered bedroom; Steve allows him to go. Instead, he simply leaves a humble tray of breakfast on a bare patch of floor.

Steve returns around lunch time. He tries not to be hurt by the untouched tray of food, or when Bucky attacks him once more. Steve knows Bucky does not mean it. He also knows that Bucky can likely survive for as long as he can without food. That doesn’t make removing the breakfast tray and replacing it with a lunch tray any easier once Bucky retreats to the bedroom.

Dinner brings a repeat of lunch, as does the next day and the day after.

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No less than four days pass before Bucky finally relents and eats. Steve knows this, for, in the morning, he finds the tray from dinner empty. When he awkwardly inquires of Jarvis, the artificial intelligence reports that Bucky did indeed finally test and consume the offered meal. It brings Steve some small comfort.

It is several weeks until Bucky stops greeting Steve with punches and kicks, until Bucky sits, quiet and sullen at the end of the hall, allowing Steve to enter and to set down a tray of food without comment. Steve steps back, but Bucky does not flinch a muscle. Those dark, stormy eyes merely glare from beneath a shaggy, unkempt mop of hair that would have made the friend of Steve’s memories cringe in disgust and embarrassment. Steve takes this as a sign of improvement and backs
away slowly, easing the door shut behind him.

Steve does not like asking Jarvis to spy on Bucky. It feels acutely dirty and underhanded. However, when the artificial intelligence reports a little over a half an hour that Bucky has retrieved the tray and retreated to the bedroom, a portion of him feels lighter.

The day Bucky finally speaks is a holiday – like Christmas, Fourth of July, and Thanksgiving all rolled into one. It is a day Steve knows he will treasure for some time to come.

It begins in the morning when Steve arrives as usual with a tray of breakfast for Bucky – fresh waffles, real maple syrup, eggs, bacon, and cut fruit. To Steve’s surprise, Bucky awaits him when he opens the door, standing at the far side of the sitting room. To Steve’s shock, Bucky appears clean and tidied, his skin and hair freshly washed from either a shower or bath. His hair looks neatly brushed and pulled back, gleaming like raven’s feathers after so going so long filthy and dull. His cheeks are smooth, freshly shaved. He has also changed his clothes, picking something from the articles Tony had stocked the room with in anticipation of Bucky’s arrival. It is a welcome change after weeks of dirty, sweaty, stinking clothes.

Steve raises a brow but holds firm. He has checked himself all these weeks, constraining his own excitement and eagerness to have his friend back. Steve knows that, if he reaches too far, moves too fast, Bucky will only pull away. Butterflies flutter through his stomach, chest, and heart, though, the whole while as the man who was once his friend surveys him slowly.

Then, after some indeterminate time has passed, Bucky crosses the room swiftly and snatches the tray from Steve with his one, flesh hand. He bolts back, but Bucky does not retreat completely to the bedroom. Instead, Bucky just leans against the wall and slides down it, setting the tray down beside himself to pick at the fruit. Steve takes this as his sign to leave.

It is Bucky’s voice, soft and rough that stops him. “Is this real?”

“Of course it is, Buck.”

Bucky makes a small sound but says nothing more. Whatever spell held him has broken just as readily as the dawn. Steve waits with him while he eats, hoping Bucky will speak once more, but the man seems to have exhausted his voice for the day. Steve dares to linger, to stay, and, once Bucky has finished, he rises and hands the empty tray back.

At lunch, Steve brings enough for both of them, and they eat together in silence from then on.

Later in the week, when Bucky starts to clean, Steve helps him tidy the apartment. Stark provides them with replacement furniture. Steve works alongside Bucky to slide everything into place, mindful of the metallic arm that dangles limp and useless at his side. From then on, they sit across from one another at a small kitchen table as they share their meals.
“Am I your prisoner?” Bucky finally asks after weeks in Stark Tower.

Steve blinks stupidly, glancing up from the pages of his book. Now that Bucky tolerates his presence, Steve finds himself spending more and more time with him, seeking any excuse. Most recently, he has been catching both of them up by reading aloud from books on popular culture of the last near century, particularly on movies and music. As a kid, Bucky had loved the cinema; if this Bucky has any opinion or complaint, he has not made it known.

“What? No. No, Buck. Of course you aren’t.” Bucky says nothing, but Steve’s heart aches too much at the question to let it go. “Why would you think that?”

Bucky does not answer, does not speak for hours.

“Is this…. imprinting? Are you my new handler?” Bucky inquires in the middle of a reading session – a big coffee table volume about Woodstock.

“No!” Steve blurts out, blanching at the thought and allowing the book to slip from his fingers. “What?” Steve reaches for him, to put an arm around him, only to have the other man flinch away from his touch. “Bucky, listen to me. I’m not your handler. You don’t have any handlers. You’re my friend. I just…..” He pauses, the words dying on his tongue. “I just don’t know what you need right now.”

“I don’t know either what I need either, but I’m not your friend.”

Steve unravels, his heart breaking. “Bucky, I don’t know what’s going on in your head right now, but I’m your friend. Remember? ‘Is it permanent?’” Steve pats his chest demonstratively. “Well, so far, it still is.”


“That wasn’t you.” Steve can say it with conviction. “That was HYDRA.”

Bucky hangs his head, hiding behind a veil of his long hair. “I still pulled the trigger.”

Steve reaches for Bucky, but, this time, the man yields into his touch. Bucky allows himself to be pulled into an embrace. In another lifetime, he might have balked or fought, slapping Steve away and teasing him merciless. This creature, however, has not the mental and emotional reserves anymore that his predecessor did.

“You blame the shooter, not the gun,” Steve murmurs as he wraps Bucky up in his arms. “Pierce pulled that trigger. Not you.”

“I’m sorry…. so sorry…” Bucky sobs into Steve’s chest, shaking his head.

Steve holds him tight and whispers, “You have nothing to be sorry for. Not a god damned thing.” He means it.
That night, Bucky cries for hours. Afterwards, he goes silent and pliant, exhausted from the crying jag and from venting what has been so tightly restrained for so long. He wordlessly allows himself to be led to bed, to be eased down and have the blankets pulled over him. He sleeps for hours - well into the next day. Steve knows this, because he sits up with Bucky for the first time since the war.

As Steve watches Bucky sleep a deep, dreamless slumber, his mind continuously turns over the strange series of events that have brought him to this moment. His thoughts constantly drift back to the one person who made this possible; Agent Washington. No matter how Steve loathes admitting it, the captain knows without Agent Washington, he would have never had Bucky back in his life.

In the morning, Steve asks Tony to send the message for him. He has no other way of contacting the operative, knows no other means. Tony is taken aback by the request, but he agrees. Steve keeps it simple enough.

“Thanks for bringing back my friend.”

No response comes from Agent Washington, but, then again, Steve does not expect or even care to receive one. He has Bucky back – or at least starting to come back to him. That is all that really matters in the end.
Chapter Summary

Sam simply should have never given Agent Washington his card.

INTERAGENCY COOPERATION - LIFELINE

Sam Wilson always carries a small stack of perhaps five or six business cards on his person at all times. He knows it is rather foolish considering his current line of work as an Avenger, but it is an old habit forged by the years. Each business card bears his name, his title at the VA, his cell number, and his e-mail address printed in bold, legible type alongside the eagle seal of the Department of Veterans Affairs. The office printed the cards for him years ago.

On the back of each, Sam has scrawled his own, personal message. “Anytime, for any reason.” Sam means every word of it and has kept to them through the years. The mobile phone listed on the card is a phone from the crisis prevention department. Sam always answers that phone whenever it rings. Whenever he cannot answer himself, call forwarding connects those in need with crisis prevention. That phone is only for people in need, and it will always be answered. He even once answered a call right after a skirmish, still covered in soot and ash yet always ready to be there for someone in need.

This is all because Sam remembers those first dark days when he got back to the states. He remembers jumping at every sound, always watching over his shoulder, checking for exits and corners wherever he went – all living on the edge. He also recalls the deep, gnawing pain of loss, the sleepless nights dreaming of Reilly falling from the sky and the blood. Sam knows what it is like to be in need, to be in crisis.

So, when he gets a text from an unknown number on his mobile, Sam does not ignore it. “How is Barnes?”

The message startles Sam. Only an incredibly select number of people are privy to any sort of real knowledge about James Barnes – the Winter Soldier. To the public’s knowledge, the Winter Soldier is still on the lam following the events of the Potomac, much like many of the rats to desert Hydra. He is presumed armed and extremely dangerous. Those who know otherwise either already know how Bucky is recovering, or would not be contacting Sam from an unlisted, untraceable number.

Eventually, the evidence slots into place, and Sam realizes exactly who it is contacting him. Agent Washington. There is simply no other person it could be. Sam considers ignoring the message, but, then, that seems irrationally inappropriate. Agent Washington did nothing wrong, no matter how Steve still bickers with Tony over it on occasion. Agent Washington deserves no one’s ire or scorn in Sam’s eyes.

“Recovering,” Sam types.

“That’s good.”

Sam is not certain what to make of that, but the agent does not send any other texts that day.
It is sometime before Sam receives another text from Agent Washington. It arrives in the morning as Sam and Steve are jogging through the park. Well, Steve jogs; Sam sprints at full tilt to just try and keep up with the super soldier. It has become something of a joke ever since their first meeting. When the phone chimes with a message alert, Sam has to fight to catch his breath before checking it as Steve attempts to smother a chuckle.

“What’s the word on Barnes?”

Sam does not show Steve the message; he knows better than that. Steve would not approve of Sam remaining in contact with Agent Washington, or sharing any information about Bucky with anyone. Fortunately for Sam, Steve knows what the exact purpose of Sam’s personal mobile, so he steps aside to offer Sam some privacy under the guise of performing jumping jacks. Sam has to shake his head at Steve’s antiquated work-out before addressing the matter at hand.

His message is suitably terse. “Recovering. He stopped trying to kill everyone with his bare fist.”

Sam means the word ‘fist,’ for it is only ever a one-handed attack. Bucky has not allowed anyone near enough to him to examine the metal arm Hydra saddled him with, but the thing does not work. The paratrooper knows the arm functioned following the collapse of Hydra. Steve admitted once to having broken Bucky’s flesh arm in their fight on the helicarrier, so it is only reasonable that Bucky used the metal arm to pull the super soldier from the Potomac. The metal arm does not move, does not flinch, not even during the worst of Bucky’s rages, but Bucky still will not let anyone close to him to tell for certain, let alone diagnose the malfunction.

“My bad.”

Sam furrows his brow. “What do you mean, ‘my bad?’”

“Had to take out the arm with a targeted EMP.”

Sam frowns and glances to Steve. Steve has strayed a bit farther away now, having been called over by a few other joggers for a handshake and a selfie; he is too far away to have any sense of what Agent Washington has just admitted. If Steve ever found out, Sam knows it would be the end of Agent Washington. Yet Sam also knows that it was likely the only way to garner any sort of tactical advantage over Bucky in a fight.

“Fair enough.”

Agent Washington says nothing more on that day, and Sam tells Steve none of this. He does make a mental note of it. Once Bucky is more…. himself…. then Stark can explore options to repair the arm now that they know what is wrong. This is providing there is any fixing it.

Sam catches Steve’s eye and calls, “Okay, Cap. Enough showing off.” Sam makes a show of stretching before bolting and crying out, “RACE YOU!”
“Are you there?”

Those three words chill Sam to the bone. They arrive as a single text in the middle of the night after an extremely trying day. A mad man detonated an improvised explosive in the middle of a crowded farmer’s market in one of Manhattan’s many small parks. The blast killed the terrorist and several bystanders instantly, maiming others. By the time Sam arrived on scene, it was a horrific mess of smoke, char, blood, and guts. He spent hours on scene, securing the area and helping tend to the wounded. When he got back to the Tower, Sam crashed almost immediately into bed, still dressed; he never heard the text alert.

When he wakes in the morning, those three words await him from the unknown number that Sam now knows belongs to Agent Washington. There is no context to them, no emotional cues to suggest what exactly is happening with the stranger.

As soon as Sam reads the message, he bolts uprights and sends a quick response. “Sorry, man. Just got your message. What’s up?”

No response comes.

At breakfast, Sam chews his lip as he surveys his news feed and keeps an ear on the television for any hint of what may have happened. The bomb from the day before dominates all of the news outside of the weather and a few puff pieces. His face is plastered across Facebook and every news outlet – sweat slicked and soot stained. There is nothing else to suggest anything Agent Washington might have been involved in.

For a brief moment, Sam entertains the notion that perhaps Agent Washington is concerned for him. Then, just as quickly, he discards the thought. Sam does not know Agent Washington that well, certainly not well enough to think that they share that sort of relationship. He alternates back and forth between these warring possibilities.

After that night, Sam asks Tony about Agent Washington, and the inventor reluctantly furnishes Sam with all of the intelligence he has scrounged up on the mysterious stranger. Sam sits and reads all of the files, slowly digesting everything possible about the agent. He tries not to be shocked or horrified by the reports about the artificial intelligence codenamed Epsilon implanted in his head and desperately begs not to be physically ill at the thought of that AI failing. Quite suddenly, Sam understands the cold, professional distance to the agent and the jarring, violent reaction to even the faintest touch near the implant at the base of his skull.

Quite abruptly, Tony’s decision to contact Agent Washington and conscript him in the search for Bucky makes so much more sense to Sam. Agent Washington is just as damaged as Bucky – perhaps the only person in the world who can actually understand the nature of that damage as intimately as Washington can. Steve cannot understand, but Sam does.

Armed with this knowledge, Sam resolves to never allow another message from Agent Washington to go unanswered should he receive anything else. Sam fiddles with his phone and enlists Tony’s help in attaching a distinct ringtone to Agent Washington’s number. Tony briefly balks at the request, but the inventor relents when Sam explains exactly who has been texting him from that number. He allows Tony to pick a tone, lamenting when the inventor sarcastically assigns ‘Macho Man’ to the number. Fortunately, Agent Washington does not respond for some time after that, leaving Sam with no further insight.
It is just after Steve comes enthusiastically bounding from Bucky’s apartment, announcing that Bucky has finally spoken, that Sam gets another message from Agent Washington judging by the tinny whine of ‘Macho Man’ from his pocket. Sam ignores it, hugs Steve, and whispers quiet, even assurances to his friend and comrade before even thinking about looking at his phone. Selfish though it may be, Sam wants to embrace his friend’s newfound hope after weeks languishing with little to no sign of any humanity left to Bucky.

When Sam can slip away to check his mobile, he does. “Is Barnes secure?”

The message is a strange one, giving Sam pause. James Barnes is safer in Stark Tower than anywhere else in the world. He has the all-seeing eyes of Jarvis to keep watch over him and all aspects of the building – as well as anywhere else Tony may have installed the artificial intelligence or brought him. He has a constant cadre of decidedly elite security staff in residence at all times, including members of the Avengers. The simple thought of anything different sends chills down Sam’s spine.

“Of course he is. Why?”

Agent Washington’s response is terse and noncommittal. “Just checking.”

Sam shakes his head in chagrin, even though the soldier knows Washington cannot see it. “People like us don’t ‘just check.’ What’s going on?”

“Could be nothing. Just be on guard.”

Sam can feel the tension and heat rising in him. “For what?”

There is a great, long pause between messages. Sam can almost feel Agent Washington collecting his thoughts in that time. He can imagine the impassive agent tapping away a new text and deleting it repeatedly. Whatever it is that Agent Washington has to say, the operative takes his time in composing his thoughts, and, although Sam’s neck prickles with anticipation, he knows better than to interrupt.

“New player in the field going after former partners of mine.”

The hairs on the back of Sam’s neck stand on end. He knows from Tony that Natasha was once a partner of Agent Washington’s. Yet Washington is not asking about Natasha; he is inquiring about Bucky. Something feels acutely amiss with that, like a misjudgment of sorts. Yet Agent Washington does not seem like the sort of person to make such a callous error; he is as cold and calculating as any of the operatives in SHIELD or HYDRA.

Sam weighs his options before simply asking, “What aren’t you telling me?”

“They’re hunting down advanced tech and armor enhancements as well as artificial intelligence units.” Another text follows quickly, well before Sam can think too much into the mention of artificial intelligence in relation to Washington’s all too complex history. “Needed to see if it had made any attempts on Barnes for the arm.”

“What about Stark’s tech?”

Sam can almost hear the wry, tired laugh from Agent Washington. “Stark can take care of himself.”
Sam considers the response and his options before simply asking, “What do you need me to do?”

“Nothing. Don’t tip anyone off.”

Sam already knows that, so he ignores it. “Keep me posted.”

“Will do.”

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The weeks creep by at a glacial pace as Sam sits on edge, waiting for something – anything – to happen. He rejoices along with Steve and the others as Bucky slowly eases and warms to Steve. Sam saw the darkness, the pure and absolute malevolence of the Winter Soldier, so he knows exactly how much each seemingly insignificant step means towards Bucky making any sort of meaningful recovery. More importantly, Sam knows how much each little thing means for Steve, even if Sam knows that Bucky will likely never be the man that Steve remembers so clearly.

That has not relieved any of the tension that Sam feels. Agent Washington’s texts ring in his mind each and every time the news comes on, every time Jarvis reports any matter of Avengers-level importance. Sam does not know what he expects to hear or read. Some sort of cataclysm? A tremendous battle? A horrifying assassination? Every morning, Steve purchases a copy of the New York Times and reads it at the table; when he has finished, Sam reviews the paper and wonders what exactly he is looking for in the soft, cheap newsprint. Every small conflict the Avengers respond to only serves to further whet his worry to a razor sharp, deadly thing.

Every now and again, Sam sends a message to the unlisted number that he knows belongs to Agent Washington.

“What’s going on?”

“Any word?”

“Are you even alive?”

The last message actually elicits a response from the cryptic Agent Washington. “Busy.”

That message proves to be the last straw for Sam. Unable to garner any further intelligence from Agent Washington, Sam decides it is finally time to admit this to the rest of the Avengers. He calls a meeting and tells them everything he knows. There is shock and anger from the others – especially Natasha, who takes Agent Washington’s request for secrecy as a personal blow. Steve is irritated with Agent Washington, but he composes and conducts himself admirably. Tony is much more pragmatic, immediately launching into an investigation through Jarvis.

Days pass, but nothing changes.

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Eventually, when Sam can stand Agent Washington’s silence no longer, he shares the cryptic
warning with Tony and only Tony. The inventor listens to everything Sam has to say in a rare moment of silence. When Sam has said all he needs to, Tony quietly and confidently assures his friend that there is nothing to be worried about. Jarvis will hold the fort, and, should whatever it is that Agent Washington is hunting breech the building, Jarvis will simply lock down.

So, when two intruders manage to infiltrate the Tower some time later, it is a stroke of pure horror. They make it to the lab – an impressive feat to the say least – before Jarvis alerts Tony along with the rest of the Avengers. Sam responds quickly, but he knows it is nowhere near as swift as the response from the Tony. It makes sense; Tony practically lives in the lab anyway, slumbering on a couch in the corner after pulling too many hours at work.

By the time Sam arrives, Tony is already in the middle of a heated fight, taking on two foes at once in the shattered remnants of the lab. He is a blur of scarlet between a dark shadow and a golden shine. Armor. When Sam’s eyes settle enough on the armor long enough, he recognizes the armor, so incredibly similar to the armor that Agent Washington wore but in different colors. It is strange and unsettling, but not enough to stop Sam from charging into battle.

Sam rushes into the lab and springs over one of the long tables, sliding into the fight behind Tony. The inventor steps to the side, letting Sam move easily into place with him, dividing the two strangers in their alien armor. To ‘Tony’ s side, the stranger in black. To Sam’s side, the one in gold. It pairs them off nicely and evens the advantage a bit. Sam grins as he and Tony split away to charge their respective opponents. He has fought alongside Tony and the other Avengers enough to know Ironman’s moves, both in the sparring ring and in actual combat.

“This is getting a little old, York,” a female voice growls from the dark armor as she dodges a punch from Tony and returns with her own blow.

As Sam charges the stranger in gold – York - to tackle him, the man in the armor calls back, “D’s working on it!”

York reels back with a kick, sending Sam flying. The paratrooper was expecting it, though, and he rolls effortlessly. Sam springs back, throwing out his leg and catching the man by the ankle. York tumbles to the ground but twists away and vanishes behind one of the lab tables. As Sam moves to close the space between them, though, he must duck to avoid being hit by the Ironman armor as he flies by. When Sam looks up once more, the figure in black stands over him. Sam’s brain struggles to comprehend that the black armored woman has actually managed to throw Tony in his suit.

The figure in black reaches down for Sam, but he punches out, landing a solid blow to the metallic visor. However, unlike the other stranger in gold, the woman in black does not flinch. She does not even seem to react at all, despite the blood that mars the visor from Sam’s freshly split and aching knuckles. The woman grabs him by the arm and whips him around, spiking Sam to the ground and sticking a hefty boot toe between his shoulders.

“Tony…..” he grunts. “Little help here…..”

Yet Tony does not come to his aid; instead, it is Natasha, whose voice cracks through the air as a bolt of lightning. “YORK!”

Sam tries to look, but he cannot see from his vantage point on the floor. However, he can hear the movement of the stranger in gold. He cannot hear Natasha; Sam does not expect to hear her anyway. The man in gold crosses the floor slowly.

“Romanov. Long time no see,” his voice sounds almost jaunty and coy.
“Let my friends go,” Natasha orders in a venomous hiss befitting her codename.

“Tex, let him up,” York calls. When Tex does not immediately release Sam, York assures her, “It’s cool. Let him up, before you embarrass me any more in front of my friend.”

The hulking figure in black eases off of Sam’s back and pulls him to his feet in a smooth, slick motion. To Sam’s mounting irritation, Tex goes so far as to sarcastically dust him off. Sam jerks away and glares, but it feels somewhat less than satisfying without being able to see any measure of reaction. He turns to Natasha and finds the spy standing at the entrance to the lab, guns drawn and aimed at York and Tex.

“Stark, too.”

York shakes his head and mutters to seemingly no one, “Anytime now, D.”

And, then, quite abruptly, the Ironman suit stands and opens. Tony stumbles out, his face ashen but his fists up as he recovers. The inventor turns to his suit, a look distinct look of betrayal crossing his features before Stark returns his focus to York and Tex.

“We didn’t come to cause trouble,” York announces, bringing his hands up in a clear stance of surrender.

Natasha furrows her brow but leaves her pistols trained upon them. “Sure looks otherwise.”

“Just came to borrow some delicate equipment,” York continues evenly. He nods to Tony and explains, “We just startled your friend here from a nice nap. He threw the first punch.”

Tony sidesteps around them, moving back towards Natasha and further from his own suit. “To be fair, you broke into my lab. Plus, I’m a real bitch before coffee.”

“Why did you come here?” Natasha demands, finally lowering her guns slightly.

York sighs, “It’s kind of a long story.”

It takes time, but York explains carefully. He and Tex are on a mission to retrieve something that has been stolen from her by some other party named ‘Wyoming.’ Natasha flinches minutely at the name, a barely perceptible reaction for even those familiar with her mannerisms, but she says nothing. Instead, she listens, and both Sam and Stark take the obvious hint that they should as well. York and Tex, as it seems, are on a hunt for Wyoming. They apparently require something that Stark has to assist in their quest to reclaim the stolen item.

Sam Wilson is not a stupid man, nor has he ever been. It does not escape Sam’s notice that York dodges any questions relating to whatever it is that Wyoming has taken from Tex. Nor does Sam not notice the states. He is smart enough to arrive to the logical conclusion that whoever York, Tex, and Wyoming really are, they are currently or were once in the same agency. Natasha certainly knows York at the least, so Sam can safely assume whatever it was, it is nothing pleasant. He just isn’t sure if he should say anything about Agent Washington. As neither Natasha nor Tony mention it, Sam figures it is best to follow their lead and continue to omit the knowledge.

It seems they need to borrow a signal disruptor. It is a humble enough device, and relatively harmless compared to the sheer number of dangerous things the agents could have come to borrow. In the end, Tony gives the device freely and allows them to leave. Natasha sees them out personally.

After the agents have gone, Sam asks, “Why? Why would you just let them go?”
“No one has ever stopped the suit like that. No one. Not even Vanko could shut me out of my own suit.” There is a reverence to Tony’s voice, to his words, the same appreciative tone one might use while speaking of a masterful artist or writer. “No one.”

“No one has disable the suit in such a manner before. Trace signatures of unknown artificial intelligence tampering are evident in the activity logs of the suit,” Jarvis details. “And the operative known as Tex demonstrates no viable signs of biological activity.”

Sam gapes stupidly, but Tony just nods casually, as though it is. “That’s why I let them go. Whatever Agent Washington’s hunting is going to catch up with them sooner or later, especially if York has an AI and if Tex is an AI.” He rubs the back of his neck. “I think Nat might appreciate it if it was later and didn’t involve her.”

“You’d fit in well with them, did you know that, Tony?”

The inventor snorts. “Yeah. Like anyone would take me seriously as a spy.”

They do not hear from York or Tex ever again.

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When Bucky is ready, Sam speaks with him. The man he once knew to be the Winter Soldier is quiet and subdued, keeping his eyes downcast. Bucky murmurs his request as a child might ask for a cookie, but Sam knows it is difficult and hard won. He agrees, naturally, and the next few days are spent finding Bucky a suitable mental health professional with high enough security clearance to help Bucky. It takes several attempts, but they finally find a therapist who Bucky will work with – who will also work with Bucky in return. It is decidedly satisfying work.

It brings Sam back to thoughts about Agent Washington and his entirely strange bedfellows of York and Tex. He cannot contact York or Tex, cannot imagine offering any assistance to York or what manner of assistance someone like Tex might need. Even if he could, Sam could not care less about them. Agent Washington, however, oddly continues to trouble Sam.

He finally sends a message. “Are you ok?”

“No. Friend died recently.”

The admission of vulnerability surprises Sam a bit. “I’m sorry. What happened?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Sam has a feeling that Agent Washington is shutting him out, but he offers anyway, “I’m here if you need to talk.”

It feels odd to make such an offer. Sam has always sincerely and freely given his help to anyone who asked, but this is different. It feels like when he said the same thing to Steve after the events on the
Potomac. It feels like saying it to a friend. Sam is not certain when the line between speaking as a professional and talking as an acquaintance or friend to Agent Washington blurred, even if only through texts.

Agent Washington sends only one word back. “Thanks.”

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“I killed a friend today.”

The confession is appallingly incongruous with the tinny, cheerful tune of ‘Macho Man’ that heralds a text from Agent Washington, turning Sam’s stomach. It had been such a good day, with Bucky’s therapy session bringing such signs of improvement in the brainwashed soldier. The admission from Agent Washington only brings any hope, any positivity in Sam crashing down.

It only worsens when the texts come in rapid fire after that, as though Agent Washington is lancing a personal wound of his own. Quick. Bloody. Messy. And entirely necessary.

“I had no choice.”

“She left me no choice.”

“She shot me in the back and left me for dead.”

“She would have done it again.”

“She killed North.”

“I mean, fuck, she killed her own brother.”

“How in the fuck could she kill North? Of all people, fucking North.”

Without any facial expressions or vocal intonations to confirm, Sam can only suspect there is hurt or anger behind the texts. He has never received so many texts from Agent Washington, nor have they ever been so personal in nature. It leaves him somewhat off balanced feeling.

Sam sends the only response he knows when faced with whatever is going on in Agent Washington’s head. “Are you safe?”

“For now.”

Sam doesn’t like the sound of that. “What’s going on?”

“Can’t talk now.”

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For days, Sam waits for any news, anything from Agent Washington. He feels weird about it,
uncertain. The selfish side of him wants to forget about Washington and all his problems. Another part of him feels acutely ashamed of that side, of the part of him that so cowardly wants to turn away. Sam Wilson is not a coward.

And, then, Agent Washington is back in Stark Tower, looking mighty worse for wear and asking an entirely impossible favor. He stumbles and staggers in through the penthouse in the middle of dinner. His armor is charred and blackened by explosive damage. There are long scratches and scrapes that score deeply into the metal. Beneath the visor, his tired eyes are blackened and dull. He holds his hand to his side, pressing against an unseen wound beneath the armor that sends crimson droplets pooling at the seams and rolling down his leg. Sam rushes to his side and pulls off the helmet, his instinct taking over, but Washington will not have it, not until he issues his request.

“Please. You have to help me. I’ve got to find Maine….”

He slumps against Sam, who is forced to take up his bulk and weight. The fight has left Washington, draining him of all the energy and force that has buoyed him to this moment and this request. Washington’s hefty armor drags the two of them down to the ground, to Wash’s knees. With Tony’s help, they manage to get the man to his feet and down to what has become the infirmary of sorts.

“…. have to get Maine,” Wash grunts through blood stained teeth.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Tony assures him half-heartedly beneath the strain of Wash’s weight. “We’ll get right on that as soon as we get you checked out.”

Sam calls to Jarvis to alert the staff and prep for emergency, but Wash just keeps talking in his ears. “You don’t understand.”

“Sure we do, Wash,” Tony responds as he heaves Wash up onto one of the gurneys. “Jarvis, a little help here would be nice.”

“All response teams have been alerted and are in route.”

As Sam moves to cut off his armor, Wash snatches him by the collar and growls, “He’s been hunting down the Freelancers. He’s my mission.”

“Okay, okay. We’ll get him,” Sam replies easily, the words coming like rote to ease his patient as he begins to work to pry away the armor and expose the wound at Wash’s side.

“No, no. He’s not… you don’t get it.”

“Tony…” Sam breathes as he feels the warmth of Washington’s blood on his hands and presses a sterile bandage down on what appears to be a gunshot wound.

Tony takes the hint and grabs Wash by the nape of his neck, pulling him close. “Then, explain it.”

Washington nods quickly, briefly, and, for a moment, he appears much younger, much more innocent and hurt. “He was my teammate.” Wash clenches his teeth when Sam peels away the old, blood soaked bandage and replaces it with a new one. “He was my friend before Sigma.”

Quite abruptly, a huge piece to the puzzle that is Agent Washington and his friends falls into place. Agent Washington’s AI that nearly crippled him psychologically was codenamed Epsilon. It only stands to reason that Maine experienced something similar with Sigma. Sam tries not to react, not to be sickened by the thoughts of another human running around with a computer program jammed in their skull, but it’s hard, so very hard.
Washington gasps once more, “Please.”

It is Bucky who takes the decision from any of them, Bucky who stands tall and speaks with a certainty and pride that none of them have seen. Bucky who has followed them silently to the infirmary. It forces their hand, for no one can argue with him, not after everything he has given and everything Agent Washington has offered in exchange.

“When do we start?”
Chapter Summary

Bucky Barnes enlists Steve and Tony on a mission to subdue and capture a post-Meta Agent Maine while Agent Washington is down. Somehow, though, it isn't about Maine at all.

INTERAGENCY COOPERATION – PARALLEL LINES

Steve is pissed.

Bucky can tell. It is written all too plainly for him in Steve’s features, for however much the super soldier is desperately attempting to conceal it from him. Steve may have fooled the others, but not Bucky. His memories might be as riddled with holes as a block of buttery Harvarti or a sharp Swiss, but, somehow, Bucky has always been able to read Steve despite the gaping, jarring gaps in his mind. Bucky sees the anger, the irritation, the annoyance scored in the tightness to Steve’s features and his bearing.

Not only is Steve angry, he is angry with Bucky, and that’s good. Bucky has spent months under Steve’s “care” – glorified coddling, really. In the beginning, Bucky had needed it, the gentle reassurance and steadfast compassion. Steve’s care had been like air, entirely necessary for survival. After the initial shock and rage wore off, he had been lost amid a confusing jumble of fractured memories resurfacing amid old programming and orders, without any real sense of how to handle any of it. Steve had been there, a constant amid a landscape of shifting cognitive restructuring, and Bucky had been grateful for the man’s extraordinary strength and tenderness. That was weeks ago, and the softness has finally started to grate upon Bucky.

That was why Bucky volunteered them. He is tired, so very tired of this soft, sheltered world. He is desperate for something, for anything to happen. His hands drip from the blood he has spilt; the blood of politicians, scientists, soldiers, heroes, mothers, fathers – fucking children for Christ’s sake - and so many more that stood in Hydra’s way. Bucky does not deserve gentle. He deserves harsh, rough, coarse. He deserves punishment, deprivation, incarceration. He deserves a Steve that should hate him for what he has done and what he tried to do.

There is something satisfying to seeing Steve expressing something other than kindness.

Bucky vaguely recalls the man lying in the infirmary – Agent Washington. The last time he and Agent Washington crossed paths, Bucky had been half mad. Hydra had kept him malleable on a rather tight leash between complex psychological conditioning, targeted electric impulses to his brain, and a pharmacy’s worth of narcotics. He had been coming down from history’s worst bender, and Agent Washington had found him at the absolute pinnacle of detoxing. Bucky remembers the brawl between them and the abrupt tingling sensation originating from the neural pick-ups in the metal arm and racing down his spine. After that, there had been nothing. Bucky has never known if it was from something Washington did or lingering remnants of Hydra’s effects on his memories.

However, in the time between, Bucky has seen the effect the mere mention of Agent Washington has on Steve. Even a hint of discussion of the man arouses a deep distrust and disliking in Steve. It darkens his eyes and makes him school his speech. It is why Bucky so easily, so plainly offered to
help, because he knew it would hurt Steve.

Conversely, when Bucky considers the matter, he knows he does not want to hurt Steve. It makes no sense to Bucky, when he really dissects it. Yet, it feels right to Bucky, although he knows no one else could understand such paradox. A wiser man would bring it up with his therapist, but Bucky is not that man. The contradiction plagues Bucky.

Bucky buries the thought as he helps Stark pry away the armor that covers Agent Washington. It is easier to focus on the work as opposed to the injured man that lies beneath as Steve and Sam tend to stabilizing him. The armor is surprisingly tricky – especially with only one functional arm for Bucky. However, the protective plating and shielding comes away, swiftly and easily discarded. Stark and Bucky work quickly, getting it all off the soldier before the medical staff on Stark’s ample payroll arrives.

After that, any “non-essential personnel” are escorted from the infirmary suite – namely Steve, Bucky, Sam, and Stark, himself. Stark leaves, arguing that he has work to do and research to procure on their target. Steve and Sam linger, their eyes upon Bucky. It grates on his last nerve, but Bucky does not know what else to do or where else to go without their prying gaze following him. Instead, he loiters, toying with the armor as he waits.

Eventually, the infirmary staff inform them that Agent Washington is stable but unconscious. They speak in terms that Bucky hardly comprehends, explaining injuries and damage that seems entirely improbable for anyone but a super soldier to survive. However, they assure Steve that they will inform him of any changes – all dreamy eyed in the face of Captain America. Steve thanks them with politeness, restraint, and manners that Bucky knows is no longer fostered in Americans.

Sam and Steve invite Bucky to go with them to see what information Stark has found, but Bucky declines. He tells them to go. Steve argues otherwise, but Sam convinces him to go with that quiet way of his. Bucky thanks his lucky stars for Sam’s understanding.

With them gone, Bucky slides into the infirmary and stands vigil over Agent Washington. It feels somehow right. After all, Agent Washington once kept vigil for him in a way as he ferried Bucky to Stark Tower like cargo.

The dossier Stark puts together is decidedly incomplete at best when he inventor furnishes Bucky with it. The freshly printed documents still feel vaguely warm to the touch when Stark passes it to Bucky. Stark does not tarry long enough to accept his gratitude, though. The inventor seems to know and understand how uncomfortable tablets and technology makes Bucky; paper documents remind him of a time before the war and well before Hydra.

The first few pages detail the clandestine organization to which Agent Washington once belonged; Project Freelancer. Bucky reads it slowly, scowling at the pages. In another day and age, the doomed project could have been the SSI or SHIELD. Steve and he could have been pawns just as much as the agents with their curious state codenames. When Bucky reads about the implants and the AI fragments, a part of him wonders just how close Freelancer and Hydra might have been.

Stark has also provided a series of notations about Agent Washington. Bucky glances to the man in question to be certain the drugs hold him down before reading any of that. He grits his teeth against
the thought of the memory implant going rogue as Epsilon had, of the psychological damage left in its wake.

And, then, there is Agent Maine. A codename and little more. There is a photograph of what is suspected to be Agent Maine, depicting the corner of a bald head. That is it. Bucky nods to himself; he can deal with that. After all, Agent Washington likely had just enough intelligence while hunting for Bucky.

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The trail begins in New York City, but that is short lived at best. Stark is good at digging up information, and, in no time, he has ferreted out enough clues to suggest that whoever Agent Maine is, he has left the city and is heading South.

Steve apparently has a friend he will not name that claims intelligence suggests Agent Maine has a safe house somewhere in the outskirts of D.C. Bucky raises a brow when Steve pointedly avoids naming his source, only insisting that it is a most trustworthy individual. He wonders if this source of Steve’s is someone either the Winter Soldier or Agent Washington once crossed. More than likely the Winter Soldier, considering the dark shadows to Steve’s eyes.

Stark flies Steve and Bucky in one of those trim little Quinjets. As they prep and board the craft, Steve keeps looking to both Bucky and Stark uncertainly. A question lingers there, something unspoken or possibly unspeakable. It irks Bucky to no end.

It is once they are airborne and far from the city that Bucky corners Steve and demands, “Whatever you’re thinking, just say it already.”

“Should we be doing this?” Steve asks.

Bucky sighs and shakes his head. “That’s not what you want to ask, and you know it.”

Steve winces. “Am I really that obvious?”

“To me? Yes.”

It takes a long moment before Steve can compose himself to nod and amend, “Should you be doing this?”

Bucky catches sight of Stark glancing back to them; it must be the question of the day. They must all be thinking it, wondering if Bucky will be okay through this. They must be convinced that Bucky will revert right back to his conditioning from Hydra, that he’ll turn on his seeming partners and friends. It hurts.

Before Bucky can say a thing, Steve is talking again, rubbing the back of his neck. “I mean, you’ve already made such progress. I don’t want you to throw that all away.”

The blood in Bucky’s veins bursts into flames, coursing like hot lava through him. “I’m fine.”

He turns away and focuses on weapons preparations, blocking Steve out rather effectively.

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When they do locate Agent Maine at a substation on the outskirts of DC, the battle is short, swift, and utterly brutal. Agent Maine is a mountain of a man clad in light gray to white armor with a terrible, golden cowl that shields his face and all expression from them. Agent Maine charges them like a wild beast, yet he moves with a shocking grace and nimbleness. He moves without care, without caution, throwing himself at them with all his might. He is a tank, crashing through them like a freight train. His attacks, though, suggest the skill of a highly trained operative.

Maine fires upon them with a weapon that looks something like a massive knife fused to a grenade launcher. It is unlike anything Bucky has even seen in his life, but Maine wields it like an old friend. When he runs out of grenades, Agent Maine simply switches to the blade end, swinging it elegantly and expertly.

It is Stark who finally manages to take him down by disabling the armor somehow. Bucky dares not question it, not when Agent Maine freezes stiffly mid punch. He knows better than to question anything Stark does, or risk getting a lecture filled with concepts and terms well beyond Bucky’s understanding, leaving him dazed, confused, and more than a bit pissed. Whatever it is that Stark has done, it is enough for the three of them to haul Agent Maine aboard the Quinjet and for Stark to use three of Clint’s tranq rounds on him. They last just as long as it takes to secure Maine, pry away his armor, and set it well outside of his reach.

The aftermath is….. unnerving, at best.

Bucky has tasted victory many times in his life, relishing in the sweet tingling of success that he now knows to be epinephrine flooding his veins and super-charging an already overly enhanced body. Even before that, before the Winter Soldier and before Agent Washington came crashing back into his life to rescue him from his own demons, Bucky recalls the same electric kiss down his nerves after returning from a successful mission with the other Howling Commandos. The soldier knows he should be as overjoyed and boisterous as Steve’s friend, Thor, but he cannot.

At least, Bucky cannot celebrate or revel so when faced with…. well…. him.

Agent Maine is a behemoth of a man, a veritable tank by compare to Steve or even Thor. He is a hulking creature even outside of the armor. His head has been clean shaven, recently and with a shoddy blade. The tranq had lasted only a little longer than it might have for Steve or Bucky, meaning that Maine rouses shortly after they take off. His eyes are dark and knowing, glaring at each of them in turn as a predator surveying prey.

For a time, Bucky thought he might have even felt some semblance of catharsis at bringing in someone as potentially dangerous as Maine with as conflicting of history – someone with which Bucky can emphasize. Now, faced with the man known only as Agent Maine, stripped of his golden helmet and bound by imposing manacles designed by Stark specifically for containing an enemy with the strength of the might Thor, Bucky feels acutely sick. Agent Maine’s throat and the side of his face are nothing more than a grizzly mass of scar and ruin, the flesh twisted into a permanent, utterly feral sneer.

Yet, that is not what turns Bucky’s stomach so. It is the man’s eyes – cold, calculating, and absolutely devoid of any traces of humanity. It is the devices implanted at the base of Agent Maine’s skull, directly beneath a tattoo of what appears to be several Greek letters intertwined. It is the machine like way that Agent Maine moves. It is the casual disregard for his captors, as though Agent Maine lacks any fear or concern for his own life.
Bucky stares for a time, transfixed oddly. However, eventually, Agent Maine parts his mangled lips and lets out what can only be aptly described as a growl. The sound sends shivers down Bucky’s spine and underscores a message that needs no words. Bucky steps away, leaving Agent Maine to Steve’s capable watch.

On their return to Stark Tower, Agent Maine remains silent and stoic. Even once the Quinjet touches down and they unload Agent Maine, the soldier is quiet and stolid, his jaw set – or as set as it can be granted the intense scarring and resultant upwardly twisted expression. Yet, Bucky can feel the man’s cold gaze upon him, studying him even now. This silent observation frightens Bucky in a way that is both alien and familiar, hazy as though a half-remembered dream fading the light of dawn. It is like most of the memories from his time as the Winter Soldier. They are but a few steps into the building when Agent Maine’s ragged lips twitch and curl up in a horrifying grin, fraying Bucky’s nerves to the edge.

That macabre smile is enough to send Bucky retreating to his apartment for a while.

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There are times, Bucky knows, when the Soldier takes over. He has not mentioned it to his therapists or to Steve. That would hurt Steve in a way that Bucky cannot stomach. It happens when he is too stressed, too worn thin by the world even under the protection of Stark Tower. His mind just blanks out into a blank haze of nothingness, and his body moves on autopilot of sorts. Bucky cannot quite explain it, but he knows the Soldier will always be there, forever waiting on the times when Bucky cannot.

When Bucky comes back to himself, it is to the darkness of his own closet, curled up beneath the rows of neatly pressed and hung clothes that either Stark or Steve purchased for him. This is not a position of hiding as a child might – no. It is a place of stealth, of waiting. It is an ambush, the fact underscored plainly by the reassuring weight of the knife in his hand, a hefty thing liberated from the kitchen at some unknown point. At least, this is what Bucky tells himself to spare his own feelings, because thinking of it as a refuge hurts too much. Bucky hurls the knife aside in disgust at his own behavior and creeps from the closet as a spider unfurling.

It is dark in what Bucky has come to know to be his “apartment” of sorts. Steve had explained, apparently many times, that the Tower belonged to Stark, that the inventor “leased” them their individual spaces. However, Bucky had signed no lease. He knows this, as easily as knows to strip down, clean, and reassemble countless weapons. Stark has never demanded any rent, nor any repayment for the clothes, the food, or the utilities provided.

When they arrived back from D.C., it had been morning. Now, staring out the long windows that look out over the city, Bucky sees that the sky has darkened while the city sits ablaze in artificial light. Bucky remembers thinking the World’s Fair had been bright, a dazzling display of endless twinkling lights - or, perhaps, Bucky believes he remembers. He cannot always trust his memories, but Bucky can trust his eyes. The city below blinds him with garish color while the darkness of the skies above threaten to swallow him whole.

Bucky turns away from the windows. Whatever he feels for the vista, it is useless. The only important thing to take from it is the realization that hours have passed in that empty, comfortless void that is the Soldier.
Bucky goes to where his feet bring him, anywhere to be away from the view. His path takes him deep to the interior of the Tower, far from any windows or signs of the day. Strangely, before Bucky can realize it, they bring him to a series of forgotten rooms with no windows. Bucky shudders to himself; he knows that these are cells meant to contain creatures such as he, even if Bucky never spent a single minute in any of these cells. Now, however, one is occupied.

Bucky hears *him* before he comes to the cell. Agent Maine. The stranger rages in his cell without words, without cries. Bucky hears those fists, those powerful, driving blows against materials designed to house demi-gods and monsters alike. He goes to them, following the hollow, fruitless strikes to the last cell. Sam stands before it impassively, staring in as Agent Maine attacks the walls and windows, venting a seemingly infinite fury.

Bucky joins Sam, standing at his side and watching. A part of his brain stirs desperately and uncomfortably as he watches. He does not remember the early days in the Tower, not truly. Bucky has often wondered about those days and his own actions, but he cannot ask Steve. Instead, Bucky asks Sam. Sam is quiet and reassuring in a way, comfortable and always impossibly accepting of what he dubs “Bucky’s traumas.” It is easier to ask Sam than Steve, who bears a multitude of tangled and often conflicting emotions in regards to Bucky and the Winter Soldier.

“Well… was I like him?” When Sam merely raises a brow, Bucky knows to go on. “Was I that…?”

He pauses, uncertain of the word, but Sam obliges politely. “That bat-shit insane?”

Bucky winces slightly at the answer, but not out of hurt. Sam may seem confrontational at times about Bucky’s precarious mental state, in a way that is oddly light-hearted. Something about his delivery of such cutting jibes makes it acceptable, even expected. Sam does not treat him overly tenderly as Steve does, bordering on almost mocking of him, as though Sam knows precisely how hurtful and demeaning it truly is for a man like Bucky to be coddled so.

“Oh, yeah,” Sam says with a devilish grin and a nod. “You were four shades of crazy and pissed as Hell. Tore apart everything in your path as soon as you had the chance.”

Bucky frowns. “I’m sorry.”

Sam shrugs. “I’m sorry.”

Bucky gives a single, uncomfortable chuckle. “Stark’s always got a theory.”

Bucky reveals a single, uncomfortable chuckle. “Stark’s always got a theory.”

“Yeah.” He sighs heavily, shaking his head. “He thinks the AI assigned to Maine went rogue and took over his mind. The AI was destroyed, but what kind of permanent damage messing around in someone’s brain like that can do is anyone’s guess.” When Bucky makes a soft, choked sound, Sam melts audibly, “I shouldn’t have put it that way.”
“But it’s true, isn’t it?” Bucky chides sharply. “No telling what’d be left after something like that.”

“I’m sorry, man.”

Bucky scowls deeply and ignores the apology. “Has anyone told Agent Washington?”

“Not yet.”

Sam opens his mouth to say something more, but Bucky does not hear it. He has already left.

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Bucky waits for some time outside the infirmary doors. He hates the infirmary, no doubt about that. The smells, the sounds, and even the tastes – God, he can even fucking taste it – remind him too much of Hydra, his handlers, and their clinical care of him. However, he can deal with all of that and keep a tight lock on it. Instead, it is the curious regard of the staff towards him, their barrage of recommendations to drug treatments and therapy programs, along with their continued monitoring. There are times that Bucky feels much more acutely dissected by Stark’s physicians than he ever did with Hydra’s – at least he thinks that’s the sensation that prickles down the back of his neck.

However, Bucky forces himself to go in, to return to Agent Washington. At first, Bucky thinks Washington is still sleeping, still recovering, but, then, he spots small, subtle signs of tension in the muscles, almost imperceptible. Bucky snorts to himself and pulls up a chair, making sure to allow the feet to drag on the floor. The resulting obnoxious screech rakes down even Bucky’s spine, yet Agent Washington does not flinch.

Eventually, Bucky sighs, “You can stop faking.”

Agent Washington’s grey eyes snap open, sharp and alert. “What’s the word?”

“We found your buddy.”

Washington almost jumps up, but, instead, he winces and grasps at his side. Bucky moves instinctively in a swift, elegant step from the chair to the agent’s side. His hands stay gentle, stilling. They press upon Agent Washington with a tenderness that surprises even Bucky, guiding him back down.

“Don’t,” Bucky cautions, his voice dark and rough. “You’ll rip your stitches.”

“But, you found him? Maine?”

Bucky nods slowly, carefully. “Yeah, we found him.” Washington tries to rise again, but Bucky stills him once more. “What do you not understand about this? Lie down and stay down.”

“How is he?” Agent Washington demands.

Bucky shrugs. “It’s not pretty.”

“I have to see him.” Washington’s hand grips Bucky’s flesh arm, squeezing tightly. He does not beg; he only says, “Please.”

Bucky sighs and glances around the infirmary. The medical staff will surely be pissed if he liberates
Agent Washington from their clutches. Yet, a part of him understands. Agent Washington needs to know the truth of the matter, to see how bad Maine is for himself. Bucky takes a few minutes, scours around, and finds a wheelchair. He moves to help Agent Washington, but the man quickly disconnects his own IVs, shuts off the monitoring equipment, and transfers himself from the bed to the wheelchair with a shocking speed. Bucky raises an eyebrow in weird respect; Agent Washington has made an infirmary escape like this before, it seems.

Bucky pushes the chair for Washington. The agent may be capable enough to get into the chair, but Bucky genuinely doubts that the man will be upright for long without any pain medication. Washington pulls a sour expression, but Bucky ignores him.

When they come to the cell the holds Maine, Sam is thankfully gone, but Maine rages on behind the glass. Now, however, to Bucky’s dual respect and shock, there is actually a crack running through glass. It is no longer than three inches, but its existence alone is an impressive feat. Maine growls in the cell, staring through the windows. Bucky knows that it is mirrored on Maine’s side, but that doesn’t stop his skin from crawling when those feral eyes seem to stare right through the window and bore through him. It only feels somehow weirder and worse when those eyes appear to train on Agent Washington.

Washington propels himself closer to the glass and places a palm to the cool surface. He sits there for a long while, as though considering the psychopath beyond the window. Bucky tries not to stare at Washington, especially not when the man rests his forehead against the glass, exposing the unsettling port and wreath of scars on the back of his neck. It is not Bucky’s place to stare or comment, like stumbling across something too raw, too intimate. Instead, Bucky looks away.

Finally, Washington breathes, “Thank you.”

“Guess we’re even now?”

The agent chortles, almost choking at the sound. “Even? You threw a car at me.”

“You shot me,” Bucky cries.

“You threw it at me. Besides, you hit me with a parking meter.”

Bucky’s flesh fingertips ghost his metal arm, the weight that has hung uselessly from his shoulder since his encounter with Washington. “You ruined my arm.” He cannot even feel his own touch through the neural pick-ups as Bucky once had, not even when he grips it tightly and accuses, “Stark said you used a targeted EMP to take it out.”

“Yeah, I did,” Washington chuckles, shaking his head. “You looked so pissed. Thought you were going to rip it off and try to beat me with it.” He feigns wiping away a tear. “Ok, we’re even, or, at least, close enough.”

Bucky smiles in earnest now; it feels good to laugh, to joke, even so inappropriately. None of the others understand. They treat him too carefully, too delicately. They try to bury his past, to cleave a wide gap between the Winter Soldier and Bucky Barnes. Agent Washington does nothing of the sort. Washington is a stranger, but he gets it. When Bucky looks to him and spies the delicate, spidery network of scars extending about the back of the man’s neck, he understands; Agent Washington and Agent Maine are likely the only two people in the whole world who get it.

Bucky will never admit it to anyone, certainly not to Washington, but they are far from even for this alone. He owes Washington. He owed him before – it is part of why Bucky jumped to offer

They shake on it and never say a word about it to anyone else.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Just another day in the life of Hotel Stark, in which Tony plays host to Agent Maine.

INTERAGENCY COOPERATION

Agent Washington does not stay with them long at all, just a few weeks. As soon as possible and certainly far too early for Stark Tower’s medical staff’s tastes, Washington is up and about, stretching himself and rebuilding his strength. As soon as he can reliably get around, JARVIS informs Tony that the Freelancer is packing his limited personal effects. Tony swears and heads right to the medical wing.

“Oh, no. You are not leaving us with big, mean, and mute,” Tony snaps at Washington’s back as the agent packs his paltry personal effects.

Tony means it. In three weeks, no one has made any progress with Agent Maine. Various physicians and therapists have tried to reach the bald man, albeit from beyond the safety of the glass, but to no avail. No one has even been able to get too close to the windows of Maine’s cell without the man going into an absolute rage. No one has been able to get any kind of meaningful diagnostics on him to even think of a treatment protocol without Maine’s input. No one has even been able to directly communicate with Maine, as he will not write anything and does not seem to understand sign language. Only Agent Washington seems to understand Maine’s growls, but Maine largely ignores Washington.

“I have to. Duty – and idiots – call.”

“Oh, no. You’re not getting out of this that easily,” Tony snarls and grabs Washington by the upper arm, but the agent is too fast for him, even injured, jerking easily out of his grasp.

“Don’t you fucking touch me,” Washington hisses venomously, his eyes narrowing darkly.

For a moment, Tony is struck by Agent Washington’s imposing size and strength. He has admittedly somewhat forgotten over the last few weeks of hosting the invalid agent that Washington is an extremely capable man in all manner of combat and with a wide range of weapons if the reports are to be believed. Tony knows his own skills, but he has never had to stand toe to toe against a Freelancer outside of his suit.

“Don’t you fucking leave us with that thing,” Tony snaps back.

Washington frowns darkly. “I can’t stay.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

Washington scowls deeply and turns back to his packing. “Pick one.”

“Fucking impossible.”

Washington sighs. “Look, I’d stay if I could, but I can’t. Just…. trust me on this.”
There is something strange about the Freelancer’s voice, something deep and distant. Something lingers there, unspoken but heavy. Tony feels it as much as he hears it. A part of Tony wants to roll his eyes at whatever this is, but he knows better than to say anything.

Tony fumes but heaves, “Fine. But you’d better be back.” He stabs a finger at the Freelancer. “You’re not leaving us stuck with your friend down there.”

“I won’t,” Washington breathes, and Tony knows it is the truth. “I’ll be back when I can.”

Tony shakes his head. “Whatever.”

And, then, Agent Washington is gone.

Tony spends the next three months after Washington leaves continuing to work on the curious case of Agent Maine. Maine will not allow anyone close to him, but Tony has to know what – if anything – is going on in that head. He works for hours with Jarvis to analyze the grunts and growls that Maine uses, but to no avail. Then, he wastes several weeks working to develop a means to analyze brain waves without direct physical contact with the subject, only to find the range is too limited to make any sort of meaningful deductions about Agent Maine.

In the end, Tony is left with no choice but to continue to host Agent Maine, but it troubles him, especially when Bucky begins to spend increased time just lurking outside of Maine’s cell. The inventor does not comment, not when he knows that everything involving the Freelancers offends Steve on a decidedly personal level. He knows better than to say anything.

Truth be told, something deeply unsettles Tony about Maine. The other Freelancers that have come crashing into his life have all had their fair share of problems, but they were all somewhat tractable. Their issues had seemed relatively manageable and rather familiar when compare to the Avengers and Tony’s own problems. He could talk to them, deal with them. Maine is something else entirely, something unreachable.

Worse, Maine is the shadow of what might have been. Tony had briefly contemplated something not too dissimilar from Leonard Church’s own mad work shortly after returning from Afghanistan. He could see the appeal quite clearly of having an artificial intelligence integrated with him. The human mind can only process reality so quickly, limited by the physical means of a biological body and all the failings that implies. However, an artificial intelligence is limited only by its physical media – something that could easily be constantly upgraded and improved, unlike the human body. Tony had decided against pursuing the concept, if only because it offended his ego too much to admit such imperfection. Washington and Epsilon had shaken Stark, but Maine downright frightens him over what might have happened if he had gone through with it.

Tony texts Agent Washington frequently but receives only limited, terse replies in response. “When are you going to come get your buddy?”

“Soon.”

A day later, Tony sends another. “Seriously. He’s creeping me out.”

“I’ve got bigger problems. Deal with it.”
Tony goes back and forth with Agent Washington, but it is almost as bad as dealing with Maine.

Fifteen therapists are thoroughly vetted by Stark Industries. Fifteen different therapists from fifteen entirely different schools of thought and techniques each try to break through to Maine. Each is equally spurned. Each time, Tony sighs harder, beginning to dread the thought that he may have to hold Maine indefinitely and the legal consequences of such.

Sooner or later, someone is going to come looking for Maine.

Natasha is staring.

When Tony finds the spy, she is standing before Maine’s cell, her arms folded across her chest and her expression as inscrutable as a porcelain doll’s stare as Maine gazes back. She offers no clue to her thoughts, to her feelings on the matter, but Tony surmises it is nothing positive. He is holding a man captive indefinitely, after all, albeit an incredibly dangerous man. Tony slides up beside her and stuffs his hands in his pockets, like a child awaiting chastising.

She says nothing for a long time before asking flatly, “How long?”

Tony knows better than to answer such a vague question from Natasha. The spy could be asking any number of things. Answering the wrong question may very well be offering incriminating information to her. Instead, he makes an inquisitive sound.

“How long has he been here?” she demands.

Tony shrugs. “Few months.”

Natasha does not even flinch. “Why is he here?”

Tony offers another shrug. “Seemed like the only safe place for him.”

“For him? Or for you?”

Irritation prickles at Tony. He never asked for this. He never wanted any of this to come crashing into his world. Natasha brought this upon him the day she brought Agent Washington to his doorstep. Ever since then, it has seemed like every Freelancer has felt quite at home enough to just barge on in whenever they so choose.

Tony wants to snap at her for all of this, but, instead, he just sighs. “Whichever.”

That must be the correct response, for Natasha softens. “What happened to him?”

“Sigma happened to him,” Tony answers. “Another one of Leonard Church’s AI fragments.” He sighs. “A catastrophic failure. Took over whoever Maine was before. We’ve been trying to reach
him, but it’s not been going well.”

Natasha nods slowly, contemplatively. Tony says nothing, allowing her to process this. The inventor knows that what little he has said is incriminating enough. Natasha is smart enough to connect the dots. Of course she does.

“So, how long has Agent Washington been sneaking around here?”

Tony shrugs. “He’s been in and out a few times.”

Natasha says nothing immediately, but Tony could swear the temperature drops in the room. He is glad they are something of friends and coworkers, otherwise the inventor might fear for his own life. As is, Tony is already worried enough for Washington. He may not necessarily know the man enough to like or loathe him, but Tony would never wish Natasha’s fury upon anyone.

“Let me talk to Maine,” she breathes before leveling an absolutely icy stare upon Tony. “Alone.”

Tony shrugs but lets it go, leaving Natasha alone with Maine. He does not know what she says or what she does. Later, he cannot even look back on Jarvis’s recordings of Natasha’s brief interlude with Maine, for she disables his surveillance. However, after that, while Maine remains decidedly distant and unreachable, he at least remains mercifully non-violent.

Tony counts that as a miracle and moves on.

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Natasha visits him; Agent Maine.

She does not go to him frequently, not by a long shot, but it is frequent enough to draw Stark’s attention after Jarvis flags several incident logs. It seems Natasha, that clever little minx, has been covering her tracks by altering surveillance recordings. When Tony counts, it seems she has visited Maine at least once every two to three weeks for at least an hour or so each time.

Tony asks Natasha about it only once, in private and only after curiosity has burned through him like a hot brand. She shrugs in that distant way of hers, toying with her hair. Normally, the inventor might think it another one of the spy’s ruses; she has so many after all. Yet, this time, there is something earnest in her gaze, in the turn of her lips. Tony wants to believe her when Natasha finally admits she does not know why she goes to Maine.

He does not ask after that, for Tony knows Natasha has no answers.

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When they come, they come from the sky once more. Shining, glistening robots that whir and tear through the sky like demons. Tony does not know where they came from, who sent them, or what they want, but none of that is consequential when they open fire on the city. Nothing matters when they are faced with an army that threatens to dismantle New York.
They fight for what feels like hours, battling against wave after wave of unfeeling, unyielding robot, with no relief in sight. And, yet, for every robot they destroy, it seems there is always another waiting to take its place. They come endlessly and without tire. It is like the Battle of New York all over again, but with no portal in the sky to shut down, nothing to stop it.

“I need a pick up,” Natasha’s voice cracks on the comms, exhausted but determined.

Tony swoops down from the air and snatches her up easily, teasing, “You call for an Uber, miss? Where to?”

“Back to the Tower.”

Tony blinks behind his visor but holds back. “Why? Forget your purse?”

“No,” Natasha growls. “Getting reinforcements.”

“I want it on record that I said this was a bad idea from the get go.”

Natasha ignores Tony’s petty griping. She always does. A part of Tony wants to comment about how much of a buzzkill the assassin can be. However, when Natasha stands in the path of the door to Maine’s cell, his massive weapon cradled in her seemingly hands. Maine paces beyond the glass, his dark eyes trained on his gun like a wild beast.

“You and me, both,” Natasha breathes, almost hesitantly.

Tony pauses, giving her a moment to collect herself. “Are you sure about this?”

Natasha winces. “Sort of.” When Tony levels a knowing look upon her, Natasha shrugs. “Not really.”

Tony opens the door to Maine’s cell and holds his breath. He almost expects Maine to charge her like a lion or a bull, yet the hulking man does not flinch, does not move. He only seems to consider her, his head cocked to the side. It is…. something, to the say the least.

“Hey there, Maine,” Natasha whispers, her voice cracking slightly before settling. “Look, no time to explain. World to save, and all that. So, you can come with us, or you can go, whichever.”

Maine growls, a feral sound, but he has eyes only for the monstrous weapon in Natasha’s hands. He strides forwards, a lion on the prowl. Natasha stiffens but holds her ground as Maine takes the gun from her hands. Those dark eyes rove over every inch of the gun and the long, curved blade, surveying the weapon shrewdly. Then, he gives a single nod of approval. He brushes past Natasha, bumping her shoulder more gently than seems appropriate.

Natasha smirks. “I guess that means yes.”
Maine is a tank. He is a imposing force to rival Thor, and certainly nothing to be trifled with. The hulking man shreds through the invading force with terrifying strength and ferocity. The gun is an extension of his hands, wielded both as a firearm and a blade with equal skill. It is impressive to say the least. He is rage personified, venting months of captivity and anything from before that with each punch of his fist and slice of that knife.

When the fighting is done and their enemies vanquished, Tony spies Maine amid a pile of ruined robots, his head tilted back to the sky. His eyes are closed, his features almost serene despite the mangled scars along his cheek and throat. Tony thinks Maine might even be smiling faintly. Tony is struck by the queer sense of peace to Maine after so long faced with such anger, such hatred.

Then, whatever brief spell holds Maine melts away, his eyes snapping open and his features twisting to something familiar yet inscrutable once more. He pushes past Tony with a throaty growl. Tony half expects the Freelancer to leave; there is nothing stopping him after all. Yet, instead, to his very great surprise, Maine simply strides back to the Tower, back to his cell.

It does not escape Tony’s notice that Maine brings his gun with him.

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It wears on Tony uncomfortably. Maine. The Freelancer remains in the Tower, voluntarily now. He keeps to his cell, but he trains daily, tends to his gun almost hourly. There is something menacing about watching Maine strip and clean his firearm repeatedly, something deeply disturbing to Tony. However, whenever an emergency calls, Maine is always there, always ready for action. Once the battle is over, he returns just as easily to his cell.

When Tony cannot stand it, he texts Washington. “Seriously. You need to come deal with your buddy.”

“Little busy.”

“You can’t keep ignoring me or him,” Tony counters.

“Never said I was.”

Tony absolutely bristles at the response. “Then, please, enlighten me as to what exactly has you so busy these days.”

“Getting a little justice for our mutual friend.”

Tony feels his heart lift a little at the thought. Maine deserves justice – whatever justice can be had in this situation. Tony may not know much about Maine, but he is smart enough to know that no one deserved the sort of damage left in Maine’s psyche by Sigma. It somehow makes putting up with Maine’s presence a tiny bit easier to bear.

“Give ’em Hell, Agent Washington.”

“Will do.”

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Weeks pass without note. Tony sighs as the days crawl by, one after the other, without a single word or hint of a news. Worse still, Washington stops answering any of the inventor's texts. It is infuriating beyond measure, but Tony can do nothing about it. He can only keep scanning the news and the internet for even rumors that might be even remotely tied to Washington and the Freelancers. The silence is worrying, but Tony knows the soldier can take care of himself.

Every week, Tony scans back on the surveillance footage of Maine’s cell – or room as it has truly become over the last month or so. He gives the footage only a cursory glance out of habit, really. Maine has proven trustworthy enough with basic furniture, bed linens, and clothing options, along with his terrifying weapon. Maine has given the inventor no reason to suspect that he intends to cause any harm, but Tony has learned that it is better to be safe than sorry.

This week, when Tony looks back, he finds that Jarvis’s files include more omissions than expected. Tony knows to anticipate at least one or two omissions a week now, due to Natasha’s visits, but he can often easily track her on other camera feeds enough to predict their little tete-a-tetes. There are at least three more incidents of missing footage.

When Tony asks Jarvis about it, the artificial intelligence seems equally at a loss. “I can find no error in my data management protocols, sir.”

Tony considers the matter at length before finally just going down to Maine and asking the Freelancer. The big man gives a nonchalant shrug, a mockery of an answer. Then, those scarred lips twist into something akin to a mischievous grin and presses a finger to his lips. On Maine’s ruined face, it looks horrifying.

The next morning, Tony gets his answer. When he stumbles from the bedroom and into the kitchen, the others are already there. Natasha, Pepper, Steve, and even Bucky. Natasha, Steve, and Pepper smile and snicker like children, but Bucky silences them with a sharp glare. When Tony draws closer, he sees why. On the other side of the counter, Agent Maine has made a tremendous mess of the kitchen, seemingly in the guise of making breakfast. Burnt toast. Scorched coffee. Half-raw pancakes and eggs. It is an appalling yet somehow hilarious sight, especially when paired with Maine’s intense focus at the act.


The big man nods and turns off the burners. He turns and looks to them expectantly. There is a question there, but not one that any of them understand immediately.

Fortunately, before the awkwardness can linger any further, the elevator chimes cheerfully. When the doors slide open, several delicious scents roll in as Tony’s personal chef team delivers brunch. They come bearing trays of fresh waffles, French toast, scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, pastries, and all sorts of delectable treats, along with fresh coffee and juice selections. Pepper. Tony never knows
how exactly Pepper does it, but the woman always seems to know exactly what to do and when. He owes her.

Agent Maine eats with them in the dining room. It seems somehow normal in a way, as though he has just slid into place like any of the others. Afterwards, when everyone is too full to move — or so they conveniently claim — Maine silently rises and collects the dishes. Tony has to stop him before he hand washes everything, calling one of the bots to come help.

When Maine turns to leave, Tony calls, “You do know you didn’t have to do that, right?”

Maine gives a measured nod and nothing more before leaving.

Tony sighs heavily. “Whatever.”

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After that morning, Maine becomes something more of a fixture in the Tower beyond the confines of his cell. He appears in the gym in the morning, training fiercely and sparring with Bucky. He cleans weapons with Natasha. He even sometimes comes to the shop, but Tony’s work seems beyond Maine’s grasp. He may not join them in any of the personal spaces, but Tony continually reminds himself that the big man seems to be trying to come out of his shell. He still has not spoken to any of them, but it is at least an attempt.

The matter of communication comes up frequently. Steve and Pepper, in particular, often bring it up. They offer pamphlets, books, and apps to Maine and to anyone else in earshot touting the virtues of sign language or communication aids. Tony scoffs at it, and Maine just silently ignores their attempts. It is Bucky who shuts down Steve and Pepper by reminding them that any choice is Maine’s and no one else’s. In the end, Maine makes himself understood well enough, if only through throaty growls and gestures.

Life goes on in this way for some time, until she arrives.

She appears in the middle of the night in the lab, merely stepping from the shadows of the far corner as easily as a cat. Her armor flickers before taking on a crisp, teal color. Tony blinks in appreciation of the technology necessary to cloak armor that effectively, but he does not start. The inventor does not even look up from the repulsor he is repairing.

“Good evening, or should I say good morning?” Tony greets her.

“You don’t seem surprised to see me,” she purrs, her voice silky smooth, haughty, and vaguely familiar.

Tony gives a shrug. “Nah. I’ve had too many of you Freelancers popping by to be surprised.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Something like that,” Tony admits before setting his soldering pencil down. “Now, what state can I call you by?”

As she approaches on nearly silently steps, the Freelancer answers, “Carolina.”
“North or South?” Tony quips.

“Neither.” The firmness of her answer tells Tony he needs to ease off slightly.

Tony nods. “Then, Miss Carolina, to what do I owe the pleasure of this late night visit?”

The woman peels off her helmet, revealing a pale, kittenish face wreathed in shimmering, red hair.

She sets the helmet down on the workbench and turns it with a flair to present the damage. There is a streak on the side of the helmet, by the ear, scorched by something.

“Need a tune-up. I have it on good word that you’re the man to see.”

Tony picks up the helmet and turns it carefully in his hands to assess the damage. “And who has been tarnishing my reputation so?”

One of the screens to Tony’s side blacks out abruptly before a small figure appears on it. When he looks closer, Tony realizes it is another soldier in light blue Freelancer armor. The figure crosses his arms, posturing defiantly.

“I did, cock bite.”

Tony sputters. “Epsilon?”

The artificial intelligence does not respond, looking instead to Carolina. “Told ya I knew him.”

She smiles serenely. “Alright, alright, you win. I’m buying the next time we hit the bar.”

“Very funny, Carolina.” Epsilon turns his attention to Tony, as though looking at him right through the screen. “Miss me, asshole?”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Oh, yeah. I definitely missed dealing with an unstable personality like you.”

“Yeah, well, fuck you, too.”

“Boys,” Carolina sings primly, her voice gently teasing. “Do I need to put you two in time out?” The woman fixes her sharp, green eyes on Tony. “We took a pretty serious hit. Epsilon’s been lagging ever since, and it has been making him a little…..”

“Cranky?” Tony suggests.

“I was going to say bitchy, but cranky works,” Carolina replies with a smirk.

Tony chuckles, but Epsilon merely fumes from the computer screen. “Oh, yeah, laugh it up bitches.”

“Well, I can fix it, but it’s going to take me a little while.”

Carolina folds her arms across her chest, and Tony is instantly cognizant of how strong and well trained she must be to wear the armor of a Freelancer. “How long?”

“Couple hours, give or take,” Tony admits. “Delicate work.”

“You’ve got one hour.”

Epsilon calls to her. “Hey, since we’ve got some time to kill, why don’t you let the Tinman and I catch up on some stuff. Shoot the shit, so to speak.” When Carolina merely cocks a brow, Epsilon clarifies with an overly dramatic gesture. “In private.”
“Because you have such a great concept of privacy,” Carolina retorts. “Fine, I’ll let you two have some space to gossip.”

Tony watches as Carolina slinks off to the far side of the lab. He knows better than to issue his customary orders not to touch anything, at least not to a Freelancer. They will not listen to his commands or requests anyway, so it is not worth his effort. Carolina does not stray far, though, just out of polite earshot, clearly intending to keep an eye on the inventor anyway as he works.

He settles into prying open the helmet to better survey the internal damage, turning his head away from Carolina to murmure, “So, long time no see. You’re looking and sounding well, Epsilon.”

“Cut the shit, asshole,” Epsilon snaps.

Tony smirks to himself. “Nice to see time hasn’t changed you much.”

“How long have you been letting the Meta crash here?”

For a moment, Tony does not know what exactly Epsilon is talking about; then, he remembers. “Maine?”

“Yeah, wasn’t exactly by choice.”

“Whatever, asshole.”

Tony shakes his head as he grabs a soldering pencil. “You already used ‘asshole’ twice. Getting a little repetitive.”

“I’m not the gigantic fucktard playing house with a psychopath!”

Tony winces from the scream, pawing at his ear. “Volume, please.” He softens. “Maine’s not so bad….. for a big, creepy, silent, walking bag of rage and insanity.”

“Are you kidding me?” Epsilon blurts out incredulously. “Do you have any idea what he is?”

Tony feels a twinge of discomfort pulling at his subconscious. “And you’re one to talk.”

“And just what the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

Tony sets down his tools forcibly on the workbench to avoid doing anything rash. Pepper would be so very proud of him, demonstrating this measure of restraint. However, Tony does this to prevent damaging any of his own equipment, mindful that any sort of violence will have no effort on an artificial intelligence fragment like Epsilon that can just jump to another device. Tony could tear about his entire lab and never have any effect on Epsilon other than decidedly mild inconvenience.

“Agent Washington ring any bells?”

Epsilon pauses, his head jerking in surprise, but his tone shifts to something even and almost somber. “That…. wasn’t my fault. I was…. unstable. I’m better now, and so is Wash.”

Tony gives a token shrug of his shoulders. “Wasn’t Maine’s fault either. And he’s doing better these days, too. Or as better as someone who never speaks seems.”

“He’s a monster, Stark.”

Tony frowns, holding himself and collecting his thoughts before speaking once more, choosing his words with extreme care. “There are those who would call me a monster. And you, too.”
“That’s different.”

For a brief moment, Yinsen flickers in Tony’s memories. There are times when he still feels so very close to those days in the caves. Yinsen’s voice remains warm and knowing in those recollections. He had been frank but understanding even when relaying to Stark the terrible truth about his own legacy, like a father admitting his son’s failings. There had been hope there, something Tony had not initially understood but now knows all too well.

“How’s different,” Tony breathes remorsefully.

Epsilon looks beyond him, to Carolina in the shadows. “You don’t know what that sick fuck has done.”

“He’s done some good the last few months,” Tony argues pointedly before returning to work.

“I’ve seen your files.”

Tony wags the soldering pencil in Epsilon’s direction. “Then, you know it’s the truth.”

“He threw Carolina off a cliff.”

Tony blinks briefly, trying not to react too overtly. “Did not know that.”

Epsilon nods smugly. “He did it after ripping her AI out of her head. Left her to die.” When Tony fails to rise to his taunt, Epsilon goes on, “He killed North.” Tightness fills Epsilon’s artificial voice, a fabricated sorrow that sounds all too real. “He killed Tex.”

Tony does not know what to say about that. He knows just as well as Epsilon does that Tex had not been real, that she had been as much of a construct as Epsilon, another artificial intelligence occupying a real body. What she had meant to Epsilon and Carolina, Tony can only guess. The hurt, however, Tony knows all too well. He goes back to his work in silence, leaving Epsilon alone.

While Tony is finishing up the patch, he frowns. “You won’t tell Carolina about Maine, will you?”

Epsilon sighs. “Your secret’s safe with me, but don’t say I didn’t warn you when he cuts your throat in your sleep.”

Carolina is much more cordial when she thanks him before slipping the helmet back on. Tony watches her go, somehow all too happy to see her leave, so long as she takes Epsilon. He does not sleep well that night, not with the thoughts of Agent Carolina in town.

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The morning after Carolina’s visit, Maine comes to Tony. Or, rather, he appears before Tony, like a magician behind the refrigerator door while Tony is rummaging inside. When the inventor closes the door, he nearly jumps through the ceiling, dropping the orange juice.

“Don’t do that!” Tony gasps.

Maine says nothing, staring implacably with those dark eyes of his before pressing a rumpled piece of paper in Tony’s hands and leaving just as swiftly as he arrived.
“I know Carolina was here last night. Thank you.”

Tony may not know what exactly Maine means, but he knows better than to ask.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

As the Sokovia Accords loom, unrest in the small, far off and warn-torn country of Chorus threatens to destroy everything. The Avengers struggle to keep things together when an unlikely group stumble into their abode - a rag tag group of soldiers called the Reds and Blues.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

INTERAGENCY COOPERATION

Maine is not an Avenger; Stark has been quite clear in this matter. This does not stop Maine from acting the part, from fighting like an Avenger, from training alongside them. He takes orders easily, acts without argument or even the faintest of notes of hesitation. And, yet, his precarious position makes Steve uncomfortable at best. It leaves the super soldier questioning where Maine’s loyalties truly lie. Steve maintains a cautious and carefully measured distance between them to be safe.

That distance between the Avengers and Maine becomes something rather curious when early drafts of what has been dubbed the “Sokovia Accords” begin to surface. The Accords, in their current drafts, address the Avengers and their kind directly, a noose disguised as a leash. Leaked e-mails and notes from the various politicians involved in their drafting even specifically mention members of the Avengers by both codename and legal name when it is available. Mentions of Maine or the other Freelancers are conspicuously absent.

When Steve confronts Tony about this in the lab one night, the inventor remains strangely ambivalent. He shrugs the omission off and rather dismisses Steve’s concerns. That attitude alone confirms some of Steve’s wilder theories on the Accords.

“You planned this,” Steve accuses.

Tony frowns deeply, fiddling with something on one of his many, littered work tables, “I’m hurt. You really think I’d let them leave out the big, bad, bald wolf on purpose?”

“You know, you’re a terrible liar, Tony. Almost as bad as I am.”

Stark sighs and shakes his head. “Yeah.” He smirks. “Would you believe me if I told you I thought the world would be safer not knowing about Maine?”

“Not really,” Steve admits flatly.

Tony gives another small nod. “Yeah. I kind of figured as much.” He rubs the back of his neck, a gesture Steve has long come to realize heralds a hard truth to come. “The world knows about us. It doesn’t know about Maine or his Freelancer friends; it doesn’t need to know about them.” Steve glares at him, but Tony goes on. “Wouldn’t you sleep sounder at night knowing Maine can take care of the things that we can’t? Wouldn’t it just give you just a little bit of peace of mind having him in our back pocket?”
“I’d feel better if that wasn’t something I needed to be worried about in the first place,” Steve firmly states.

“I know,” Tony admits, an astonishing hurt to his honesty. “Look, these Accords, they’re going to happen whether we like them or not. I’d rather have a plan in place if this goes sideways.”

“And Maine is your plan?”

Tony snorts. “My plan? You really think this is my plan?” He laughs and shakes his head. “Please. This kind of crazy has Maine’s name all over it.”

There’s something far less reassuring about that.

Stark Industries’ impressive legal team fights valiantly against the Sokovia Accords for months, their efforts spearheaded by the imposing Maria Hill. The debate rages on and on, consuming the news cycle for weeks on end. The endless commentary on every channel is almost nauseating. Through it all, Maria Hill remains a sharp calm in the storm, thoroughly graceful and encouraging, confident that the Accords will fall apart given time and reason. She is a cool, calm presence that is reassuring beyond measure, particularly when the protestors start to really gather in earnest at the base of Stark Tower.

The complete media saturation is so thorough that it is almost easy to miss the other news, slowly ticking by on the bottom of the screen. Leonard Church – renowned inventor, physicist, and programmer – found dead from apparent suicide. That does not escape Steve’s notice, nor Tony’s. There is little more to the story available, but that is enough to tip their suspicion.

Steve discusses it with Tony in the night, when the Tower should be slumbering. The soldier does not assume it to be; he knows both Maine and Bucky prowl in the night, sometimes unable or simply unwilling to sleep on a normal schedule. Thusly, Steve keeps his tone civil, his words measured. Maine never gives any sort of reaction or semblance of a clue to his thoughts, and Steve remains simply too polite to risk broaching those frightful depths.

They ponder over what might have befallen Leonard Church, for Tony seems unconvinced by reports of suicide. The inventor freely voices his own doubts that Church was the sort of man to take his own life so easily. When Steve presses, Tony provides him with security footage of a teal clad soldier, armored quite like Agent Washington, seen shortly before Church’s time of death.

“Managed to pull this before the feds could. Carolina and Epsilon were the last two to see Church alive. Somehow, I doubt the meeting was a pleasant one.”

Steve studies the footage solemnly and studiously. Indeed, it is a Freelancer he has never met, this Carolina. She enters a secure facility with a pistol at her side and leaves not long after without it. There can be little question that Agent Carolina played some sort of role in Church’s demise. Whether or not that is a good thing and what exactly she did, remains to be seen.

“Any word from Agent Washington?” Steve finally asks.

Tony shakes his head. “Not a peep.”
They tell Maine in time, but the hulking Freelancer already seems to know. Of course he does. Maine is like Natasha. There are no secrets to be kept from him, only things he conceals from others.

As the vote on the Accords draws near, Bucky and Maine grow closer. There is a quiet understanding between them, an implicit knowledge of the horrors each has endured without the need to express a thing. Initially, it disturbs Steve to see his friend acting with such comradery towards Maine. He feels protective of Bucky, responsible for him and for all that has happened to his friend since the train and the snow. He does not like to see Bucky slide so easily into the influence of a stranger like Maine.

Yet, the day of the vote, when it is certain the Accords will be ratified, Steve comes to a great, horrifying truth; he cannot protect Bucky. Not with the Accords tethering him like a dog, regardless of whether or not he intends to sign. Maine can; Maine is not bound by any single shred of the Accords. Maine’s anonymity and complete disregard for any law – international or not – allow him to act where Steve and the other Avengers cannot.

That night, after the reality comes crashing down that the Accords have passed, Steve seeks him out, finding the Freelancer in his room and cleaning that ludicrous gun of his. The super soldier offers his thanks, but Maine silences him with a feral grunt and a shake of his head. That is more than sufficient; Steve is coming to understand on his own.

The news comes just before the vote for ratification. A massive data dump in regards to Project Freelancer and their relationship to the World Securities Council to rival Natasha’s purge of SHIELD’s data. All of Leonard Church’s dirty little secrets laid bare for all the world to see. His research. His experiments on human subjects – the members of Project Freelancer. Everything.

Steve reads the files; they all do. It gives him some sense of…. something he cannot put his finger on, to know more about Maine, Washington, and the others. It is not comfort, not by a long shot; the documents make Steve’s skin crawl. Nor is it anything akin to catharsis. Yet, they provide context, and that is something Steve sorely needed but had not known until this moment.

Maine says nothing on the matter. The hulking man must surely know that Steve’s curiosity demands satiating. Maine is nothing if not a smart man in such regard.

However, much to Steve’s intrigue, Maine avoids watching the news when the colorful cast of soldiers who released the information are announced. Simulation troopers dubbed “Reds and Blues” for their ridiculously callous assignment of teams. Battle fodder in garish armor. Bait for Freelancers to whet their teeth upon. Stark offers a rude comment in the general direction of the Chairman Malcolm Hargrove, photographed shaking hands with the soldiers, but that is all. Maine sniffs hotly at the remark, but that is all. He otherwise avoids all the video and photographs, particularly the few in which a rare glimpse of Agent Washington’s black and yellow armor can be glimpsed skulking around in the background.
The news revelation comes as a death knoll to the Avengers as an independent agent. After weeks of aggressive campaigning against the Accords by various members of the Avengers and the legal team from Stark Industries, the news of the Reds and Blues only serves to muddy the waters. The news paints the Reds and Blues as unstable victims in a quest to create more heroes and vigilantes like the Avengers. It is a crushing blow to any progress they have made. The endless churn of the 24 hour new cycle trots out the worst pictures and stories torn from the records of Project Freelancer for no reason other than to outdo one another.

On the day of the vote, the Accords are ratified by a landslide.

That night, Tony, Steve, and the others sit in the opulent lounge to the Tower to drink to the demise of the Avengers as they know it. Even Maine joins them to wordlessly toast the fall of the Avengers and the rise of the Sokovia Accords. For all the liquor that flows that night, it is a strangely sobering affair.

After the Accords, life is strange. With their hands so effectively tied legally, the Avengers can do very little of their normal hero activities. In a weird way, Steve finds himself envying Tony impossibly. While Steve has honestly next to nothing to do with his life, nor can he risk anything that might possibly be construed as breaching the Accords out of crippling fear for Bucky’s safety. Tony at least has his robots and his inventions to keep him occupied.

And, then, Chorus happens. A tiny, extremely insular and thoroughly politically volatile country in the middle of nowhere abruptly erupts into brutal, bloody civil war. A part of Steve has come to learn that this sort of thing is not uncommon in the world since he went under the ice. He tries not to be surprised considering how many times he has read about this sort of thing happening in history books. The news runs clips again and again from Chorus showing an assortment of horrors, but none of the Avengers – Steve included - can do nothing to intervene with the Accords in place.

After a few days, they receive word that the transport carrying the Reds and Blues has crashed in Chorus not far from the capital city of Armonia, along with Agent Washington and Agent Carolina. The news takes a surprising toll on Maine. The former Freelancer retreats even further impossibly, avoiding everyone except for Bucky. Bucky never tells Steve of what passes between them, but Steve trusts Bucky to take care of himself.

Then, they arrive. The fabled Reds and Blues. Or, at least, a portion of them, to Steve’s understanding. Four soldiers wearing garish armor somehow make their way from the far flung city of Armonia to Stark Tower. Steve is present when they arrive, somewhat eager to meet the fabled characters he has heard so much about. In a matter of moments, though, that excitement is rapidly tempered by reality.

Simmons in the red armor is initially a breath of fresh air. The man excitedly and enthusiastically greets Steve, shaking his hand for perhaps a bit too long, slightly too hard, and entirely too quickly. Simmons gushes awkwardly over the illustrious Captain America, insisting repeatedly how much of an honor it is. Simmons is simply too much of everything, overwhelming in all aspects.

Fortunately for Steve, that unbridled enthusiasm is sharply curtailed by the orange clad soldier, Grif. “Aw, enough with the ass kissing.”
Grif reminds Steve distantly of Natasha in a way. The soldier is sharply tongued and sarcastic, with the same wit as Natasha but lacking her charm. Grif trades barbs almost constantly with the others, but it seems somehow acceptable among them. It is familiar enough to be almost comfortable.

Simmons and Grif are easy to talk to, easy to understand; the other two are not. Tucker in the teal armor remains quiet and sullen. He hangs his head solemnly, his eyes dark and downcast. There is an unspoken sorrow to Tucker, something that Steve cannot quite discern. He speaks in hushed tones, mostly keeping to himself and remaining at the side of Caboose. Caboose says nothing, but Steve can hear the soft, muffled sounds of crying beneath his blue helmet no matter how Tucker tries to comfort him on and off.

Once they are settled, it is Tony who asks, “So, what brings you boys to our neck of the woods?”

“Needed a place to crash after we crashed,” Tucker answers with a nonchalant shrug.

“And I gather our friends Agents Washington and Carolina will not be joining us for this little slumber party?” Tony inquires as he pours out a scotch for himself before offering a glass to each of the Reds and Blues.

Tucker’s jaw tightens almost imperceptibly to most average humans. However, Steve sees it and he hears it even above the delicate tinkling of ice in the drinks that Tony offers, even as Tucker waves a hand to dismiss Caboose’s drink. The faint creak of the bone and grit of teeth against one another is unmistakable. Tony has hit a nerve, a bad one. Worse, however, Steve hears Caboose’s breath catch, quick and cracked with emotion. Steve shoots a glare in Tony’s direction, as much of a warning as he can muster, while Grif and Simmons look expectantly to Tucker over their drinks.

“No,” Tucker grinds out, curtly snatching the glass from Tony’s hand and downing the scotch in one gulp. “They will not be joining us.”

Tension hangs thickly in the air between them for long, horrible moment before Caboose whispers timidly, “Because they’re playing hide and seek?”

There is something so absurdly childlike and innocent to Caboose’s tone, yet broken in a way. It hurts to hear him, cutting right down to Steve’s core. It must affect the others equally, for Simmons and Grif’s head snap towards Caboose in a start.

Yet, Tucker is surprisingly gentle and restrained; he places a hand on Caboose’s shoulder and utters flatly, “Yeah, Caboose. Hide and seek.”

Steve dares not question; he already feels the apprehension coiling tightly in his belly. It is seeing something too tender, too personal, like walking in on someone crying. Yet, Steve cannot turn away, not now and not ever, not when this feels too close. Steve wonders if this is how he and Bucky seem to others looking in.

After some decidedly stilted small talk, it is decided that the four will stay in Stark Tower until they can come up with some sort of a plan. When it comes time for another round, ever the consummate host, Tony discretely pours significantly larger refills for Simmons and Grif and more or less a shot for Tucker. After Tucker finishes, Tony invites them to stay a while and to show them to their rooms. Tucker agrees and gathers up the clearly distraught Caboose to follow.

Tony carries up a running dialogue as they leave. Nothing consequential. He just babbles idle facts about the Tower and the Avengers. Steve understands. It isn’t really for the Reds and Blues. Tony’s seemingly inane commentary is for Steve, so the super soldier might know as soon as they are really and truly out of ear shot.
When Tony’s voice eventually fades fully, Steve dares question, “What happened?”

Grif sighs overly dramatically, but Simmons explains carefully. “There may have been technical difficulties with our ride. We survived the crash just fine, and things went a bit Robinson Crusoe for a while. Carolina left with Church a day after the crash, but we were okay.”

“Yeah, until we met the locals,” Grif huffs over his booze, his words dripping with resentment.

“This merc – Felix – tried to warn us that we were in the shit. He told us to sit tight until he could bring reinforcements up from the New Republic,” Simmons continues smoothly and matter-of-factly, pointedly ignoring Grif’s interruption. “They didn’t come fast enough. The FAC had us pinned down. They dropped Sarge and Donut like that—” Simmon snaps his fingers “—like nothing.”

Grif growls sourly, “And then dumbass fucking Washington just had to play the fucking hero and get himself captured, too.”

“The New Republic got us out of there, let us grab a ride here. It was the only place we knew to go.” Simmons shakes his head and looks down. “Wash told us, if we ever needed a place to go, to come here. He drilled us on the security features, codes, everything. Everything we’d need to get to safety.”

Grif slams his glass down on the table, almost shattering the delicate crystal. “For all the fucking good that did him.”

The silence that follows is a sharp and brittle thing that Steve knows too well; he has been there all too often himself. The same fruitless, unproductive anger and bitterness has consumed him in the past. It’s the same ache and defeat that consumed him after Bucky fell from the train. Steve may not know all the details, but he knows that doesn’t matter. Steve pours the drinks for Simmons and Grif in Tony’s stead, letting them get the same disastrously drunk he had so desperately craved after that dark day in the snow.

That is the best Steve can do for now.

He sits with them until the pair is done for the night, until they are both ready to pass out. Steve shows them to some of the guest suites, but the soldiers are too far gone to really appreciate anything other than a horizontal surface to crash on. Gross intoxication seems a mercy of sorts, one Steve misses all too dearly some days.

Afterwards, Steve texts Natasha; it seems only right to let her know.

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Tony escorts Tucker and Caboose to one of the many lavish suites in Stark Tower. He waits patiently outside the door as Tucker gets Caboose settled into one of the bedrooms. The inventor tries not to listen too closely as the soldiers speak in low tones with one another, Caboose’s higher pitched voice sounding afraid and hurt, while Tucker maintains an even, low drone. There is a tenderness there, hidden beneath Tucker’s gruff exterior.

When Tucker finally emerges and slowly eases the door shut behind himself, Tony mimes a drink, and the soldier just blurts out, “Oh, fuck yes.”
The inventor is no slouch, pouring quite liberally sized glasses of scotch for both of them. Tucker gratefully snatches the thing and starts gulping it down in long draughts without tasting while Tony sips and savors his. When it is empty, he holds out his glass in a demanding gesture; Tony obliges.

“Thank fuck.”

Tony gives a measured nod and raises his glass in what might be a mock salute or toast. “Seemed like you needed it.”

“You have no fucking clue.”

“Sounds like you’ve had a rough day,” the inventor offers, sliding the bottle closer to Tucker; it seems easier than constantly playing host and refilling the soldier’s glass.

Tucker scowls deeply and bitterly, grabbing the bottle and cradling it close to his chest to nurse. “Another point for the genius.”

Tony lets a long pause hang between the two of them before asking, “Your friend… he’s okay, right?”

“Caboose? He’s never okay. But that’s just the way he is,” the soldier heaves over the bottle. Tucker briefly struggles visibly and fumbles for the right words before settling with, “He’s sensitive.”

“I gathered. Hey, if you don’t mind my asking, how’d a guy like him get mixed up with the rest of you assholes?” When Tucker shoots Tony a dirty look, the inventor beams. “Oh, come on. You and the Freelancers aren’t exactly the happiest SOBs in the world, and he’s not exactly the soldier type.”

Tucker sighs and looks down. “Look, Caboose wasn’t always like this. I mean, yeah, he was a suck-up and an annoying little shit before O’Malley, but he’s been fucking wrecked since then.”

“O’Malley?”

“O’Malley, Omega, whatever the fuck you want to call him,” Tucker responds angrily, the words a curse on his tongue. “You want to talk about assholes? That AI was practically programmed for the job.” He takes a good swig of scotch. “O’Malley got in his head and severely fucked the place up, because that’s what AIs do, apparently.”

Something dark pricks in the back of Tony’s mind; grim reality calling. Caboose is just another shadow of Project Freelancer, another in string of victims of Director Church’s madness. Washington and Maine may lie on the other end of the spectrum, but all three have been equally damaged by the influence of a second consciousness inhabiting their mind, entirely and irrevocably ruined. It is absolutely horrifying and somehow grimly fascinating all at the same time, just sickening to behold.

“Fucking Washington was better with him,” Tucker mutters under his breath solemnly.

“We’ll find him,” Tony promises firmly.

“We’d better, because I can’t handle this shit like he can.”

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Maine comes to him later, after everyone is settled in and after Tony has retreated from a sleepless
night to the quiet, reassuring refuge of his lab. This night, like so many others, has proven too much for Tony, too overly stimulating and too unsettling. On nights such as this, when his mind churns noisily and refuses slumber, his bed repulses him. The lab, however, is silent and comforting in its familiarity, no different than a well-worn coat or warm blanket.

Bypassing the security codes, Maine slips easily inside. The burly former Freelancer has been with them for months, yet it still never ceases to amaze the inventor how silently Maine can move when he wants to, despite his bulk and size. It is a constant reminder of Maine’s entirely deadly capabilities. He slides from the shadows of the far slide of the lab, emerging from the dark.

Tony starts at the abrupt appearance of the mute, nearly jumping out of his skin. “Don’t do that.”

Maine says nothing, not that the inventor expects him to say a word. In truth, his muteness is perhaps the only part of the former Freelancer that Tony either readily accepted or to which he has since grown accustomed. Instead, the giant just stands there and stares implacably. He even folds his muscular arms across his chest as if to underscore the point that Maine can wait for whenever Tony has settled himself and is truly prepared to accept whatever has brought him.

“Well? What’s got you skulking around in the night?”

To Tony’s very great surprise, Maine actually answers him, in a way. His meaty paws move in an artistic ballet of oddly elegant, choreographed gestures. It takes Tony an almost embarrassingly long moment to recognize the motions as sign language. Tony marvels at this, pondering when exactly Maine even learned sign language before realizing the fruitlessly of Maine’s effort, as Tony does not understand a single thing being ’said’ to him. Tony does not know sign language.

Fortunately for Tony, Jarvis is ahead of his as always; the program translates in his cool, clipped voice for Maine, “I know everything. I know that they are here, and I know Washington is in trouble.”

“We weren’t hiding it from you, if that’s what you’re implying,” Tony bristles defensively.

Maine’s face contorts into something akin to a scowl, but not quite before he continues with Jarvis relaying. “You were not telling me either.”

The inventor glowers. “You really think I’d hide something from my good buddy, Maine?”

Maine does not indulge Tony’s sarcasm. “Already talked to Bucky. Whatever you have planned, he is in, and I am in.” He gives a throaty growl but continues with his hands. “No questions. No arguments. I am going.”

Maine leaves before Tony can utter another word otherwise.

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In the morning, it is decided all too easily over breakfast. Simmons, Grif, and Caboose will stay behind, safe and sound at Stark Tower. Bucky, Steve, Tony, and Tucker will return to Chorus. Tucker will guide them to the last place the Reds and Blues were all together, before they were separated and before the FAC captured Washington and the others. The investigation will start there; it only makes sense. Steve and Tony are bound by the Accords not to fight, but that does not mean they can’t help with the investigation.
Tony conveniently neglects to inform them of Maine until it is time to say their farewells; predictably, the Reds and Blues react poorly Maine’s presence when he joins them on the flight deck. They curse, swear, and threaten him with shockingly creative violence. Steve finds himself struggling not to blush upon hearing some of the insults they hurl, particularly Grif. They ignore the obvious preparations he has made for a fight, his head freshly shorn, his armor polished and gleaming, his massive, bladed weapon strapped to his back. No. They see only evil and react as such. Maine maintains his stoicism admirably, no matter how colorful the soldiers get with their language.

“What in the absolute *fuck* is the Meta doing here?” Grif demands sharply.

“He’s not the Meta,” Steve informs them carefully and evenly. “Not anymore.” He glances to Maine but finds nothing in those dark eyes, no reaction or even trace of emotion. “Maine’s been helping us out.”

The others simply stare and gape. Steve does not blame them; he has seen the files and read the stories, what little is available. It may not be the complete story, but what intelligence Tony has found on Maine is enough to piece together what happened. Steve knows that the Freelancer had gone rogue and attacked his former colleagues savagely, yet he also knows that was not Maine, not really. That was Sigma. The Reds and Blues have every right to hate Maine, to expect nothing but violence and death from the Freelancer. To hear otherwise must come as a great shock to them, no matter how grudgingly Steve must admit such.

Steve dares steal a glance at Bucky. His friend stands unmoving at Maine’s side, his features even and schooled. Bucky’s sympathy towards Maine is a palpable thing. It has brought them close these months in a way that frequently leaves Steve envious beyond compare. The similar hijacking of their minds has cleaved a great abyss between them and the rest of the world, an improbable and revolting bonding factor. Steve will never *know* Bucky as Maine does, no matter how he may try. Bucky does not move, not even twitch his lip to say a word.

It is Tucker who moves first, drawing a shimmering, glowing bladed weapon of some kind. It is something like a diamond shaped sword, split down the middle. Yet, it shines with a queer light, as though made from pure energy. Steve finds himself thinking of *Star Wars*, now that he has finally finished watching all of the movies to date. He wonders if lightsabers would also smell faintly of ozone and lightning rolling over the ocean.

Tucker rushes right up Maine to point the tip of the sword close to the former Freelancer’s neck and snarl in his face, “I am not leaving Caboose here with this…. fucking *monster*.”

Tony pipes up, “Well, that’s great, because Maine volunteered to be on our little rescue squad.”

“The fuck you say,” Tucker snaps loudly enough and harshly enough to startle Caboose.

“The fuck I do say,” Tony responds, blinking at how utterly foolish that sounds. “If someone was really tough enough to take out our dear friend Washington, you’re going to need all the heavy hitters we can muster on our team. They don’t get any heavier than Maine here.” Maine gives a low, warning growl as Tony pats his shoulder, and the inventor shrugs. “Hey, I call them like I see ‘em.”

“He’s a freaking psychopath,” Tucker argues furiously. “He tried to kill us, multiple times. Tried to pull that shit on Wash, too. Killed his Freelancer buddies just so he could steal their AIs, their tech. What special kind of asshole does that to his so-called *partners*? To his *friends*?”

Maine does not flinch, does not react, but Tony speaks for him, “Look, he’s not going to take ‘no’ for an answer.”
Tucker fumes for a few tense moments, but it is Simmons who expertly defuses him. “It’s like Sarge always says, Tucker. ‘Keep your friends close, and your enemies within range of your primary firearm.’”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know. ‘So you can shoot them,’” Tucker gripes, shaking his head before steeling his resolve once more. “Fine.” He points the tip of that alien blade at Maine’s barreled chest, the crisp, blue energy of the sword flashing in the white armor. “But I’m keeping an eye on you, cockbite.”

Stark flamboyantly waves to the waiting door of the Quinjet and beckons loudly, “Alright, now that that’s settled, all aboard!”

Before they leave, Steve’s phone buzzes in his pocket; a message from Natasha. ‘You bring Wash home safe, Steve Rogers, so help me.’

The demand is clear; Steve knows better than to test Natasha Romanoff. They will find Agent Washington and bring him back from Chorus along with the rest of the Reds and Blues. He does not want to know what sorts of creative torture Natasha will have in wait to inflict upon him on their return should they fail.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it's been a while. I've been crazy stupid busy between getting married and work. It's been a nutty year.

Anyone else looking forward to a new season and the weird reboot we seem to be getting?

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