The Influence of the Earth

by bluesyturtle

Summary

“Why are you in my city?”

“Way I hear it, it was my city first,” he answers coyly with the smallest shrug.

After the near-disaster with the Insight Helicarriers, the Winter Soldier flees D.C. and heads for Brooklyn seeking familiar ground--or what would have been familiar ground to Bucky Barnes. Trouble follows him to New York in spite of his good intentions, but he's soon
joined by a team of extraordinary people who all want to see him free. They work together to
tear down a weakened but extant organization in the hopes that he won't be torn apart with it.

Notes

The Russian in this piece (Cyrillic because the alternative makes our eyes bleed) is the work
of my lovely friend lobopodia. Liza, you are a goddess and I adore you. English translations
are available in the end notes.

This thing is unbeta'd because I am impatient. Typos are typos. Drake, this is your fault.

Also, I made a pinterest account for Wade because reasons.
https://www.pinterest.com/poolgongiveit2u/
Breathe the Air

The Soldier runs.

He can only haunt the bridges overlooking the Potomac for so long before the East Coast sky starts to strangle the air in his lungs.

It’s a place looking to know the man he was. A name that once was was his sits emblazoned on a wall next to an image of his face. That is his still, at least, if a thing like that could be his simply for existing together with the rest of his body.

But that doesn’t feel his either. Everything is too tight.

He runs for a long time. Sometimes he does so by pumping his legs as hard and as fast as he can. When circumstances demand it, he stops and takes a few hours of the less accommodating daylight to rest. Biology demands that he procures sustenance and maintains hygiene, and both are tedious in their own very different ways.

His feet take him North towards the coast under the aegis of nightfall, and he can taste it when he gets close enough to the East River that the temperature in the air pinches with humidity.

It was a hot day. The sweat soaks his hair and has gathered under his arms when he stops at an iron gate with English letters naming the grounds in its keep: “Brooklyn Botanic Garden”. The Soldier sighs and weaves his fingers through the spaces in the R, the D, and the E. His forehead fits squarely against the L and the Y of “Brooklyn”. The K presses against his skin when he turns his head from side to side.

He’s tired again. Keeping late hours has allowed him to take the quickest route from D.C. into Brooklyn largely unnoticed, but constant motion has depleted his resources. Sleep sounds like it would solve all of his problems. But he knows better.

Brooklyn exists like a ship out over calm waters. He waits for trouble to come, but there’s nothing. Another hour on his feet carries him to the Brooklyn Bridge, and he stands slouched over the railing staring down at the river until the sun rises. The polished wood has the sheen of rain and reflects the overhead lights from the bridge. Atop the structure waves an illuminated American flag, silently stern and judgmental.

The Soldier finds himself sneering before he returns his gaze to the water. He imagines falling over the safety rail to the metronome of wind and currents. His knees ache around the lateral collateral and patellar ligaments when he straightens out but the ache in his shoulders and back lifts with just a few steps.

He still smells of sweat and vaguely like rust where the rain has mixed with the dirt in his hair, but the wind off the water refreshes him to the fullest capacity that it can. The first hair gelled man in a suit to cross his path generously, unwittingly offers up his wallet. Wonder of wonders, there’s a gym membership card inside it. The Soldier gets himself a shower at Hair Gel’s gym of choice, tools around some on the weights, and takes another shower for the hell of it before leaving the wallet relatively untouched at the front desk.

The sun sets early and finds him in the Garment District devouring scorched swordfish and chunks
of bell pepper and lemon on a stick he bought from a bright blue truck on Park Avenue. Street food smells and automobile exhaust waft up all around him, the sights and sounds of people mulling about purposefully. A tall woman passes him on the sidewalk with a shaggy dog leading the way on a leash. It-sniffs at his leg as they go by and the Soldier watches while he is watched by the animal in turn.

He hears her say, “Come on, Cindy.”

Sundown in Hell’s Kitchen is another world. At first it could be any place in the continental U.S. after dark, but the cover of night summons all manner of filth from the city. There’s a freeness to it that he’s almost inclined to allow, right up until he can’t.

It happens almost too fast for him to understand, like a knee-jerk reaction to pain or heat.

A wraith-thin boy reminding him of someone shouts down a pack of men cat-calling a woman across the street. The woman hurries away and the men pursue the boy, follow him behind a deserted tenement building in an unlit part of the district. There’s nothing for the black eye the Soldier’s too late to prevent. Certainly no reason to care about the odds stacked against this kid with panic and courageous anger in his heart. Good deeds go punished all the time.

Except he knows as his metal fist lands another blow on one guy’s face. Knows he’s seen photographs of Rogers before he was Captain America, knows the story of the boy who fought the bullies.

Knows that scrawny kid from Brooklyn got a pounding more often than he could count. Knows that kid kept count anyway as a force of habit. Doesn’t know how he could know that, but he’s sure of it, somehow. People like that remember. Rogers remembers everything, unlike him.

“Whoa,” the kid in the here-and-now says, somewhere behind him, vaguely.

He lets the last of the four go and watches the other three, not satisfied really but something that isn’t apathetic. Two of them are out cold. One of them writhes pitifully. He considers knocking him out, too, but doesn’t.

“Wait,” he hears at his back when he’s making his exit. He doesn’t stop, but he hears, because he’s listening for it, “Thank you.”

His flesh hand is warm in the cool breeze. Metal fingers uncurl in the safety of his pocket. Storm clouds overhead look poised for a downpour. He likes the rain—doesn’t like wet socks all that much but supposes there’s a price to pay for all life’s small pleasures and luxuries. Nothing quite like a soak from the sky to remind him that good deeds go punished all the time.

Play the hero, reap the penalty of wet socks. He flexes his toes in his boots and wonders how much ground he can cover before the sun comes up.

There’s nothing for him in New York. It was childish of him to think coming here might answer some question he has about himself that he can’t bear to ask yet. The museum in D.C. gave him some easy ones, some hard ones.

“Bucky Barnes” fell from a train, was never recovered.

He was found, but that person was never recovered. He won’t ever be. The Soldier scuffs the asphalt with one heel and tells himself that’s okay, that it has to be. But it feels hollow just like everything else.
The last human part of him is frozen and buried in a ravine somewhere. Probably that’s where the rest of him belongs, entombed in all that snow with only a dream of warmth to send him into permanent, gnawing sleep.

It’s not in his limited arsenal of memories whether or not he’s had that thought before, but it cuts deeply like it just might be the first time. And because he’s free to do it, he wonders if Rogers ever thought something similar: that sleeping forever might have been a great alternative to the sucking pain of living. But their “lives” have been so utterly different. Their periods of “rest” have been so different.

He wishes he could remember, but he’s grateful, often, that he doesn’t.

If he could, he might know one more time what it was like to be Bucky Barnes, to have the mindset and the wealth of information about that life that may as well not even exist but so impossibly, irreversibly does, even now. He might remember the shape and tone of his thoughts as he was and not recognize the mass of flesh and bone he’s become.

Not that there’s ever been anything to compare to now, for reference. But having the missing footage, the years he lost when his life was his…

He hazards a guess and decides Bucky Barnes could never have imagined the Winter Soldier. Life has either become much crueler, or he led a charmed existence before. Likely another puzzle from the past he’ll never solve. Not by himself.

At the docks on the river, he stands idly looking out at the water and listening. A ways East he can hear two people talking business of a sort. It doesn’t sound entirely legal and when he gets eyes on the exchange, he can see that it really obviously isn’t. Given the nature of the meeting, he figures it’s best to keep himself hidden behind a shipping crate and watches with his cheek pressed to its aluminum siding.

It’s a drug deal in all likelihood. The players involved don’t have any distinguishing features from his vantage point. But he also doesn’t care all that much what they’re up to. He starts to go and stops on instinct when the casual hum of negotiation takes a turn.

Bullets ring out in bursts and he plasters his back flat against the crate. He counts three rounds in between pauses. Several weapons firing at once, trained southwards: an assault coming at them, cornering them with the water at their backs and an unreachable city in front of them. He hears a dense weight crash into the river and then another.

They resurface. He hears them fighting the currents where they’ve fallen. Injured, but alive.

Once the firefight has ceased, he slinks out of his defensive posture and gets another look. He sees a guy in red stood over a motionless attacker dismantling one of the firearms that was just used against him. It might be a variant of the Kalashnikov, but that ID does little to give him any insight into who those people are or what ties they have on the East Coast in general.

He drops his hand from the side of the crate, metal fingers dragging just for a moment on the edge. The tip of his finger catches on a dent in the aluminum and makes the faintest screeching sound.

When he looks up again at the man in red, he’s already staring in his direction. Even with the mask covering half his face, it’s clear he’s looking at him.

He’s not carrying a gun on him. Stupid.

He does have a folded pocket knife tucked in his boot, which seems to be something of an
advantage, considering the man in red leaves the guns behind before deliberately making his way across the docks. The Soldier buries his metal hand deep in his jacket pocket and fists the material there to remind himself not to free it unless he absolutely must. It’s not the most inconspicuous of things to have: a metal arm.

There’s no way to really know what the hell the guy in red is even doing here or what he thinks the Soldier is doing here. All he knows is things could escalate, and if they do, the red-masked guy can clearly handle his own in a fight.

But he’s proven countless times that he can handle himself when the chips are down, too.

His head snaps up at the whisper of sound above him—more a reshuffling of atoms than a proper slide of friction and weight.

“You’re the Winter Soldier,” a calm, breathless voice says from atop the crate he’s kept at his back. They stare at each other.

“What gave it away?” he drawls in English. He’s discovered he’s good at that drawl so many Americans have as a result of their language that’s so historically prone to leveling.

“I recognized you.”

He jumps down easily with a peaceful air about him like all he wants to do is talk. However authentically that demeanor matches his intent, all the Soldier knows when the costumed man’s feet hit the planks is that he’s backed into a wall.

His instinct is to throw himself forward, fists and gravity and inertia and will, but he settles for shifting his feet and squaring his shoulders. The man standing and straightening out before him takes a cautious step back, similarly squaring his shoulders and angling his head slightly to one side.

The Soldier watches him think through what to do and what to say before he settles on: “Why are you in my city?”

“Way I hear it, it was my city first,” he answers coyly with the smallest shrug. The man watching him cracks a small smile at that. Comfortable as he looks in this interaction, the Soldier can’t make himself blindly trust this person who’s a vigilante or mercenary-for-hire. Neither of those things really bodes well for him, but at least if the guy’s a sell sword he won’t have any reason to abscond with the Soldier’s head tonight.

Unless of course he’s in this part of town at all because someone put out a kill order on a certain rogue Hydra agent. Red Mask could be working for Hydra.

“No one sent me after you,” he says like he can read the Soldier’s mind. He holds his hands up briefly, gloved palms exposed in a companionable show of harmlessness. The Soldier doesn’t trust those hands at rest either—would entertain the idea of security if he saw them in combat, would have a more fluid approach on how to handle them if they were aimed as weapons at his body. “That’s not why we’re talking.”

“Take a few steps back then.”

They’re at a safe distance, but Red Mask’s subtle, strategically casual shuffling closer has not gone
by unobserved. Although he doesn’t regret not having a gun on his person now that he’s taken a minute to size the guy up, their proximity to each other is making him more and more aware of the possibility for hand-to-hand combat. The Soldier’s got seven ways to sneak the knife out of his boot undetected if they come to a close quarters brawl.

“Sure,” Red Mask cedes, raising his shoulders as he carefully backtracks, facing the Soldier all the while. He adds, conversationally, “You never answered my question.”

“Sightseeing,” he replies brusquely. “And yourself?”

Smiling wryly at something he’s heard, Red Mask tells him, “I’m on patrol.”

“You don’t look like police.”

“I’m not.” His expression tightens somewhat—maybe he’s squinting underneath his mask. “The papers call me Daredevil.”

The Soldier’s expression flickers, shutters lifting for a moment to reflect the realization of who Red Mask apparently is. He makes his face indiscernible once he’s caught himself staring and says, “That they do.”

He’d seen the headlines on all the papers at all the newsstands. Probably he should have pieced it together before now. It seems so obvious in hindsight.

_Daredevil._

The name sounds like a sideshow attraction. Most outliers in society do. He squeezes the lining of his pocket with his metal hand and bites the inside of his cheek.

“There are a lot of bad people looking for you. Do you know that?”

The Soldier grunts, uninterested in those so-called bad people. He just keeps his eyes on ‘Daredevil’.

“What, are you here to protect me?”

The words seethe and drip with sarcasm. He’s a warrior scraped off the battlefield and pieced together with shrapnel and congealed blood. No one on this earth can protect him. He’ll destroy anyone who condescends to try, now. Now that it’s too late. Now that there’s nothing in him left to be saved or redeemed.

“It’s not like that,” Daredevil assures him with something like sincerity in his voice. Who can really say, though, since the guy leads a double life and probably lies habitually to those closest to him? “But I should really take you in, just to be safe. If anyone makes a move to pick you up…”

He stops listening momentarily.

_Should really take you in._

**Bring him in.**

_Just to be safe-house on the water, a clear exit from the coast to the interstate._

_If anyone makes a move—move in, we’re onsite._

“…a lot of innocent people could get hurt.”
To himself the Soldier murmurs, “Innocent,” like the word itself might exorcise the flurry of jumbled thoughts and voices from his mind. Some of those spirits haunt him with voices not his own in languages from farther reaches of the world than New York.

Daredevil takes a step closer and the Soldier gets the hilt of his knife cradled in his palm, metal arm pulled studiously back. He isn’t at full throttle yet, but his heart skips a beat all the same. His chest tightens and he listens to the wind for a slower tempo to mimic. A shaky breath catches in his throat. The blade springs out from the protective handle like an extension of his arm.

“Stay. Back.”

“Okay,” he answers gently, arms up and out as he retreats one step and then another. His footwork is practiced and slow like that of a gymnast or a dancer: or a trained martial artist, which makes the most sense. The Soldier keeps the edge of the blade horizontal and in line with Daredevil’s throat in case he comes close again. “Barnes, I need you to hear me.”

“Don’t.”

“I…it’s not safe for you out in public like this. People will come for you.” Daredevil pauses and the corners around his mouth pinch uncertainly. He doesn’t like that he has to say what comes next. “They’ll come for the Winter Soldier.

“And I’d rather not have to fight you and them.”

The Soldier blinks. “Why would you fight them?”

Tripped up and visibly affronted at the question, Daredevil says, “That clandestine Neo-Nazi organization comes anywhere near Hell’s Kitchen I’ll put their operatives in a cell. I can promise you that.”

He squints. It’s an anti-climactic threat in the face of everything Hydra is and does. But, considering Hydra’s mantra, arresting known affiliates might be better than putting them in the ground.

Cut off one head, sure, two more spring out.

Subject one of them to the justice system? The essence of the motto just doesn’t apply. Hydra agents go into the field looking to die before they let themselves be captured, turned, or God forbid, rescued.

Morior invictus.

I die unconquered.

“You seem confident,” the Soldier croons, fingers tightening over the texturized handle of the knife, “that they’d let you arrest them.”

“I don’t think they’d let me do anything,” he answers with a strange, young smile on his mouth. “But the fact is I’d do it.”

They watch each other, and for all his pessimistic realism, the Soldier believes him. Even in spite of the inherent deception his concealed identity perpetuates, Daredevil strikes him as forthcoming to the point of being too honest.

So he flips the knife in his hand into a less lethal position, holds it at his hip without bending to sheath it in his boot, and says, “Be that as it may.”
“You won’t let me take you into custody.”

He sounds disappointed. The Soldier doesn’t blame him. There’s enough of that to go around—enough blame and disappointment to could swallow the city whole. It’s perhaps the deadliest weapon anyone could use against him: the blame for Hydra’s agenda, the disappointment of the U.S. government, the blame for the genocidal apocalypse Pierce sent him to fulfill, the disappointment of America’s mascot and model super soldier.

It shouldn’t have been difficult to bear between his lost memories and the phantom pains and the nightmare flashbacks he primarily ignores. He tells himself it’s not. The empty feeling persists.

“I won’t keep you if you don’t want to be kept. Just, humor me. One more question.”

The Soldier waits. Courtesy is one of a few things he can spare for someone more inclined to release him than he is to force his hand.

“Why save that kid back in Lenox Hill? I was on my way there to break it up, but there was no need.” He gives the Soldier a few seconds to respond. When he doesn’t reply, Daredevil says, “You sure you’re just here for the view?”

Defensive but passing it off as dismissive he says, “I was just passing by.”

The truth of this encounter hits him one fact at a time: the Soldier interfered in civilian affairs, exposed himself to the scrutiny of a masked vigilante in the process, and was tailed here by said vigilante after the fact. His defenses hadn’t even been tripped.

Daredevil will probably continue to keep him under surveillance as long as he’s anywhere in the vicinity of Manhattan, but whether that’s a horrible thing or a reasonable thing, the Soldier has no idea. He bristles at the notion of being monitored by anyone, but rationally he’s aware that he was, at one time, very, very good at working under constant supervision.

Can something like that be soldered into a person’s DNA? If it could for anyone, it would have for him, after everything.

“You gonna keep an eye on me from now on?” He asks disdainfully, needing to put it into words—needing to resist. Part of him snaps viciously at the corrupted section of his DNA trying to accept Daredevil’s implied but fixed terms. “That how it works with the bad guys you don’t feel like arresting?”

“I already told you I’m not police,” Daredevil tells him, voice soft and lined with something that sounds like compassion. “I’m not gonna watch every move you make, but if there’s trouble anywhere in Manhattan I’m there. If you happen to be at the center of it you’re gonna see me again. That’s how this works.”

The Soldier nods, folds the pocket knife, and slips it back into his boot. He can agree to that arrangement. Moreover, it looks like it’s one he’s being asked to accept.

“Then I’ll see you when I see you.”

Daredevil ducks his head and steps away, letting the Soldier pass before jumping up onto the crate and sinking into a crouch. He doesn’t look in the Soldier’s direction when he says, “I hope you’ll let me help you when that time comes, Barnes.”

He’s gone before the Soldier can snarl at him not to get his hopes up. It’s probably for the best.
The night is dark and he walks through it, stopping every now and then for a climbable tree or a building with minimal or no security to scale. He likes being high up, in a roundabout way. It inspires a faint, feeble fear in him that feels too soft to be his most days. It’s easy to sleep like that—a long way above the ground safely cocooned in a vulnerable, animal phobia that he can’t explain.

At some obscure hour of the night he ends up back on the Brooklyn Bridge looking down at the water. It’s tranquil and black in the dark. The night isn’t a cold one but there’s a breeze every now and then that makes him glad he has a jacket on. He watches the sunrise for the second time in as many days and crushes the strangled sensation of pain in his chest that accompanies the sight of the billowing flag.

When the doors open to the public at 8 sharp, he walks into the botanical garden through the Washington Avenue entrance and pays the $12.00 fee for adults in cash (he did return Hair Gel’s wallet relatively untouched, aside from a few stray bills).

He tentatively follows signs that lead him to the Cherry Esplanade which is luminous in the bleak morning with glossy pink. Halfway down the path he has to stop and look up at the gossamer canopy capturing the gray-white sunrays, letting only chinks of light through. Some of the more impressive boughs have streams of flowers that droop like the leaves of a Weeping Willow.

Two women pass by, one of them carrying a sketchpad in one arm and sketching with her free hand. Her hair is deep brown and falls down her back in tight, orderly ringlets. She’s a few inches taller than the woman walking at her side with her hands clasped behind her back and her black hair woven into a messy bun atop her head.

The one not carrying anything says, in a smooth, rich voice he didn’t expect, “I read in the pamphlet that the blossoms will fall soon. They do that after they bloom.”

“Don’t most things?” her companion says offhandedly in a voice that’s more like bells.

She directs her gaze out at the trees as her pencil hovers over the gray-and-dark-gray lines on her sketchpad. He can see the straight line of her nose when she tilts her head back to look up at the trees.

“Well, yeah, of course, but that’s the thing about cherry blossoms. They’re here for a little while and then right when they’re the most beautiful, they have to go. It’s like Nature’s way of reminding us how short life is.”

“Okay, it’s sort of pretty when you say it like that,” the sketching woman allows, turning to look at her friend.

The Soldier sees the profile of her smile and wonders distantly why he’s still looking at them.

The woman who read the pamphlet makes a humming sound through closed lips and kisses the other chastely, playfully on the mouth. He tears his eyes away and makes his feet move. Near the end of the trail where the path diverges into two he sidesteps a young child in overalls veering around the corner with arms spread wide mimicking the sound of a propeller with their lips. A winded man runs after the now maniacally laughing child.

“André!”

He looks over his shoulder at the pair of them, marveling at the child’s ability to elude the adult. It would be entertaining if it wasn’t also quite a spectacle—one that he really can’t be a part of.

The end of the Cherry Esplanade takes him to the Bluebell Wood where he’s struck by the inversion
of colors and their placement in his sightline. In contrast to the weightless pink dappling the sky like crushed pastels, the bluebells are a vivid blue and manage to still hang down even as their stalks push them toward the sky. As he’s watching them, the clouds edge across the blocked sun and the light filtering through the birch and beech leaves warms from silver to gold.

He walks through the wood and silently takes in the trees and amorphous shadows pierced through by light. Once, he has to stop to watch a bee patiently explore a seemingly wilted blue flower. Its tiny body shifts and expands in its intricate search and process of pollination. The bee is as old as the birch trees: ancient creations dancing the same few steps ingrained in them from the very beginning of their lines, from the dawn of time.

The bee probably came first.

It also leaves first. The Soldier stares after it and walks aimlessly down the path toward Daffodil Hill, imagining a time far removed from the present when the earth was green with constantly renewed life and multitudinous bounty.

He must have been studying the bee in the Bluebell Wood for a while because the couple from earlier—the female couple—passes him again. The brunette is sketching what looks to be a leafless tree with many branches. Her shorter companion has an arm draped along the small of her back and her other hand buried deep in her pocket, not unlike the Soldier’s. The picture on the sign for Daffodil Hill advertises stout yellow flowers that aren’t presently in bloom.

The brunette artist says, nonchalantly, with her attention split between the sketchpad and the sloping mounds of grass that are still lovely for all that they are commonplace, “So the cherry blossoms are to show us that life is beautiful and temporary and the bluebells are for humility and gratitude. What does the pamphlet say about daffodils?”

He keeps his eyes trained on the green grass and imagines the even spread of awkwardly two-toned yellow flower petals that they missed by a month. Behind him he can hear the quiet rustling of waxy paper.

“Says they represent the coming of spring, bad hair days, cheesy pop songs on the radio…”

The Soldier wrinkles his nose. The voice more like bells retorts, laughing, “That’s not what it says.”

“Just wanted to see if you were paying attention.”

The brunette artist with the voice like bells makes a ‘tsk’ noise. The Soldier has to agree.

“So what do they actually mean then?”

“Basically what all the others mean: winter ends, spring makes a comeback.”

“Aaliyah, what does the pamphlet say?”

“Okay, fine. They’re supposed to stand for truth and honesty, which probably comes from the snow melting and everything underneath finally being revealed again in the springtime. And when they bloom it’s like we’re supposed to remember that even the coldest winter can be a precursor to really beautiful things.”

“Hmm, sucky winters and melting snow. See? I listened.”

The Soldier glances in the direction of that voice when it passes him up. The deeper-voiced woman with the darker hair, the one called Aaliyah, mumbles, “Yeah, pigs are gonna fly.”
But their hands are connected at the seams of their fingers, soft padded tips draped over knuckles and palms cupped in alignment. The sketchpad is cradled between the taller woman’s arm and chest, the drawing forgone in favor of allowing this exchange—which he should not be watching—to happen without a hitch.

Out of a desire to give them the privacy they’ve probably thought they had all along, he breaks away from their path and goes left when they go right down a fork in the trail. His road takes him to the Magnolia Plaza which is a sensory overload if any of the gardens have been. The white flowers look sheer and frosted from a distance. As he draws nearer he can see that there are variations along the red side of the color spectrum: pinks and yellows and violets. Some of them are genuinely white, even up close.

His walk is quiet but does perk up slightly when he hears faintly from the way he just came, “André!”

The Soldier bites back a smile, wondering about children and whether he was like this child with such an affinity for pantomiming airplanes. Surely he was a boy, once. He didn’t erupt out of the earth like those soldiers gesticulated from dragon teeth sewn into the soil.

What kind of child was he? A noisy one? An ill-tempered one? Had he been prone to colds? Did he like to be held? Would he cry if he skinned his knee? Was he difficult to feed?

And as a teenager, what was he like then? Did he speak his mind often? Was he more likely to storm out of a room in order to avoid a difficult conversation? Would he seek to help others or himself first? Was it more to his taste to suffer in silence or to explode in an argument?

When the war came, did he feel brave to join the fight for his country? Was he afraid when he was taken the first time, or the second time, by the enemy? Had he pushed the hardest for the sake of his duty, or were his priorities elsewhere? What did his family think of his disappearance? Would they have rejoiced to know he was alive all along?

He can answer that final question. No.

Better a corpse here, at home, then a warm body in a faraway place never quite far enough. Disease and violence are similar in that respect, and he supposes that he was both as the Winter Soldier—a dangerous thing to be quarantined when not in active use: a bioweapon.

He haunts the Magnolia Plaza, staring up at the flowers quivering in the breeze as the child André saunters past him and ambitiously attempts to scale a hedge. It’s at least as tall as the kid is, but he makes astonishingly quick work of it. The Soldier tries not to react but he does turn away when the kid rolls over the top of the hedge and lands in the grass on the other side.

“André, you’re killing me, boy.”

The Soldier keeps his hands held steadily in his pockets as the boy’s father (his father?) reaches over the hedge to scoop up the squirming child, who squeals in delighted laughter to be caught. His father just huffs a sigh and shakes his head. The Soldier hears how his sigh tapers at the end in the semblance of a laugh.

“Дети,” he murmurs under his breath, sliding his gaze back to the beaux art Administrative Building.

He takes his time moving from the ancient presence of the magnolias to the water lilies, encountering an ornate fountain, a dome-shaped greenhouse, and flowering eastern redbud trees but no water
lilies. Most of the rest of his walk is quiet.

At the Lily Pool Terrace he doesn’t see the people he crossed paths with before, but he overhears conversations from new groups and couples and running, yelling children. He keeps his head down and his collar pulled up to hide the bottom edges of his face. It’s worked to mask his identity this long with the one exception of Daredevil, but he figures that was an extenuating circumstance.

An outlier in society is always likelier to produce statistically improbable outcomes than a run-of-the-mill civilian. He’d seen the guy fight, though, and he definitely isn’t run-of-the-mill or a civilian.

The visitors to the garden shuffle in and out. They come and go while he shifts his attention from garden to garden, soaking in all the colors and smells associated with keeping up a place like this with so much dirt and such a thriving population of bees and all the subtly aggressive pollen sailing on the breeze.

He watches the bluebells until he memorizes the mesmerizing sway of the bloom in the wind, he studies the bricks in the lily pool until he can map out the lay of each sandstone block by heart, and he retraces his steps through the rock garden enough times to remember the distribution and intensity of every purple, orange, and blue pigment in the flowers that grow in wild bunches like sea anemone.

It’s goodbye.

When the gardens close and he has to leave, he heads northwest toward the Brooklyn Bridge to watch the night approach in the company of tourists, locals, and the American flag. He spends the hour after dusk lifting his face to the cool rush of night and remembering the Brooklyn Botanic Garden with his eyes recklessly closed.

The East River coos a hushed melody of nonsense beneath him: slow, solemn chords that could be anguished or could be blissful. It’s difficult to say with the hokum surrounding running water. To him it just sounds like psalms uttered from the depths of Nature’s subconscious mind—the voiced, disquiet hum of centuries and millennia of noise and void and chaos.

He hears someone breathe behind him and turns to see six men and a woman in body armor that could pass for street clothes—armor that could pass if not for the outlines of holsters at their sides. The harness crisscrossing over the woman’s chest clearly supports a long blade mounted on her back.

Between the seven of them he counts twelve firearms on the men, eight blades including the woman’s ostensible cutlery, and a pair of cuffs on every one of them designed to withstand his metal arm. He’s not certain at a first cursory glance, but any of the twelve guns he clocked might actually be Tasers.

Any of those potential Tasers might be a scrambler specifically engineered to de-power his arm. With the influx of information released in the leak, anyone could have whipped up a counter-agent to what is now his most identifiable and contested weapon. He braces himself and waits for the din to kick up and the dust to scatter.

One of the men with a stun grenade peeking out from the flap of his unzipped jacket muses, “You’re a long way from home, Zimny.”

He sneers the fabricated nickname, butchering the pronunciation entirely.

Another man with a Standard USMC-issued Ka-Bar on his hip says, “We’ve got orders to take you
The others stand stark still. He matches them, barely expanding his ribs to breathe.

“I don’t like your odds in a 7-to-1 melee, soldier,” the woman croons, all stern clout and authority that her male counterparts boast but clearly lack. “Do you?”

“In a bottleneck like this,” he says, flicking his head to one side but keeping his eyes on the mass of people taking up most of the walkway, “Sure.”

“So he does speak,” a tall man with two blades and a gun- or Taser-shaped mass at his hip remarks condescendingly. He eases one of those blades out of its sheath and the Soldier gets a look at it while its holder carelessly waves the point in his direction. It’s a goddamn Leuku. “I was told you didn’t speak.”

“You know how to use Finnish steel, мудила?” he growls, pronouncing the Russian smoothly, threateningly. “Need me to show you?”

“What’d he call me?” the man with the Leuku mutters to another agent who snickers without offering a translation.

“Enough.” They fall dead silent at the woman’s command. “Come with us quietly, now.”

He considers it. Really, truly he does.

“Not on your life.”

“Then you leave us no choice.”

With that she unsheathes a katana—a katana—from over her shoulder, and the men flanking her go for their guns. He gets there first and disarms one before he can get the Soldier in his sights. The weapon at that agent’s side is a standard CEW that the Soldier uses to incapacitate the man who understood his Russian taunt.

He empties a full clip of the gun he lifted at the wall of attackers closing in on him. At a break in the gunfire he goes hand-to-hand with the agent who’s clipped himself to a stun grenade. He’s yanked in close and uses that opportunity to detach the grenade from the man’s jacket. Holding it close to his body so it remains unseen, he covertly separates it from the safety pin.

An EMP burst seizes all the way down his metal arm, a spasm coursing down those fingers that causes him to drop the grenade. A proper bullet stings his leg in time with the grenade’s activation. His attackers are briefly, but thoroughly subdued by the unexpected flash. The force of the bullet took him off his feet, but they aren’t in a position to bombard him while he’s down.

Having managed to shield his eyes from the blast, it’s just the disrupted fluid in his ears that gives him problems. The deafening explosion so close to him leaves his balance wanting.

He falls sideways into the bridge railing and unsteadily lifts a Beretta off an agent’s belt. That agent is struggling to his feet when the Soldier pistol whips him. He grabs the CEW off the man’s side before he crumples to the floor and uses it to take down another disoriented Hydra agent.

Two more throw themselves at him while his metal arm is in the process of recalibrating from the EMP. One has a knife aimed for his heart and the other a 9MM. He grabs the hand with the gun when it comes for him, breaks the wrist in his grip, and deflects the knife with the man’s borrowed forearm.
He head butts the man now robbed of his knife—the Leuku. With that threat neutralized, he slams his fist into the stabbed man’s solar plexus hard enough to drop him right there, even in spite of his malfunctioning metal arm.

The Soldier stands straight and flings the Leuku unceremoniously beside its owner. He looks up to find the last agent standing—the woman—calmly pointing a gun at him. She must have taken it from one of her fallen compatriots because he checked her for a holster when they first walked up on him.

The plates in his metal arm shift and emit a mechanical whirring sound as he quietly catches his breath. He drops the gun in his hand, removes the one he tucked in between his back and the waistband of his jeans, and drops that one, too. It kills him a little bit, but he even parts with the lovely Ka-Bar, tossing it near a motionless heap of a man at his feet.

She studies him critically for a moment and makes an inexplicable looping motion over the ground with one foot. Her knee kicks up to toss a katana into the air that she catches expertly by the hilt. It flies forcefully in his direction and he angles his body away from the blade to catch it with his metal hand.

She tosses the gun she’s holding over the railing and reaches calmly over her shoulder for a second katana.

He thinks to himself, Блядь.

Before he can contemplate an escape plan she charges him, all hard, heavy attacks that he parries for the most part because they’re slow and easy to predict. The second he categorizes her style as brute-force offensive, her attacks get lighter, faster, and deadlier. She plays with him and eventually knocks the katana out of his hand before pulling her arm back, all geared up to run him through with the blade.

Pushed to desperate evasive tactics, he catches the katana in his metal hand, tugs it toward him, and rams the butt of its hilt into the side of her head. She’s stunned by the blow but doesn’t go down, which is awkward, and then disastrous.

Her close proximity gives her the opportunity but not quite the angle to drag the katana back down and perforate the muscle along his clavicle, dangerously close to his neck. Immediately there’s blood everywhere and icy panic spiking through his system. He evades the thrust of the blade and gets her in a standing arm lock. She loses the katana but worms her way out of his hold.

She’s about to come for him again, relentless in her pursuit, when a shade drops down from the overhead arch behind her. The Soldier staggers back toward the railing for support and watches a pair of red-sleeved arms close around her neck and efficiently wrestle her to the ground where she joins her team of seven, body thrashing as if with electricity.

The Soldier slides down into a sitting position with his back against the railing. He holds his flesh hand to his profusely bleeding wound as he watches.

“Persistent, aren’t we Chaplain?” a cheery voice says moments before releasing her. A tall man decked out in a red suit approaches the Soldier where he’s slumped over with his legs splayed out and his hand clutching blood and the shredded fibers of his jacket. “Whoa, not doing so hot, are we, Barnes?”

He crouches a respectable distance from the Soldier, who still flinches into the railing at his unannounced intention. The man roots around in a compartment on his belt, paying no heed to the Soldier’s clear distrust.
“The one and the same, judging by that fine piece of machinery,” the unnamed man says matter-of-factly before removing a thick roll of white gauze that doesn’t look proportional to the compartment it came from. “Sorry to barge in on your party uninvited, Sarge. Well, technically, I was invited—by this merry band of cutthroats, to be exact.”

The stranger angles his head at the many unconscious bodies littering the otherwise deserted bridge. The Soldier’s head spins.

“What?” the masked man squawks. “Of course it was always the plan to go AWOL.”

Exploding, the Soldier yells, “Who the hell are you?”

There’s a brief sigh of silence between them and the other man grins through his mask. It’s visible. Through the mask. His grin.

“Name’s Wade Wilson, Sir. I also go by Deadpool. And D Pooly, if the mood calls for it. I’d shake your hand, but then I’d have to drop this cushy First-Aid stuff. That would be bad. Think you can manage it?”

Wilson daintily offers the wad of gauze, a sensible gesture that the Soldier pushes through the most singed of his nerves to accept. His metal hand is fairly untouched by the blood so he unwraps the gauze with those fingers and his teeth.

He manages to do a fairly decent job of patching up the deep slash through his shoulder, but now both his hands are coated with blood. The dressing helps to staunch the bleeding and that’s about it, but that’s all he needs it to do.

“Ooh, soldier, you look like the ghost of Sebastian Stan. You should sit this next part out.”

“What?”

But Wilson is already standing to his feet and running toward the other side of the bridge singing, “When I’m alone with only my dreams of you that won’t come true, what’ll I do?” at the top of his lungs.

The Soldier closes his eyes and tries to visualize bees pollinating flowers, trees swaying in the wind, the tranquil babbling of a manmade fountain, or the whisper of the sky crossing over the water. It doesn’t work. Wilson sings louder than he thinks.

Gunfire startles him out of his reverie and he retrieves the first weapon he can get off one of the unconscious Hydra agents. He pockets a Taser, manages to reacquaint himself with that stunning Ka-Bar from earlier, and resettles with an empty Beretta he doesn’t have time to swap out for a loaded one.

The four agents Wilson is fighting on the other side of the bridge are accompanied by three more on the Soldier’s side. He claws his way to his feet, realizing that he hurts all right now because of the bullet in his thigh that’s sending shooting pains up to his sacrum and down to his aching knee.

He shoots the agent closest to him in the kneecap and the two remaining agents attempt to flank him. One of them pulls a sawed off pump shotgun and the other arms himself with a Ka-Bar like the one the Soldier has. As the two of them face off with their respective steel blades, he sees the shotgun list down in the direction of their legs, which sounds about right: take out his legs, but leave the arm intact.

There’s a strong chance a shot at this range with the two of them so close would take out both their
legs, especially if it’s buckshot. Best case scenario would be a .410 bore, and even then they’re too close. They’re moving too much.

Precision is an impossible outcome, and it’s not what they’re aiming for anyway. Hydra would do it. Hydra would shoot through a field agent to get him.

In spite of his concerns, the man engaging him is good with the knife. He prevents him from doing anything about the shotgun outside of merely being frightfully aware of it. The Soldier does what he can to keep the knife-wielder in between himself and the shotgun, but his hands are tied.

He knows before it happens that the man is going to pull the trigger. It’s just inevitable.

When the shotgun goes off he grits his teeth against the noise and prepares himself for a world of old, but incomprehensibly new pain that never comes.

His legs and feet remain solid beneath him. The man he’s fighting turns to investigate the sound and while he’s distracted, the Soldier cracks him over the temple, hard, with his metal fist.

“Wilson,” he tests the name.

He tries again upon really seeing the telltale red of the suit accompanying one of the prone, unmoving bodies on the ground. The Soldier nudges a red-clad hip with his foot, notices the blood, and holds his ground against the slow wave of nausea creeping up on him.

He’d hoped there wouldn’t be any bodies for him to have to throw into the river. It would be a damn shame for the only casualty to have been a tentative ally: bad luck, not economically viable, and the opposite of inconspicuous.

“Ow.”

“…Wilson?”

“Ow, and fuck. Oh, wait. Owwww—’s a good thing ‘s not a movie,” he whines. “I already said it at the compound before. Ohhh, ow.” Disconsolate, he adds, “As if swearing’s the worst a kid could see in a theater today.”

The Soldier closes his eyes and after a moment, helps roll Wilson over. He’s curious about all the blood, wonders if he might have shot the gunman.

—Except there’s a crater in Wilson’s side right about where one of his kidneys should be. The edges of the hole smoke and the haphazardly oozing blood looks as unconcerned by the damage as Wilson does. Even as slippery ropes of intestine sluggishly topple over the opening in his guts, Wilson pays the carnage no mind.

“He does look shocked, doesn’t he?” Wilson mumbles, slurring his words around gasping breaths. “Guess we’re the only ones who read our comics anymore.”

The Soldier blinks.

“You’re talking,” still he only barely refrains from saying. Abruptly it makes sense. “You’ve got an accelerated healing factor.”

“All the cool kids have ‘em nowadays.”

His instincts tell him to leave. A sense of propriety he doesn’t possess, but perhaps once did, suggests
that he wait.

In a controlled fall, he sits a few feet away from Wilson who is still laid out on his back. His arms fall out at his sides, wrists at level with his shoulders. Very faintly, he’s humming the same song from earlier under his breath, cutting himself off every now and then and then to grunt something unintelligible before slipping back into song.

At least the Soldier doesn’t have to touch him to know he’s still breathing.

“Why turn on them?” the Soldier asks when he can’t stand the droning, off-key humming any longer. “They’re Hydra. They’ll report back to their base of operations and bar you from further participation within the organization.”

“Uh, slow your roll there, Winter.” His voice sounds dauntingly unaffected by the destruction of his midsection, but the tremble at the end suggests he is in some kind of pain. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Why else would you have come out with them on this mission if you didn’t want to join their ranks?”

“To stop them. Seriously? Captain Devastating-Face would never let me be an Avenger if I captured you for those jerks.”

“Captain…”

“Captain America,” Wilson grunts, pushing himself to sit up and scooping uselessly at the soupy innards that eke out of him. “I’m sure his opinions about that face aren’t what they would have been seventy years ago. Oh, shut it.”

The Soldier expels a heavy sigh and blearily focuses his attention on digging bullet fragments out of his thigh with the Ka-Bar. Not the most sanitary method since he has to reopen closed gashes to get at the mess of flesh beneath, but he’s gone through worse.

Wilson doesn’t seem all that surprised, but why would he? Clearly he’s got issues of his own to work through, not the least of which is a busted gut.

“Wait.” He looks at Wilson and narrows his eyes. “Are you working for him?”

“Which him? This universe is of a sausage fest in case you didn’t notice. Well, with the exception of Chaplain, and isn’t she exceptional.”

The Soldier grits his teeth and flicks a larger shard of metal out of his leg. A steady trickle of gore flows from the wound. Through an impatient hiss he says, “Captain America. Are you working for him?”

“Hell, I wish. It’s just me. A lonely merc on the run, a candle in the wind—”

“I got it,” the Soldier cuts him off, nostrils flaring around an especially deep fragment he scrapes out with the Ka-Bar. “You said you’re a cutthroat. I got it the first time.”

“Man, there’s nothing for a guy’s self-esteem like being remembered by a hunky super soldier. If only Captain America would hop on the bandwagon,” Wilson says, trailing off briefly before saying, in a hushed voice, “Not as a villain, as one of the good guys!”

The Soldier stands, really at his limit with this one-sided dialogue—and especially done with
Wilson’s obvious adoration of Steve Rogers.

“You’re not leaving, are you? But we were just starting to bond!”

“I can’t stay here. We’re exposed on this bridge as it is, and we’ve got limited exits. You can make like I shot you as long as these agents stay down long enough for you to get clear. Way I see it you can still make it out of this with your life.”

He turns his back on Wilson but has to stop walking when he hears the sickening squelch of something wet. He spins around and Wilson is on his feet wiping a huge Bowie knife off on his leg.

The Soldier’s gaze drops unwillingly to the mercenary’s feet. A good portion of his intestines sits on the polished wood, cleanly severed from his body.

Flippantly, as if he hasn’t just been eviscerated, Wilson announces, “Special Assignment: TAC-team, fifteen agents on the bridge and at least double that back in Brooklyn. Our odds are better in Manhattan, and I know where all the rendezvous points are. You’re better with me, Sir.”

He can’t make himself believe in the final statement. Wilson’s conviction is alarming.

“I’ll be tiptop pretty soon,” Wilson says through a laugh that is equal parts disturbing and reassuring. He starts to fumble with another roll of gauze he produces from behind his back and mumbles, “Just gotta keep it in until my skin grows back, yep. Ain’t no thang.”

The Soldier doesn’t wait up but he does look over his shoulder to check the state of his hanger-on. Wilson walks and bandages the hole in his abdomen at the same time.

They make it off the bridge without incident and take an obscure detour through Columbus Park. The routes they take are empty this time of night, and Wilson redirects their course as needed, seemingly at random.

He offers mundane information about the units frequenting various stations like, “They’ve got Moreno. She’s not a bad shot. She’s also in a bowling league. You can’t trust someone who rolls balls in borrowed shoes for fun.”

Or, “I met Huong in the Galapagos last spring and he never called me back. I didn’t call him back either, but it’s the principle of the thing. Rejection gives me hives.”

“You don’t have those already?” the Soldier mumbles from Wilson’s left.

He’s gotten an eyeful of Wilson’s marred flesh by now. The lesions from the shotgun blast have healed over into scar tissue, and that’s only the part of him that’s visible from under the bloody gauze and his tattered uniform. He can’t imagine what the GSW itself must look like.

Wilson hesitates but says, jovial as ever, “Hives are what you get from an allergic reaction. I don’t get those, unless you could call regeneration an allergic reaction to bullets. I’d roll with that.”

The Soldier looks down instinctively at Wilson’s hand when he reaches for his side, but he just works it under the bandage and scratches his stomach.

He scans the quiet buildings around them and mutters, “Probably don’t get stage fright either.”

Wilson laughs at that and says, “Oh tin man you do have a sense of humor. I worried those Hydra douches sucked it all out of you.”
“Shut your mouth, Wilson,” he snaps, irritated. His shoulder aches bitterly where he’s been cut open. He rolls it carefully and presses his lips together around the sound of protest that dies in his throat. Pain simmers under his throat, trying to be felt. Instead of shouting himself hoarse until he’s got nothing left, he says, “Or we’ll see how long it takes your tongue to grow back.”

He shouldn’t encourage him. It was stupid to say anything in the first place.


The Soldier closes his eyes and takes a breath, the words, “Если мы выживем – я тебя сам прикончу, ей-богу,” riding the train of his exhale.

“Gosh, should that be as dreamy as it is?”

It doesn’t sound like Wilson really meant for him to hear that, but there’s no way to know without asking. The Soldier resolutely does not ask.

So he goes with a safer question: “Where are we even going, Wilson? I’m bleeding out here.”

“Still? Jeez, not much of a healing factor, is it?”

It’s spoken playfully. Wilson’s teasing him. He’s definitely going to test out the ‘forty minutes’ thing if they get a chance to stop somewhere. As it is, Wilson keeps them on the move, which is wise, considering the heat they keep narrowly avoiding. The Soldier’s started to take notice of the plain-clothes agents milling about on street corners, some of them posing as homeless.

“That’s disgraceful,” he hears himself grumbling on yet another rooftop. To Wilson, “Where have they left the civilians in all this?”

“The civilians? They’re just part of the scenery, my metal-licious friend.”

He bristles at the casual use of the word—and less at the made-up adjective. Maybe he deserves some ridicule for the hives comment earlier.

“Anyway, you asked about our destination. Penn Station’s at the end of our magical quest.”

They clear the gap between two rooftops. The Soldier dives into a roll and white hot pain burns in his shoulder where he’s torn the gash open. He messily catches himself on his metal hand and sits back on his heels. The sensation of fire under his skin begins just over his heartbeat, radiating upward and outward. His metal fingers screech against the concrete, balling up into a fist.

“What’s in Penn Station?” the Soldier grits out.

“Trains,” Wilson answers innocently, even looking a little wide-eyed from behind the mask when the Soldier glances at him. “Uh, you need a minute?”

To the ground he says, “We don’t have a minute.”

“Bullshit, we’ve got ten if you need ‘em. I’ll keep watch.”

“Wilson.” The Soldier sighs. “What’s at Penn Station?”

“I told you: trains. And a rail yard.”

“What good are those going to do us?” he asks through his teeth. “If I find out you’re taking me to them…”
“I’m not! I’ve killed and I’ve stolen for money, sure, who hasn’t? But I don’t touch what people like that would do if they got their hands on you again.”

Pushing forward to sit on his knees, the Soldier seethes, “And what’s that, Wilson? Since you seem to think you have any idea.”

Wilson fumbles at the soaked dressing around his midsection and drops it to the ground at his feet. It looks and sounds like his fallen intestines did, saturated as it is with his blood. The patch of healed skin unmistakably solid and flesh-colored, smeared amply with flecks of dried blood. His skin where the shotgun got him is raised in some places and dimpled in others. Even in the dark the puckered tissue has a glossy sheen to it. Wilson calmly lifts the mask up over his head.

His face isn’t what the Soldier expected. He imagined a manic grin or wild eyes, but Wilson just looks like his scars. He looks like trauma compressed and sealed over, compressed and sealed over.

He wonders if that’s what he looks like, minus the keloids.

“Not that I strip down for just anyone with an impressive service record, but I’ve dealt with my share of secret government sectors doing sanctioned and unsanctioned work on the Build-an-Übermensch Initiative. I’ve been that ill-gotten Übermensch.”

Wilson waves a hand at his scantly-clothed middle and then at his face. The devil-may-care, singsong tone of his voice makes less sense than usual paired with the stoic, glazed expression on his face. His smile is horrible and ironic when his lips part to show his teeth. He holds up a finger and wags it to indicate negation.

“They’re scum and I’ll die and come back twice before I hand you over to them.”

The deep furrow in his brow does look right in conjunction with his solemn rumbled promise—and it is a promise. As much as the Soldier might not fully trust in the practice, he can see it for what it is: an oath.

Wilson pulls his mask back on and says, “We good, Grumpy Cat?”

“Whatever, Wilson,” he answers, uncomfortable for several reasons but finally more in the ballpark of feeling like a human being, at least. “And if you die a third time, guess we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

Wilson guffaws. “See, it’s funny because we already crossed a bridge today!”

The Soldier groans and gets to his feet.

“As much as you talk, you still haven’t said why we’re going to Penn Station.”

“Didn’t anybody ever tell you, Sarge? Location, location, location!”

Wilson dives off the ledge of the building and the Soldier follows him. What else is he going to do?

That they’re nearing Hell’s Kitchen doesn’t go unnoticed to him, but Wilson doesn’t mention Daredevil or if he’s part of the plan for extraction—if there even is an extraction designated to go down at Penn Station. He doesn’t expect there to be one, but that’s all he can think of in association with trains and the rail yard.

On a bridge overlooking the rail yards, he lets Wilson take a few steps ahead of him toward the safety rail. He lifts the firearm from Wilson’s thigh holster and presses the muzzle to the small of his
Wilson instinctively raises both hands.

It’s a heavy piece but with nice balance: a Browning Hi-Power Practical.

“I gotta say that’s not how I hoped you’d touch my thigh if you were ever gonna touch my thigh.”

The Soldier ignores him to ask, “These hollow points, Wilson?”

“Only the best, Sarge.”

“Point-blank, .40 caliber Smith & Wesson. That take forty minutes to heal up, too?”

“Eh, twenty five.” He shrugs minutely on the other end of the Practical’s barrel. “You’re not gonna waste my ammo now that we’re here, are ya, Barnes? That’d be a bummer. And here I thought I’d won you over with my charms and feminine wiles.”

“Tell me why we’re at the Hudson Rail Yards and you get your gun back. If this is as far as your knowledge of Hydra’s plants in Manhattan goes, then this is where we part ways.”

Wilson says nothing. The Soldier frowns and takes a step back, lowering the gun as he does.

“You don’t know where they are beyond the rail yard.”

“They’re positive they’ve got you boxed in between the dozens of kill-zones they’ve got set up all around New York,” Wilson answers quickly, nervously. He gains some confidence in his position and adds, “That’s just Brooklyn and Manhattan—Queens is a deathtrap. Forget Staten Island and the Bronx. New York is sealed up tight.”

The Soldier closes his eyes around the sound of blood roaring in his ears. Wilson’s looking at him over his shoulder with his arms at his side when he opens his eyes. A few hours ago he felt prepared for events to lead him to this moment.

Now that it’s here his chest isn’t big enough to contain his fear.

Wilson makes a stammered noise in the back of his throat and jerks around to face him.

“We’re not finished yet, okay? We can put you on one of those trains, shoot anyone who comes sniffing around, and with some luck you get out of their range, at least until morning.”

The Soldier shakes his head. The Rail Yards might be a blind spot, but the surrounding five boroughs of New York are under surveillance. It’s a foxhole.

“This is the kill-zone,” he says, stomach flipping nervously as he looks out at the many parallel train tracks before them.

“What? No, it—I told you I’m not with them.”

He shakes the gun and Wilson raises his hands again. Trapped, both of them.

There’s a flurry of movement from a neighboring street. A handful of voices call out, words lost to the wind but intention very clear when they open fire. Wilson crosses in front of him and takes the shots meant for him without so much as flinching. He removes a gun from his other thigh holster.

The Soldier takes cover behind a bend in the railing where he’s likely to get the most coverage in spite of the slot-shaped holes in the iron.
“Get down, you idiot!”

“Nah, they’ll run out before I do.”

He coolly reloads his gun with a clip from a shoulder strap on his harness. The Soldier sees him catch a bullet in the neck and mounts the Browning Practical over the railing to open fire on their assailants. He can see them now: something like ten of them, in street clothes. No way to tell if they’re Hydra or if they’re locals who got roped into it.

Wilson’s right, though. They do run out of ammo.

A train far down on the tracks lights up the Rail Yards, and the Soldier yells, “Wilson!”

They clear the railing and run for the tracks. As if needing the clarification, Wilson shouts, “You want to thin them out! The readers are probably having a fit, Sarge!”

He doesn’t know what the hell Wilson’s going on about. All he knows is they need to clear the tracks to have a fighting chance. His wounded arm is weaker than it was and as one of their assailants proves in the chase, some of them do still have firepower at their disposal. But handguns aren’t the beginning and the end of what they’ve got in their arsenal. It becomes clear straight away that they’ve made a mistake when Wilson goes down.

“Sniper!” he shouts, already rolled over on his back and returning fire with his one handgun.

The Soldier rounds back for him and gets eyes on the shooter perched on a rooftop. He hands Wilson his gun back so he can shoot for both of them and drags Wilson behind a stationary train car. Wilson slumps against the it with his legs in a jumbled unnatural mess and reloads his guns.

“Huh,” Wilson states in an odd, high voice. He pokes forcefully at his leg and then stabs it curiously with his Bowie knife. Out of nowhere in a dramatic voice, Wilson bellows, “Us turning on each other—it’s what they want. I tried to warn you, Charles!”

Was that supposed to be a German accent?

“Wilson.”

The Soldier shakes him. He peers around the side of the train car.

“They’re coming.” They are, in swarms. The sniper is still laid out belly-flat on a rooftop. His heart races and he swears, “Нам пиздец.”

“Go. I’ll hold them off.” Wilson squirms pathetically against the train car to scope out the yard and shrieks, “Remember the Alamo!” as he shoots.

His feet start to move, directionless. The train they meant to use as a defensive strategy whirs by at the Soldier’s back and something happens. He imagines himself where the sniper is, sights focused on a target he can’t see anymore.

Several men run up on them. A few are trained in hand-to-hand, but they aren’t fast enough to take him. They must be of the local criminal variety. He’s able to judge that much before his vision cuts out and his head fills with the train’s hollow whistle. The sounds of fighting are peripheral, far away, removed from him. A face swims in the dark waters of his mind.

Dark brown eyes, wide and glistening, young, stare back at him. Hair a shade lighter than those eyes frames the temples, dusts across the fair eyebrows. A small round mouth smiles and shapes the word,
“Barnes!”

He screams and struggles against the arms holding him down. A bullet whizzes past his ear, weakening the grip of the hands pinning his neck to the ground. Someone sticks a gun in his face and he turns it back on them, shooting them in the shoulder. Wilson calls out, “Flashbang!”

The Soldier covers his face and grits his teeth against the cacophonous explosion. His heart feels displaced behind his ribs, like it’s floating disconnected after having finally been knocked loose.

Torn out of that place where his heart should be he hears himself sob the name, “Rebecca.”

He sucks in a panicked breath. It hiccups in his chest. Everything piles there, stacking and stacking and stacking.

More hands grab him.

Distantly he’s aware of a colorful blur moving on the rooftop behind the sniper. But the hands touching him are here, and he must break them. He must.

“—rnes, drop him!” a hoarse voice commands. “I said drop him!”

Daredevil. And Wilson on his feet.

He opens his hands before he sees what’s in them and a person-shaped mass hits the ground at his feet. The rush of the train is audible still in his ears, but the train itself is long gone.

Wilson holsters his gun. He hadn’t been pointing it at anything.

“I’m not even going to ask how you knew to bring him here, Wilson.”

*Bring him in.*

“Why does everyone expect the worst of me *all* the time?”

*Bring him in.*

*He’s been out of cryo-freeze too long.*

*Bring him in.*

*Then wipe him, and start over.*

*Bucky.*

*Bucky?*

*Who the hell is Bucky?*

He holds his head with one hand, alerting to the pain in his right arm. The utter lack of sensation in the other flowers into shooting sparks of liquid agony: tearing pain, the rending of flesh.

It isn’t real.

But the fall was real. And the pain was real.
His sister. Real.

Of course she existed—maybe still does, but to remember her. To see her face in a memory and to imagine himself as a brother, once…

“Yo, we cleaned house!”

“Is he wounded?”

It is real. All the pain, real. Now.

“Tin man? Maybe a scratch. No more firefights tonight, he should be good by morning. Say, you wouldn’t happen to privately own a train, would you?”

“Wilson, what the hell are you up to now?”

“Nothing, I swear! I was only with those Hydra dicks so I could get him out of Brooklyn.”

“There are Hydra agents in Brooklyn,” Daredevil says smoothly with quiet rage.

“Buddy, New York’s crawling with them. They know he’s here.”

The Soldier releases a breath he’s held for too long and reaches mechanically for a discarded handgun. He checks the chamber and racks the slide, silencing the conversation happening several feet away from him. His eyes scrunch closed around the pounding in his head and the ringing in his ears.

There’s nowhere to run. His body hurts and his mind is racing. They brought him here—Wilson and Daredevil; delivered him straight into an ambush.

Wilson admitted to having been part of the unit on the bridge.

“Hey, Barnes? Earth to Barnes!”

His mouth falls open around a ragged breath in and his arm moves, trigger depresses, bullet flies. He needs to see what they do when he doesn’t cooperate. He needs to see what they really intend to do with him.

Almost in tandem with the gunshot, he sees and hears Daredevil’s choked protest.

The Soldier stares openly at his gaping mouth. Wilson drops, the Soldier probably hallucinating his plaintive cry of, “Oh, the plight of secondary characters.”

Daredevil shudders and breathes a shaky, “Jesus.”

The Soldier narrows his eyes at the tilt of Daredevil’s head, vaguely in the direction of Wilson’s limp body but too high. He rotates slowly at the waist to get the remaining target in his sights. It’s curious that Daredevil doesn’t plead with him, that he makes no move to raise his hands.

Daredevil’s head snaps up at the twitch of the trigger pulling back and he leaps out of the way of the bullet. The Soldier pulls the trigger again and again, emptying the clip in no time at all. Daredevil evades the onslaught of bullets, but he can’t undo what the Soldier has deduced about him.

He crouches to take Wilson’s Practical and throws his head back into Daredevil’s when he looms behind him. It’s clear his goal is to keep the gun out of his hand, which is fine. He plucks the Ka-Bar from his belt and swings as if he intends a punch.
Daredevil blocks him with an arm. The steel catches and drags against the armor reinforcing his suit. They scramble to their feet and circle each other, the Soldier’s eyes scanning their surroundings for opportunities. Predictably, Daredevil listens for him.

The Soldier tests his theory by throwing the Ka-Bar down hard in between them with his left hand. At the same time as all that metal reorganizes itself, he uses his right to remove the pocket knife from his boot.

“Barnes, you don’t have to fight.”

The Soldier takes a step forward with the blade still folded into a safe position. Daredevil holds his ground, hands fisted at his sides.

Daredevil licks his lips and asks, sounding helpless, “Why did you shoot him?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead he lunges forward and leads with his knife hand, carefully estimating the blade’s length and detracting at the last possible second. His fist misses Daredevil’s chin by about an inch, but the point of his knife grazes the soft patch of skin beneath.

*Got you.*

Daredevil staggers back, surprised, and the Soldier follows him with less caution. He flips the knife in his flesh hand, tossing it between his hands when his strikes are sidestepped or deflected.

It flies out of his grip and over his shoulder after a brutal body kick. He takes advantage of the brief lapse in Daredevil’s defenses to get him into a clinch hold. Daredevil breaks it, only for the Soldier to use their same-direction inertia as a means of taking him down.

“You can stop! Barnes! Listen to me!”

It’s messy and he only lands a few solid hits before he’s lifted and dragged off. He thought he had more time than that. But no matter.

Wilson goes in for a sleeper hold from behind. The Soldier presses his chin down, raises his shoulders up, and gnashes his teeth against the arm trying to suffocate him.

His feet lift off the ground as Wilson straightens, screaming profanities all the while. Vision blurring and mouth flooding with blood, he reaches behind his head and breaks the fingers holding his head in place.

The ground comes up hard and fast under his knees as Wilson drops him, still shrieking. “Mother of —goddamn—Russia!”

He gags, sucks air into his lungs, and vomits. Wilson’s suit tastes…

Foul doesn’t cover it.

“Aw, come on, I do *wash* it.”

His head is still hanging low between his shoulders when something collides hard with the back of his skull.

They’re moving him when he comes to.

He waits until he’s sure he has a general schematic of the room in his mind and breaks a table and a
window trying to get away from them. They manage to secure him to a metal support beam in the center of the room for all his struggling, but it’s still just the two of them. After the hell he raised at the Rail Yards they didn’t call for an extraction team.

And he did raise enough hell to warrant the extra help.

Wilson’s mask has a bullet-shaped hole where one shiny moon-colored eye shows through. Daredevil’s calf bleeds through his suit where the Soldier cut him with a sliver of broken glass.

“What the hell happened out there? Has he been like this all night?” he hears Daredevil whisper at the door to the room.

They’re in an abandoned warehouse from the looks of it.

“No way! Sarge when I met him wouldn’t have shot me in the face for no reason. It’s like we were in a buddy movie right up until, well. Ka-blooey.”

“You’re saying something triggered him.”

“Hey can you blame him for lashing out at anything with a pulse after the night he’s had? I wish I’d known they were gonna have locals on their payroll. That was my bad.”

Daredevil sighs and says, “I wish you’d given me some warning that this was going to happen.”

“It’s not like I knew ahead of time! They put the teams together yesterday morning! I’ve seen more organization in an improvised comedy sketch.”

There’s a pause and then Wilson adds, “That is a good point—yeah, I’m…I will, jeez. The only thing different about the Rail Yards was the train. You catch what I’m saying, DD?”

There’s a moment of wordless void the Soldier can’t interpret. They’re stationed behind him, expressions unseen and so, unreadable.

“Think you might be able to convince him to stick around?”

“That’s the plan.”

“All righty,” Wilson concedes. “He’s gonna need a change of clothes if you want him to be out and about tomorrow. I’ll stop by around noon?”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“I gotta blow this Popsicle stand while it’s still only him Hydra’s looking for. You need reinforcements? He packs a lot of bang for his buck.”

Wilson sputters and then howls.

“Bang for his buck,” he squeaks. “Oh.”

“I’m good here, Wilson,” Daredevil sighs. The Soldier can hear the air of longsuffering familiarity in his resigned tone. “You’re all set.”

“Thanks, kiddo. Here, give him this when he’s more himself?”

When, not if.
“Really,” Daredevil drawls, voice warm and amused.

The Soldier leans his head into the metal at his back, wincing at the sensitive welt that hasn’t healed yet. He squints, straining his ears and searching for a reflective surface that will let him see what they’re doing. No such luck.

Not economically viable and the opposite of inconspicuous.

He can’t see what they’re doing without turning around.

“I didn’t think you were the sentimental type.”

“Just don’t forget. If this whole thing goes sideways…”

“It won’t.” There’s a shuffling of fabric and weight. “I’ll see that he gets it, Wade.”

“All right.”

Wilson mutters something else and promptly leaves without another word, to Daredevil.

A few beats pass in silence, and then Wilson is singing as he leaves: “What’ll I do when you are far away and I am blue? What’ll I do?”

The sound lessens, drawn off into the distance in time with Wilson’s retreat. As the warehouse pulses in the newfound silence, the Soldier drops his gaze from the higher point it had idled on. Daredevil walks around in front of him with an understated but present limp on his bloody side where the Soldier got him with the glass. The cut must be deep. He pressed as hard as he could.

As if he’s speaking to a friend, Daredevil says, “He can be a handful.”

The Soldier stares at the far wall.

“But he’s also spent most of the night dragging you around New York and I’m inclined to believe him when he says something happened at Hudson Yards.”

He crouches gingerly across from the Soldier and does nothing to hide that his leg hurts him.

In a clear, even voice, Daredevil asks, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Which part?” the Soldier asks wearily. “The part where I shot him in the face or the part where I realized that you’re blind?”

Daredevil’s skin shifts where his jaw tightens.

“Is that what you think you realized out there?”

The Soldier laughs mirthlessly and says, sardonically, “You think I’m confused.”

“You’re not confused.” The edges of Daredevil’s frown could carve glass. “But you’re not answering my question either.”

“Which one? You asked two.”

“You answered the first one,” Daredevil retorts with a small smile. It’s still tight at the corners, but it retains its ability to render his features boyish and well-meaning. “We’re talking.”
Daredevil folds his arms over one bended knee. The other he keeps straight.

“You knew Wilson would bounce back. He always does. Bullet in the spine, bowels falling out; doesn’t matter.

“And if anything, you pushed harder to take me down once we both knew what your game was. Question is: why let me catch on? Why not just kill me?”

The Soldier looks at the wounded calf on display. He can even make out the line he drew in Daredevil’s chin. Fragility is the essence of it.

It asks without the needless barrier of words: Why fight at all if you weren’t going to do it?

He averts his eyes and shuffles so he can sit up straighter with less pressure near the tender spot on the back of his head. They cuffed both his hands separately to the support beam, giving him more mobility but also twice the security to bypass.

“I know why you didn’t do it. Do you?”

He swallows, not sure if it’s safe to reveal his suspicion now while he’s still detained.

Biding his time he says, “Don’t suppose I’d spare you because you’re blind and Wilson because he’s crazy?”

“No not your style. And I’ll remind you,” he says in that crisp, confident tone that leaves no room for arguments, “that you’re down an arm, if you’re determined to bring my sight and Wilson’s psychological wellbeing into it.”

“Point,” he says blandly.

“You’re welcome to try again,” Daredevil tells him with a looser, calmer smile on his face. “I’ll just tell you now: if you lie to me, I’ll know.”

“What does it matter to you? Wilson did it for the hero points with Captain America,” he says, lip curling around the name, or maybe around the deliberate lie. “You’re keeping your city safe. Is that it?”

But Daredevil doesn’t react to the sneering taunts meant to get a rise out of him.

“On a day-to-day basis,” he says. “This is bigger than that. Hydra’s bigger than New York. They’re bigger than you, too.”

The Soldier scoffs. “Tell them that.”

“I know you didn’t ask for this. I know. The world knows. And Hydra, they’re not gonna get away with it. They can’t.”

“You’re gonna stop ‘em,” he deadpans, skepticism heavy in his voice, “you and Wilson and the rest of the freak outcasts with something wrong in their DNA.”

Daredevil sits still and at ease across from him.

“Oh, right, not just you.” The Soldier nods his head and says, “The police. You think you’re gonna slap a pair of cuffs on Hydra.”

“The group from the Brooklyn Bridge is already in custody. They should be processed come
morning."

The Soldier leans his head back, breath catching in his throat when he bangs his bruise for the seventh or eighth time. It already feels less tender to the touch.

“Barnes, look.” Daredevil sighs and bends his head momentarily. “It’s bad. It’s really bad for you right now. The few choices you have left, things get worse for you before they get even a little bit better. But there’s a way they can get better.”

“That’s assuming a lot about what I want.”

“You’d rather let them take you?” It’s not even a question the way Daredevil says it. He doesn’t buy it for a second and has no intention of acting like he does. “You’d rather die?”

The Soldier clenches his jaw angrily. He hears his breathing quicken before he can stifle the reaction.

“This is bigger than you,” Daredevil says again, voice low and earnest, lined with compassion. “It’s bigger than you and you can’t fight it by yourself.”

He hears Daredevil’s hard swallow.

“You don’t have to fight it by yourself.”

The Soldier relaxes his hands and breathes.

With the air of finality to suggest that this is the last time he’ll ask, Daredevil says, “Why did you fight us?”

He keeps his mouth shut and Daredevil bows his head forward for a three-count, shaking it morosely as he pushes onto his feet. The Soldier watches him approach the support beam on his right side and tenses up at the brush of knuckles on his wrist. Daredevil undoes both manacles chaining him to the metal beam and leaves both cuffs attached to the pillar.

“I can’t force you to accept my help,” he says somberly. “And I can’t hold you here against your will.”

The Soldier stands to his feet and looks at Daredevil who starts to walk away. He closes his eyes, hoping—and doesn’t that feel like a mistake—that he’s making the right call.

“You’re right. There was nowhere to go. I thought if I made you, you’d call for backup.”

“You still think we’re Hydra,” Daredevil says, stunned disbelief evident in the slack line of his mouth.

“You said things are bad. They are.” He rubs his flesh fingers over his forehead and scrubs more purposefully at the tacky blood and dirt there. “You ID me on the docks and the next day Hydra’s on my trail. I let Wilson take me to the Rail Yards and we get jumped where he says we won’t be.”

Daredevil appears to consider this and says, “He mentioned the train may have had something to do with it.”

“Just reminded me of something,” he hedges. “It’s nothing.”

“Okay. Then I believe you.”

The Soldier sighs, “What now?”
“We’ve got a few hours until dawn. Our guy at the 27th is working on rounding up the remaining agents with Wilson’s aid.”

“Wilson? I heard him say he was clearing out.”

“Hell’s Kitchen, not New York. He needed to get to the precinct before word got out about our connection to you. Assuming he got to Sergeant Mahoney in time, his information as to the whereabouts of the other agents involved will be invaluable.”

“And after they’re processed in the morning, however many of them you get…what happens after that?”

“We take them to trial.”

“You’d need Wilson’s and my testimonies to make anything stick against them, and even then, a court’s more likely to convict us.”

Wincing, Daredevil says, “I did say things had to get worse before they could get better.”

Nerves flutter in the Soldier’s stomach.

“You want to take me to trial?”

“As long as you run from this, they will always find a way to make your life hell because of it.”

He can think of a million reasons not to willingly walk into a courthouse, the least of those being that they’d take his arm. It’s not really his, fair enough, but it’s attached to him—has been part of him long enough to feel as natural to him as any other part of his body.

“It’s a lot to ask, I know it is. But the only way you can get out ahead of them is if you’re cleared.”

“If I’m cleared,” the Soldier repeats dourly. “If I’m cleared.”

“You will be,” Daredevil enunciates.

“Here? At an international trial? What if Russia decides they’d like a piece of me? Hell, Hydra goes back to Schmidt, Zola, the Nazis—maybe Germany will want a taste.”

“I can get an attorney to represent you.”

An ambulance siren whines outside, something like a block away. It passes them up.

“You don’t have to decide now,” Daredevil tells him, reassures him. “It could take months, a year, for their case to hit the courts.”

The Soldier looks down and crosses his arms over his chest. He sucks in a breath at the tearing pain in his shoulder. It’s less now than what it was, but stitches would help the wound to stay closed.

“I can bring someone to look at that for you, too, if you want. In the morning.”

“You expect me to hole up in this warehouse for months, a year?”

“It’s not home,” Daredevil concedes with a shrug. “But it’s off the map—a holdover from the Russians back when they were still in Hell’s Kitchen.”

The Soldier doesn’t ask what happened to the Russians.
“What are you going to do?”

“I need to be out there. Wilson’s going to need backup if Hydra’s not already onto him. You should rest. I’ll send my friend to look at your shoulder when she can and the coast is clear.”

“How’m I gonna know when it’s her?” he asks uncertainly.

The thought lingers in his head that he’s also been examined by countless, nameless faces in the past without complaint. It’s different now. Now he has a choice.

“I’ll tell her to knock twice, then once, then twice. Her name’s Claire.”

The Soldier taps out that pattern on his thigh with his thumb, remembering it.

“When you’re fixed up you’re gonna wanna talk to Foggy Nelson at Nelson & Murdock. There’ll be a woman there at the desk. Her name’s Karen Page. She’ll get him for you if he’s not in, but he should be in.”

He blinks. Daredevil detects his hesitation, which seems bizarre now that he can’t tell how he’s being monitored if it’s not by sight.

“That is, if you decide to come in. I hope you will.”

“You sure this place is secure?” he asks instead of pledging his word one way or the other.

“I can’t guarantee it’s the safest place in Hell’s Kitchen, but if you do get cornered, guerilla tactics work to the advantage of the one over the many. The fourth window from the backdoor is the cleanest way in and out if you need to run. Circuit breaker’s on the southeast wall. You get unfriendlies in here, yank the main line. It’s on the bottom of the breaker box.”

The Soldier looks in that direction and locates the metal box protecting the switchboard. He flicks his eyes up toward the ceiling and slowly brings his gaze back to Daredevil.

“The lights aren’t on now.”

“Oh.” Daredevil presses his lips together. “Oh, that’s right. They wouldn’t be.” Self-consciously he asks, “Do you want them on?”

“No.” He shrugs, wondering if Daredevil can sense the gesture—if he hears it, or how. “They’d just draw attention.”

“You call. Oh, and I’m…” He turns and walks toward a table near the exit door. “—supposed to give you this.”

He turns and holds the Ka-Bar taken from the fight on the bridge, tipping it sideways until it’s laid out horizontally between his hands.

“Wilson,” the Soldier says without moving to accept it.

“He thought you’d want to have it. And,” Daredevil adds, reluctantly but realistically, “in case you do run into trouble you should have a weapon. A knife’s quieter than a gun and doesn’t run out of bullets.”

When he still doesn’t move forward to accept it, Daredevil says, “You can take it.”

“Just leave it on the table.”
Daredevil doesn’t argue with his request. He doesn’t react to it at all except to do exactly what’s been asked of him.

The Soldier leaves the circuit breaker untouched and sits in the rafters with the Ka-Bar cradled in his right hand. It’d be a waste of resources to cut the power prematurely, and doing it at all would alert the enemy to his position. It’s better if they do come in and light the place up. Let them search with the full aid of artificial light while he slips out. He’s already found the broken window Daredevil designated as well as a weak spot in the roof he can use as a last resort.

Of course, they could come in through the window Daredevil mentioned. If they do that at least he has the Ka-Bar. He stays up a good few hours studying the ridges of the handle, the contoured grooves in the steel, and the serrated teeth near the base of the blade.

He can only speak for his experience, but the potential conflict in the city doesn’t bleed into the warehouse. It’s all quiet.

At dawn he closes his eyes to chase sleep and wakes an unchecked amount of time later at the sound of two knocks followed by one and then two. He sits up against the wall he’d slept against, his body a few steps ahead of his mind but overall, conscious. A woman walks through the entrance Wilson and Daredevil had carried him in through. She’s wearing scrubs under a leather jacket and has a sizeable case of medical supplies, he supposes, in one hand.

“Hello?”

He jumps down, stumbling briefly at the few aches and pains that his sleep didn’t cure. She jumps, turning toward rather than away from the sound of his feet on the concrete.

“Damn it,” she mutters. “Do you know who I am?”

“Claire,” he says.

That he answers correctly does nothing to soothe her nerves. She nods once jerkily and gestures to the chairs next to the table he broke last night.

“Come on. I gotta get back to work after this.”

He goes obediently. After resisting everything and everyone in the past twenty four hours, it doesn’t register in his brain as failure to give, here. He shrugs out of one jacket sleeve and hesitates on the remaining sleeve that hides his metal arm.

“She told me about it.” Her voice is soft but curt, notes of compassion riding alongside the current of smooth professionalism. She watches her tools as she sanitizes them instead of his face. “It’s okay if you leave it on, but you don’t have to.”

In the interest of downplaying his discomfort, he does take them off. He folds the shirt and jacket, setting them on the ground in between his feet once they’re neatly piled on top of one another.

There’s flaky blood decorating his wrist and knuckles, a fresh oozing supply of it at his shoulder, and an angry abrasion up the inside of his forearm. He hadn’t taken stock of his injuries outside of just knowing what hurt and why. The bullet hole in his jeans is tattered and red. He probes two fingers through it to test the severity of the wound. Claire sees him checking it and locks eyes with him.

“Knife wound or GSW?”

“The latter.”
She nods and asks, “Through and through?”

He shakes his head. She makes a face that’s the opposite of thrilled.

Perhaps to remedy the emotion behind that expression (not that he cares at all what kind of face she makes) he tells her, “I already dug the fragments out.”

Claire gives him a blank look, hands stilling. She blinks.

“Wow you’re just like him.”

He doesn’t engage her beyond that, grateful for her preference of dutiful silence. Every once in a while if he winces at the tug of sutures in his skin she’ll mumble or hiss back a “sorry”, depending on how bad the sting is.

She can always tell when it’s a bad one. Even if he sits statue-still and it’s just a twitch in his jaw, she’s attuned to what hurts him and what won’t.

“It looks better now than it must have last night,” she says.

He looks up from his lap to her face. He can’t tell if she’s trying to start a conversation or if she’s just the type of person who talks to herself while she works. She keeps her gaze fixed on the jagged, angry streak of red bisecting his shoulder.

“Is your leg okay? If you’re in pain, I can give you something.”

“I’m fine.”

She flicks her gaze to meet his eyes, fingers slowing and then stopping. He averts his eyes.

“I don’t need anything.”

Not believing him but doing nothing to push she says, “Okay.”

Her stitches are nice—evenly spaced and holding him together. She wraps a bandage around her neat, completed handiwork and points to his leg. He takes off his boots, stands to his feet, and starts to undo the button at his jeans.

“Uh,” she starts to say before shaking her head and waving her hand. “Yeah, sure, fine. That’s fine.”

He resumes disrobing, hearing her mutter under her breath, “What’s another one for the collection?”

The Soldier sits with his injured leg facing her. He leans toward his clothes and slowly positions the Ka-Bar on top of the pile for easy access. His gaze roves from the doors to the windows to the rafters before refocusing on Claire. She’s watching him with her eyes widened around mild alarm.

“We should be safe here.” She shrugs a bit ruefully. “As safe as anyone could be in a warehouse in the middle of Hell’s Kitchen.”

Something about her tone is stretched tight with tension. He looks around at their surroundings again and studies the stern concentration in her face and hands. Even when her attention isn’t split between her medical kit and the red tears in his body, she doesn’t glance around at the room they’re in.

“Are you afraid of me?” he asks before he can think better of it.

He’s embarrassed as soon as the question’s past his lips. The clear amusement in the softened line of
her mouth calms him.

*It’s foolish to look at a person and feel that,* something integral and wrong inside him clamors. *She’s just a mark who hasn’t played you yet.*

She saves him from having to dignify his senseless paranoia with a reply.

“You haven’t given me a reason to be.”

There’s nothing in him that wants to challenge that statement.

“You know who I am?” he asks with his voice at half its normal speaking volume.

Claire tapes a clean square of gauze to his thigh and nods her head. She says, “He told me.”

He nods his head.

“Can you tell me about him?”

She smiles, thrown by his curiosity and whatever it reveals about him. Her eyebrows lift into symmetrical, disbelieving arches.

With a faint chord of conspiracy in her tone she muses, “Like what?”

He bends to retrieve his clothes and chooses a low-risk question that she’s most likely to answer: “How’d you meet?”

“I found him in a dumpster,” she answers pleasantly. She focuses on cleaning her instruments even as he pauses with one foot in his jeans. “Half-dead, I might add.”

“You patch him up?”

He stands to get his jeans up around his hips and works his shirt on carefully around the fresh dressing on his shoulder. She waits until he’s slipping the jacket back on to tell him, “On a pretty regular basis.”

“That’s…”

*Badass, amazing, impressive?*

“…nice,” he finishes lamely, cringing at himself.

*Nice.*

Claire, because she’s a doctor, clearly, and knows how to be merciful and blunt at the same time, just quirks a tiny smile at him and says, “He’s not ordinary, but he’s just a guy.”

He lets that sink in and slowly laces up his boots before sheathing the Ka-Bar in his boot. The blade is cold against his skin.

“Well, so am I. Thanks,” he thinks about not adding, “Claire.”

She hums noncommittally and closes the medical kit before also standing to her feet.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I hope I don’t see you again.”

It takes him a few seconds too long to figure out which way is the wrong way.
“You know, all banged up and covered in blood that doesn’t look like it all came from you,” she clarifies.

He nods and says, “Oh.”

*What if I wasn’t a mess?* he thinks blearily, hating himself the second that thought clears from his mind.

She sighs and starts to go, saying over her shoulder, “I’ve only met Foggy the one time, but he seems nice, if you were wondering.”

A doctor, kind *and* gorgeous. Claire.

He paces through his agitation in her absence watching the shadows change. At about 1300 hours the garage door slinks open. In walks a tall man in a gray hoodie with fragrant Mexican food cradled delicately in both arms.

“Honeyyyy, I’m hooooome.” Wilson’s voice rings out. He sets the cargo down and pulls the door shut with a metallic bang. “Tin man, you around?”

He steps out from behind a dented cabinet without replying verbally. His stomach growls at the suggestion of food. Wilson notices him as he’s straightening out with the food in one hand and a pile of clothes in the other.

“Hey, buddy. Hungry?”

The Soldier crosses his arms over his chest, not saying anything.

“Right, right, clean clothes first. I hear ya. Who can focus on food when you’re covered in blood and guts? I mean, *I* can do it, but only when I *need* to, you know?”

“Wilson, the clothes.”

“Yep!” He tosses the bundled pile in a high arc through the air so it’s easy to catch. “Do you like tacos? I can always go back out for something else, but they give out these little hand wipes when you order stuff you eat with your hands, so I figured…”

The Soldier starts to tune him out and shrugs out of his jacket again, letting it drop into a heap on the floor. He pulls his shirt off over his head and peruses the choices at his disposal. The black shirt looks nice, sleeves and all.

A roll of tube socks falls out from between the one pair of jeans and three shirt choices. He holds it up and looks down at his feet, setting that and the shirt aside to pluck the Ka-Bar from his boot and the boots off his feet. He shucks his flimsy, worn socks and dons the new ones, flexing his toes with nothing shy of pure relief.

“Um, so in lieu of a real shower, you know—not that I’m saying you’re funky or anything.”

“What?”

Wilson waves a few squares of disinfectant hand towels in explanation.

“Oh. I guess.”

Wilson tosses those over, too. His distance is also appreciated, though that fact goes unsaid.
He opens a packet and scrubs his face first then down his neck, tearing into a second for his armpits. Wilson ignores him to set the food down against the wall. It’s a strategically sound location that he chooses, out of view from the windows and near a low-hanging pipe that feeds up into the rafters.

The Soldier pulls the black shirt on over his head and pokes his arms one at a time through the rolled up sleeves. He pushes his unbuttoned jeans down his legs and looks up at Wilson’s muffled squawk. The Soldier looks down at the pool his jeans make around his ankles and rolls his eyes at Wilson’s back, kicking them off his feet.

“Um, so I’ll see you around, Sarge. Hopefully when all this is over and you’re not running for your life anymore.”

He looks at the bag of food on the floor and steps into the jeans. They’re crisp and new against his legs. And they hug him in a few choice areas that he’s deeply suspicious of.

“You got all this for me.”

“Well yeah.” Wilson ambiguously waves a hand. He half turns to look over his shoulder before facing the Soldier. “I don’t know when the last meal you had was. You’ve gotta have fuel to power the machine, right?”

The Soldier studies what he can see of Wilson’s face under the hoodie. He looks cheerful in general but bewildered to be watched so closely. Wilson’s mouth opens, closes, then compresses into a thin line.

“What do you really get out of helping me?”

“Aw not this again. You don’t still think I’ll flip on you, do you? I got you tacos and a sponge bath. We had like, thirteen pages of interaction. Granted, a lot of that was continuous action sequences.” He weighs his hands. “If we’re not bros by now…”

“Wilson,” he sighs. “Cut the inner monologue and just tell me.”

Wilson looks shocked at something he’s said, but the surprised wrinkles in his forehead smooth out. He glances away and then back, one hand gripping indecisively at the top of his hoodie like he can’t decide whether to keep his face hidden or to show it. Ultimately he does keep it hidden. His hand’s retreat into the hoodie’s front pocket is almost bashful.

“When they offered me the job I was gonna do it,” he says.

He had owned that much in previous conversations, but to hear it spoken independently of separate terms and circumstances changes its sound. Wilson sounds…ashamed.

“They only told us who the target was after we’d agreed to do it. Tried to turn some of the folks on the unit with me—I could get away with it. They thought I was messing with them: talking ‘nonsense’,” he says around a pair of air quotes, “just to get on their nerves.”

He sighs and points at the bag of food.

“You should eat before it gets cold.”

The Soldier kneels in front of the bag, takes a wrapped object from the top, and sits with his back against the wall. He tears the foil from it and eats, flicking his eyebrows at Wilson.

“Oh man this is one of those make-it-or-break-it moments, isn’t it?” Wilson laughs, but the tightness
in his mouth is evident without the veil of his mask. “Where you decide if I’m one of the good guys or not. Right?”

He gets distracted devouring the shredded beef taco in his hands but shrugs eventually at Wilson’s expectant glance.

“I just prefer to know now rather than later if you’re going to be calling in to collect a debt.”

“Ah.” Wilson deflates and flashes a smile. “None of that from me, Sarge. No favors.”

The Soldier balls up the empty foil and reaches for another taco. He holds it up as an offering, but Wilson waves him off.

“You didn’t say why you changed your mind about the mission.”

His mouth twists unhappily at the memory of the last mission he had. He hides his frown by taking another bite.

“I just…” Wilson kicks at the ground with one foot. “I need to be better than the things I’ve done.”

He looks everywhere but at the Soldier. Not ironically, he adds, “Not that saving a life here and there makes me a hero.” He holds up his hand, the first two fingers crossed and on display. “One day, though. Holdin’ hope till then.”

“That explains why you didn’t kill anyone last night.”

“Aww, tin man, you noticed?” Wilson holds his hands to his chest like his heart might jump out otherwise. “You went out of your way not to, so I thought I should make an effort. And well, I’m getting help from this really cool superhero spider-dude who gets kind of peeved if I take a life. He’s like a sober companion, but for killing. With an ass that just won’t quit.”

The Soldier chokes.

“Well if that’s all,” Wilson sings.

He starts to move toward the garage door and the Soldier jumps to his feet, sealing the remains of his second taco up in the foil and throwing it back in the bag.

“Wait.”

Wilson stutters to a stop. The Soldier walks around to stand in front of him. He gets nervous and says, instead of what he initially intended, “I’m sorry I shot you. It wasn’t personal.”

“DD read me in last night after we got the rest of those assholes off the street.” Wilson nods. “He told me what you told him. It’s all good, tin man. B-t-dubbs, no civilians were hurt. The homeless you asked about got stashed somewhere out of the way. I made ‘em say where.”

The Soldier feels himself smirk.

“I wanna know how?”

“With my words,” Wilson answers innocently with an incongruously wicked smile. “Nah, I’m kidding. I used my fists. They’re alive, though, so it’s kosher. Spidey can’t fault me a few broken teeth, right?”

“I wouldn’t,” he says with a small shrug. “Look, I wanted to apologize.”

“I made a crack about your skin looking like hives last night. It was lousy of me.”

“Buddy, you don’t have to—”

“I’m sorry.”

His mouth flaps, eyes wide and surprised. He says, “Oh.”

The Soldier slips his hands in his back pockets. Wilson’s expression closes off and then opens to reveal a beaming smile.

“Did we just become best friends?”

At his bristling response, Wilson just barks a laugh and raises his hands.

“Jest, I jest. How cool would that be? Hash tag: my otp is canon.”

The Soldier grumbles under his breath and walks back around to the bag of Mexican food.

“You’re welcome to stay and eat.”

“It’s like I fell asleep and woke up in a fluff piece.”

Wilson measures his intake against the Soldier’s appetite and between them they finish the bag. It was a lot. He probably could have eaten it by himself.

“You don’t know where Nelson & Murdock is, do you?”

Wilson gives him a solemn look that brightens by degrees.

“Sure I do.”

“Our mutual acquaintance told me to go there.”

“Hmmm.”

The Soldier waits and tilts his head, raising his eyebrows at Wilson after a spell.

“Can you take me?”

Wilson’s faint smile drops. He asks, “Did you really just ask me that question?”

He slaps his own face with his flesh hand and growls, “Wilson.”

“Sorry, sorry, my brain went mushy for a second there. Nelson & Murdock, yes, I can escort you… I…we’ll go there. To Nelson & Murdock. Oh, before we do that, maybe you ought to ditch the jacket. Because bloodstains. Yeah. Those pockets should be deep enough to hide your hand.”

After a quick test of that theory, he parts with the jacket he lifted from a Laundromat way back in D.C.

He half expects some disastrous event to derail their quest, but they take straightforward streets and pass multiple security and traffic cameras. Wilson must be confident they got most if not all the Hydra agents last night. It’s almost casual how they walk side by side, each of them in attire that somehow swallows the parts of them that others would thoughtlessly describe as deformity.
The building they stop at is simple, sturdy: a law office fashioned out of tan- and red-colored bricks not unlike the tan stones of the lily pool in the Brooklyn Botanical Garden. He looks up at the deep red of the pillars on either side of the door and reads the sign affixed on the left.

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“Don’t be a stranger, tin man.”

“Thank you, Wilson,” he says reflexively.

A slow smile stretches across Wilson’s face. He salutes and continues on down the sidewalk, finally disappearing around a corner. The Soldier sucks in a deep breath and faces the door to the practice.

He follows the entryway into a corridor that leads to an office and lets himself in. The doors are unlocked and there doesn’t seem to be a functioning lobby.

A woman sitting at a desk looks up at him. The laptop in front of her casts a bluish glow on her face that fades when she stands.

“Can I help you, Sir?”

His mind blanks temporarily. She tilts her head at him. Blonde hair falls over her shoulder.

“Nelson,” he blurts out. “Foggy Nelson, I’m…have an appointment.”

“Oh, Mr. Barnes, isn’t it?” She smiles kindly at him. It’s a lot for his brain to process. “I’m Karen, hi. Foggy’s expecting you. I’ll take you to him.”

He goes with her, fingers twitching restlessly in his pockets.

“Foggy, he’s here.”

This can’t actually be happening to him.

But it is, apparently, because Karen waves to Nelson as she’s pulling the door shut behind her, and the Soldier is being offered a seat that he doesn’t take.

He bounces slightly on his heels. Nelson stands across from him and perches his knuckles on the desk. He looks composed, like he’s been working.

“I…”

Nelson gives him a few moments to come up with something and offers a glass of water when nothing comes.

“Sure, please.”

He sits once Nelson’s ducked out of the office. The door stays open behind him when he returns. It helps to have a quick exit available.

“Matt said you had information about the seventy people the cops picked up last night all over New York. Was he right?”

“Who’s Matt?” he asks slowly.

“He’s my partner—Nelson and Murdock. I’m Nelson. He’s Murdock.”
The Soldier says, “Huh,” and downs the water.

“Some more?” Nelson asks, sounding more concerned than he looks.

He considers asking him to bring the whole water cooler. That’s how dry his mouth is.

“I was on the bridge last night. They were there for me. All of them were there for me.”

Nelson keeps his expression neutral.

“Can you say why?”

“Depends.”

“On?”

“A guy I talked to last night said he could find me a lawyer.” The Soldier flicks his gaze to Nelson’s. “And then he dropped your name.”

Nelson’s jaw drops open. He says, with a funny little vein showing on his forehead, “That guy wasn’t by any chance wearing a ridiculous maroon-colored costume, was he?”

His eyebrows furrow at Nelson’s oddly accurate question. Nelson strides out of the room in a flustered whirlwind, muttering to himself. The Soldier follows at a distance and hangs back in the doorway to Nelson’s office.

“Did he say when he was coming back?” he hears Nelson ask Karen in the next room.

The door to the offices swings open. He sees the white cane before he hears an unmistakably familiar voice ring out: “Oh hell, Foggy, I was going to tell you.”

“Sometimes I just hate you,” Nelson grits out through his teeth.

Karen snorts from her desk. Both Nelson and Murdock, apparently, turn their heads in her direction. She holds her hands up in a vague ‘well?’ gesture.

“She threw her hands up. Because you’re frustrating and disappear all the time when you’re needed.”

“Foggy, let’s just…take this to your office, okay?”

Nelson gives Murdock a dark look, turns a softer glance on the Soldier, and waves for him to go with them back into the office. The Soldier crosses his arms, his metal arm passing over the flesh one, and waits leaned up against the doorframe.

“After you, Murdock.”

He smiles, chagrined, and leads the way with his cane held straight and close to his body. Nelson closes the door behind the three of them and turns to the Soldier.

“First of all, I apologize for my outburst. That was not directed at you. It was directed at you, for being a genius and not telling me how you met our client.”

“Client?” the Soldier interrupts him to ask.

“Of course client,” Murdock tells him. “If you’ll have us. It just seems appropriate.” Turning to
Nelson says, “I was going to tell you just now when I walked in. You know I’ve been down at the precinct all morning. I’ve just come from the courthouse. I couldn’t really explain the situation over the phone.”

“What were you doing at the courthouse?” Nelson inquires, anger forgotten briefly.

“Securing a judge for the trial.”

“Who’d you get?”

“Judge Ayers.”

The Soldier looks between them, failing to grasp the reason behind Nelson’s apparent relief.

“Mahoney’s uncle, nice. Good. Good work—I…I’m still irked at you, but good work.” He nods at the Soldier and repeats, for his benefit, “This is good news.”

“With any luck he’ll take your case, too.”

Now Nelson looks between them.

“Uh, why would Judge Ayers take…that is, why would we be representing him in…you said,” he remarks dully in the Soldier’s direction. His eyes close around a realization he clearly dislikes having had. “Oh, Barnes. Barnes. That’s why your name looked so familiar. Oh God Matt you didn’t tell me any of this last night.”

“It was four in the morning, Foggy. I told you I was bringing in a big case.”

“I can go,” the Soldier murmurs.

Nelson and Murdock turn toward him, the former with hardening resolve and the latter with quiet confidence in their chances. Nelson sighs heavily, knocks one hand on his desk, and straightens out.

With a strained smile he muses, “Can we start over? Foggy Nelson. My partner, Matt Murdock.”

The Soldier swallows a mouthful of air. Several muscles in his face twitch at the same time. He pushes the strangled sensation in his throat down.

Bucky?

Bucky.

Who the hell is—

“Bucky Barnes.”

Murdock expels a breath. The Soldier—Bucky, in another life if not in this one—raises an eyebrow at him before turning it to Nelson.

“Is it just him, or do you have an alter ego, too?”

Nelson huffs a laugh and shakes his head, says, “What you see is what you get.”

“Does Karen know you’re…?” Daredevil goes unspoken.

“No,” Murdock answers with some measure of reluctance. “Not yet.”
“I won’t tell her.”

He hesitates but says, bowing his head slightly, “Thank you.”

“Speaking of telling,” Nelson says a bit grimly. “If we’re doing this, you’ve got to be totally one hundred percent honest with us. Can you do that?”

“Anything I forget to say’s probably been leaked in a document to the whole world by now anyway.”

Nelson opens his mouth. Murdock tucks his chin into his chest.

“Right,” the former mumbles. “That’s a yes then. Good. We can start.”

Murdock gestures to one of the two empty seats in front of the desk.

“Please sit, Mr. Barnes.”

“Start from the beginning.”

“…Which one?”

“The Brooklyn Bridge,” Murdock provides when Nelson flounders for a way to rephrase. “If you like, you can start with Manhattan.”

It’s eerie that Murdock can’t see him with how pinned and exposed that sightless gaze makes him feel.

“I have a question, before I do.”

Murdock nods agreeably and replies with, “Sure.”

“That first night with the kid in Lenox Hill and the drug deal by the river, you said you recognized me. How?”

“I heard the plates shifting in your arm.”

He looks down at his arm and curls his metal fingers into a fist. Murdock lays his hand out on his knee and mimics the action. The Soldier deftly uncurls one finger after the other beginning with his pinky and working outward to his thumb. Murdock fans his fingers out in an identical fashion and stalls over the thumb that stays stationary against his palm.

Fascinated, the Soldier turns his palm over and flutters his fingers rhythmically. Murdock grins and shakes his head. Nelson mumbles, “Show off.”

“In Lenox Hill?” he asks.

“That was where I picked up on it.” Murdock nods. “You left Manhattan that night, didn’t you? I kept an ear out for you and didn’t hear you anywhere.”

“I went back to the bridge and crossed into Brooklyn for the day.”

“You spent the night on the bridge?” Nelson asks, sounding affronted for him.

As if it’s some consolation he adds, “I didn’t sleep.”
Nelson looks at Murdock, who lifts his head in acknowledgement. The former returns his gaze to the Soldier’s and his face is sincere.

“No client of ours is going to not-sleep on a bridge.”

“Foggy,” Murdock starts to protest.

“We can find you suitable accommodations if you’re amenable to us moving you around.”

He thinks about the dull ache in his lower back and the warehouse with its broken windows and reliably destructible circuit breaker.

“I don’t really have anything,” he answers in a small voice. He flexes his metal hand again. “Just this, and the Ka-Bar Wilson left me.”

“Ka-Bar? Did he say Ka-Bar? Who’s Wilson?”

“It’s fine, Foggy.”

“It’s in my boot,” he tells Nelson, cool as can be.

“Oh-kay, well. We’re going to need rules about that, probably. Just for future reference.”

“Wilson’s an ally,” Murdock supplies helpfully.

And because a part of his mind can’t help but think of Wilson’s bemoaning the ‘plight of secondary characters’, the Soldier adds, “He’s good.”

“Right, okay. Please just, start from the fight on the bridge.”

The Soldier takes a steadying breath.

“It was night by then. There were seven of them, that I could see…”

Chapter End Notes

Дети – children
Мудила – (the definition Liza gave me that must be quoted in its entirety) an unpleasant person known to fuck other people up with no regard towards their feelings or and well-being. Not a fool, not a weirdo, not ugly, just a human being that irks you to no end, because of their behaviour, which is not evil per se, but harmful and thoughtless, disrespectful and, at times, disgusting.

Блядь – shit
Если мы выживем - я тебя сам прикончу, ей-богу. – if we survive this, I’ll finish you myself, I swear to God
Нам пиздец – we’re fucked

The title is inspired by this quote from Thoreau’s Walden: “Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influence of the earth.”

“What’ll I Do” is a song written by Irving Berlin
The line Deadpool quotes when he gets shot is from X-Men: First Class

Brownie points if you know where the super secret knock comes from~*~*~
Drink the Drink

Chapter Summary

The Soldier works with Nelson, Murdock, and Karen to build his case. He and the team deal with the repercussions of dangerous people being after him.

Chapter Notes

I suck so much at summaries. It's an illness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Soldier tells them about the fight and about Wilson’s unexpected assistance—the series of events that allowed the alliance to come to pass and what little he knows of Wilson’s orders beyond just grabbing him on the bridge. He tells them how they worked their way to Penn Station and about Wilson’s plan to get him on a train, glossing over the exchange on the rooftop when he had to stop and Wilson showed him his face.

“We got to the Rail Yards. I threatened him with his gun. I thought…it’d be safer for us to go our separate ways. That’s when we got ambushed.”

He goes through the details of the fray, talking around the gaps in his memory. Nelson scribbles a note when he pauses to gather his thoughts and the Soldier stammers. They think he’s lying, maybe.

“Records,” Nelson explains when the Soldier’s gaze lingers on the pen in his hand. “We can get a timestamp on the night’s events when we cross-reference with the train schedule. That’s all.”

The Soldier heaves a sigh, trying to be quiet about it but probably not succeeding.

“Do we need to take a break?” Murdock asks him.

“I can keep going.”

“Hey I bet you could push through all of it,” Nelson cuts in gently. “That’s not the point. We can stop for a bit. It’s not a problem.”

“No just…let me get through it. We’re almost to the end.”

Nelson pulls a face like he regrets his acquiescence but waves a hand for the Soldier to continue anyway. He finishes the story and neither lawyer interjects at the places where his voice fails him. It fails him frequently.

It’s only once he’s talked himself up to the present moment when Nelson asks, seemingly unable to help himself, “You shot him in the eye? How does that work?”

Together he and Murdock reply, “Accelerated healing factor.”
Nelson glances back and forth between them with narrowed eyes. He says, “That makes sense?”

The Soldier spares a thought for what Wilson had said about sanctioned and unsanctioned government projects. He doesn’t speak of it, having nothing frivolous to say about Wilson’s “ill-gotten” constitution. Murdock guides them away from that topic once the Soldier’s unwillingness to elaborate becomes clear to him.

“He found out I was blind in the middle of a fight.”

“Jesus,” he says, turning to Murdock and then back to the Soldier. “That’s a first.” He looks back to Murdock. “Is that a first?”

“You could have killed me,” Murdock says, nodding, with a secretive pride that throws both men in the room with him for a loop. “Oh come on, it was impressive. And it’s not like you were actually trying to kill me.”

“You are so weird,” Nelson mutters at the desk.

Murdock shrugs. The Soldier pours more water from the pitcher Nelson brought in halfway through the story and drinks. He expects to have a sense of relief after getting through the account, but his skin itches around uncertainty and paranoia. Murdock, however he’s doing it, picks up on his discomfort and brings up an equally challenging dilemma that they haven’t spoken of since they sat down.

“I’ve been thinking about where you could stay.”

“When did you have time?” Nelson sputters. “Oh that’s right you were there for most of what happened. Let’s hear it then.”

Smiling faintly and turning to the Soldier, Murdock says, “The last time a client of ours was in a bad way with bad people, she stayed at my place. Nobody will look for you there. I’m rarely even around.”

“You trust me in your apartment, alone.”

“Well when he puts it like that, Matt.”

“Foggy,” Murdock sighs. “You remember Karen’s situation when we met her.”

“What’s Karen got to do with it?” The Soldier wrinkles his eyebrows. “Wait, she was your client?”

“Not that it’s relevant,” Nelson says, narrowing his eyes at Murdock. He points a more neutral glance at the Soldier. “But yes, she was. And just so you don’t get the wrong idea, she was cleared of all charges.”

He has half a mind to ask because he’s curious, but he keeps it stowed away for later. It makes his skin crawl thinking about the masses who’ve learned intimate things about him without having even met him. If it’s ever his place to ask, he’ll ask Karen and leave it with her to decide if he deserves the answer.

Murdock speaks through their approaching silence again: “We could set you up at the VA if you’re not inclined to hole up with me. They might have better resources.”

“And more people,” the Soldier adds flatly.
Nelson leans forward and says over his folded hands, “If you’re worried about exposure, there are some strings we could pull to get you full anonymity—”

“You like our chances, do you? They probably know already that you’ve taken my case, especially if you went out of your way to handpick a judge,” he directs in Murdock’s direction. “We need to take precautions to minimize the fallout that’s going to come when Hydra decides to make another move on me.”

“You think they’d be brazen enough to try again?” Murdock asks with his eyebrows raised over his glasses. “All of New York’s looking for them.”

“I guess you never heard their motto,” the Soldier muses humorlessly. “Chop off a head, two more…” He waves a hand tiredly. “Et cetera.”

“He’s got a point, Matt.” Nelson looks at the Soldier. “Bright side, the water pressure at Matt’s is aces.”

The Soldier blinks.

“It’s true,” Murdock says after a moment.

“Sure, fine.”

“So now that that’s settled,” Foggy claps his hands together. “Should we also talk about the other thing? The ‘Daredevil’ thing. Matt?”

Murdock tips his head to one side like he’s not sure what Nelson’s talking about. Nelson rolls his eyes. The Soldier had been suspicious of a friendship between the two of them with the natural ease in their rhythm together. Nelson’s air of longsuffering affection in confluence with Murdock’s relaxed candor confirms for him that such a friendship does exist.

Rationally speaking, it shouldn’t change anything. Irrationally speaking, their conversational volley is worlds more amusing to watch through that lens.

“The main thing is that it’s probably best if you don’t make it easy for them to target you,” Nelson says with a sigh. Aiming his voice more in Murdock’s direction he continues, “Obviously we can’t keep you from going after them under the cover of night if that’s what you feel pressed to do.”

“What would your suggestion be?”


Murdock snorts and adds, “I’m sure once we get further into the legal proceedings we’ll have more in the way of keeping you busy. They won’t get ahead of us because you take a day off.”

“Yeah, okay.” The Soldier looks at his lap. “Okay.”

Murdock gives him a moment before saying, “We can head out now, or if you’d rather stay here until we finish up we can do that, too.”

“I’ll wait,” he answers, not eager to make Murdock travel back and forth for him. “Less visibility that way.”

“Fair enough,” Murdock replies with a nod.

Nelson shuffles the papers on his desk and says, “Since you’re gonna be around it might help to talk
about what went down in D.C.”

“Eventually we’ll need to talk about the rest of it.” Murdock sounds unhappy and remorseful about their situation but earnest in regards to how they’ll get through it together as a team. “There’s no rush to get into it now. We can wait until you feel comfortable.”

“Not sure it’s the kind of thing you’re ever really comfortable with,” the Soldier murmurs back in reply.

Both Nelson and Murdock respond with silence. The Soldier sighs.

“Should Karen be here for this? You’re gonna show her everything you’ve got on me anyway.”

“Good idea,” Murdock replies. “While we let them get set up, maybe we should change that bandage.”

Murdock waves for him to follow while Nelson breaks left and they go right. He takes an obviously marked First-Aid kit and leads him to a gender neutral restroom. The Soldier tends to his dressing while Murdock waits in the hallway. Just like it was when he saw it before, Claire’s stitches are neat and clean. His skin is pink around the wound but being sutured up has helped it not to be such a mess.

He gets another square of gauze taped onto it and puts his shirt back on. Murdock’s bouncing his cane on the ground in between his feet when he opens the door.

Instead of assembling in Nelson’s office again, they move into a larger conference room. He appreciates that they’re proceeding at a slow-to-moderate pace, but their efforts to be careful with him are getting to be obvious and annoying. He’s not brittle, ragged though he may be.

Once they’re all seated he starts from as far back in D.C. as he really remembers—blinding pain in his head, movement, bursts of combat on the airstrip, the deadweight of several bodies he can’t completely place, flight, Rogers, the Helicarrier, falling, the river…

Karen starts to scratch notes in a yellow legal pad while he speaks. Nelson stops her with a gentle touch on her arm. They’re friends, too.

His mind drifts while words mechanically fall out of him, chasing a vast multitude of questions all at once: Karen’s reasons for needing legal representation, her position at Nelson & Murdock, Nelson’s acceptance and complicity in Murdock’s alter ego, Murdock’s decision to help the Soldier in the first place, those things Wilson hinted at having done but never named outright, and Rogers.

Rogers, who exists in his mind as inconsequential but who is also deeply important. Someone who is nothing and no one but who is also everything and the only one—the only one left who has any idea about the person he used to be. The Soldier is Theseus and the Minotaur in his own labyrinthine mind. Rogers stands out among the chaos as Ariadne’s thread.

His memories have to be there, somewhere, beneath the electrified, ravaged wasteland Hydra made of his head. Half the battle is ownership. Possession of anything begins in the mind.

It’s dark outside when they get through it all to Nelson and Murdock’s mutual satisfaction. They ask him to clarify parts of the story he withheld for inanely sentimental reasons and delicately purge the truth from him.

That’s easy, too: confessing it is easy. Saying why is substantially more taxing and two of the three times they ask him to explain his actions he can’t.
Why did you jump after him?

What was your logic for coming to New York?

They don’t press him for answers now, but it’s only a matter of time, he’s sure. Having it out in court will be bad anyway. He doesn’t need them to stress how much worse it would get if the Prosecution managed to surprise them with something they hadn’t prepared for.

Murdock suggests that they adjourn ahead of schedule so he can get the Soldier set up at his apartment for the night. Nelson and Karen stay behind to compile information made publically available about Hydra that will strengthen their case against them. Karen’s been read in on his prospective legal problems, too, so ostensibly they’ll be looking into him as well.

He and Murdock exit the building through a side door with Murdock going out ahead of him. The Soldier idles on the step while Murdock waits expectantly in the center of the alley. He keeps his cane tucked in close to his body on his right side.

The Soldier sidles next to him and puts his flesh arm between them. His metal hand stays tucked away in his pocket, closed in an incidental fist.

“I’ll only ask for your arm when we cross a street.”

“Force of habit?”

“Little bit.” Murdock flashes a quick, relaxed smile. They start to walk side by side with only enough space between them that their arms shouldn’t brush even by accident. “Just takes less concentration that way. Easier to follow where you’re going.”

The Soldier looks down at his flesh arm and loosens the metal fist on his other side. Murdock tilts his head in his direction.

“All right?”

He rolls his eyes at Murdock’s concern and answers in the affirmative.

“You’re not fond of me, are you, Barnes?”

“The only reason I trust you is because Wilson didn’t bat an eye when I asked him to bring me to Nelson & Murdock.”

“Is that the only reason?” Murdock asks with the barest tinge of disappointment in his tone that sounds almost playful for all that the Soldier can tell. He’s ready for Murdock to ask why he puts so much faith in Wilson’s judgment but Murdock doesn’t. He just says, “We ought to go a few rounds, you and I.”

“What?”

“Do you mind?”

The Soldier looks at the street corner they’re stopped on and casts his gaze down the road. A car passes with a broken taillight and he sighs, holding his elbow away from his body.

“Is that a yes?”

“Yeah, Murdock, it’s a yes.”
He presses his fingers lightly to the inside of the Soldier’s arm just above the joint. It’s actually convenient that he’s on the Soldier’s right side as he’s able to keep his dominant hand on the cane. They step off the curb onto the asphalt. The Soldier walks with his arm held stiffly at that angle so that Murdock’s knuckles don’t brush against his side.

“Boxing,” he says before they’ve made it to the other side. “We should go a few rounds.”

“We already have done,” the Soldier mutters back. Maybe needlessly he announces, “Step” at the curb.

True to his word Murdock releases him once they’re both on the sidewalk. His cane dances in front of him like an auxiliary appendage.

He says, “You were already wounded by the time I got there. And besides, we were both trying not to do too much damage to each other.”

“Sayin’ you went easy on me, Murdock?”

“Same way you went easy on me,” he replies with a casual lift of his shoulders that matches the airiness of his voice. “Two against one’s not a fair fight anywhere.”

“Step,” the Soldier says, holding his elbow out.

Murdock hums a cordial, “Thank you.”

They walk a few more blocks without speaking. Out of some blunted sense of curiosity, the Soldier purposefully fails to announce a curb before they step down from it onto the street. Murdock doesn’t stumble over it. He merely turns his head in the Soldier’s direction, checking to see if his attention might be elsewhere.

“Figured you had it.”

Murdock tips his head and says, “I did.”

They cross that street and Murdock climbs the curb on the other side.

“Have you had some experience with this?” Murdock asks, turning his head in the Soldier’s direction when he doesn’t answer straight away. “Walking with a blind person.”

The Soldier ruminates over an answer that’s closer to yes than no but that he can’t elaborate on. Murdock ducks his head and accepts the silence for what it is: an inability to respond truthfully one way or the other.

He tells the Soldier as he’s taking his elbow for another crossing, “Well you’re a natural.”

Perhaps there are other things his body and his instincts can tap into that his mind can’t access just yet. Memory retrieval might be as simple as compiling enough of the right triggers that his body does something his mind finds familiar.

He’s still running with that train of thought when Murdock comes to a full stop outside an apartment complex. His first impression once inside that first hallway is that it’s roomy. He can’t see the rest of the apartment what with the lights being off but the entrance isn’t cramped. It wouldn’t make sense for the rest of it to be. Murdock hangs his cane on a coatrack by the door and moves further into the apartment.
It is, in fact, as spacious as he anticipated. In the dark he can see the outline of minimalistic furniture arranged in the front room, an empty metal frame leaned up against one wall, and white artificial light filtering in through the wide, curtain-less windows.

Murdock stops mid-stride in the center of that large room and turns to face the Soldier. He gestures to the ceiling with a wayward hand.

“That’s the second time I’ve forgotten the lights with you.”

The Soldier’s started to wonder if it’s an intentional slip on the part of Murdock’s subconscious. Perhaps he’s of the opinion—however much he’s really aware or unaware of it—that the Soldier will be every bit as comfortable in the dark as he is, which is the truth.

Shadows don’t hang on him. They part when he passes through.

“Don’t need ‘em.”

“If you’re sure.”

Murdock must believe that he is because he starts moving into another room like the subject is closed. The Soldier would be comfortable telling Murdock if it wasn’t.

“Kitchen,” he says, waving his hand in the general direction of a refrigerator.

The Soldier plants himself in the center of that middle room as he looks on. Murdock revolves around him to point as he labels the rooms in the apartment.

“Bedroom and bath that way. When Karen was here she slept in there. The living room’s not exactly ergonomic. You’re welcome to decide for yourself. Just know I don’t plan on sleeping much tonight, so I won’t mind if you take the bed.”

“No,” the Soldier says, biting his cheek once the word is out too fast and too loud from his mouth. “The couch is fine.”

“Okay. You know where the shower is. I can show you how to work the faucet.”

“That’s…fine. You don’t need to.”

“We’ll have to see about getting you some more clothes. There’s a laundry room in the basement if you want to wash—I keep the detergent in the hall closet with a bunch of rolls of quarters for the machines. The laundry basket’s in the bedroom closet.

“You can wear something of mine in the meantime, but I think—” Murdock tilts his head to one side, contemplating an unspoken consideration. “You’re a bit wider through the chest than I am, so you might have a time of it.”

The Soldier squints, says, “How…?”

“I know your reach, and your general size and shape. I did carry you to that warehouse last night.”

Embarrassing.

“Are you hungry?”

He last ate that afternoon with Wilson. Hunger pangs aside, he should be fine until morning.
“No.”

“All right. Help yourself to the shower whenever. There are towels under the sink in the bathroom. I’m going out.”

Murdock slips silently into the next room. The Soldier mills about in the front room and locates a metal drawer in the corner of the room. An unbound text half-expelled from a nondescript but worn, dark gray folder lies solitary beneath the shade of a reading lamp. Without picking it up, he runs his flesh fingers along the raised text already exposed to him.

Intrigued, he swaps hands and judges the differences in sensation. His metal arm is virtually useless at distinguishing between dot clusters, but the vibrations themselves aren’t completely beneath his threshold. He alternates hands and tries to internalize what his flesh fingers pick up so that he has a mental image to pair with the tiny shuffling sounds of Braille beneath metal.

It’s all incomprehensible to him, full of meaning he can’t fathom. He touches the lines with his flesh hand and notes the thickness of the stack.

The Soldier clocks the absence of a proper bookshelf and wonders if Braille reading materials are hard to come by or if Murdock simply has no time for books between his work at the office and his work as Daredevil.

Murdock emerges from the bedroom suited up but without his glasses. The Daredevil mask is in his hand. The Soldier doesn’t move but doesn’t go out of his way to stay still either.

Without making any assumptions about the answer, Murdock asks, “Can you read Braille?”

“No.”

“It takes practice,” he says, nodding his head. “Like anything else.”

“I learned Russian. It can’t be that hard.”

Murdock laughs. He has a young face.

“Then I bet you could learn.”

He doesn’t mention the Soldier’s obvious disadvantage but takes a few steps closer to say, “Think you might get stir crazy staying here all night?”

The accommodating answer would be ‘no’, but as he looks around at the apartment he can’t help but imagine it as a box closing in and closing in. It doesn’t wield the same connotation as ‘stir crazy’. The antsy churning inside of him is a different animal entirely.

“I probably won’t be able to sleep.” Safe, vague, neutral.

“What if you had something to keep your mind occupied? Would that help?”

“My mind is occupied.” If anything, it’s over-capacity.

“No, I mean with a task. Something to keep you focused on one thing instead of a thousand.”

The Soldier crosses his arms. Murdock keeps his hands at his sides, calm as ever.

“If I gave you a Braille print-out of the alphabet, say.”
“You have one of those lying around?” the Soldier asks.

“I’d have to print it out. It’d take five minutes. You’re not inconveniencing me if it helps you to feel more at ease here. Would it?”

He casts a reluctant glance at the Braille text splayed on the desk. Just looking at him the Soldier can tell that Murdock won’t insist if the answer is no. But he’s offering, so surely there can’t be any harm accepting. He’s doing so much for him already.

“It might,” he hedges, curious and willing enough to act on it.

Murdock flashes a brilliant smile at him and turns on his heel.

“You can follow if you want.”

The Soldier goes, keeping a respectable distance but not too concerned about hovering since they’d been closer on the walk over. He stops with his arm leaned on the doorframe to Murdock’s bedroom. Murdock tosses his mask on the edge of the bed and takes a laptop from a drawer on the way to the closet.

With a one-track mind Murdock crouches to set it down on the floor to his immediate right, opens the closet door, and reaches for a blocky object on the top shelf. His hands find it without any fumbling or feeling around.

He takes one precise step back and kneels to set the printer right there beside the laptop. The Soldier leans his head on the doorframe, blearily, distantly tired but not calm enough to relax. Murdock busies himself with plugging in the clunky machine from the closet and turning on the laptop.

“You don’t use it often?”

“Oh no I have a better one at the office. I do most of my typing there. This one I keep mostly for sentimental reasons.”

The Soldier hums and looks in Murdock’s direction when the device that’s probably the printer whirs to life. He looks at it and at Murdock’s fingers roving over the keyboard where there are, evidently, Braille buttons. The printer makes another electronic whistling sound.

Murdock slides it to the left and plumbs the closet again to produce a sheet of white paper. The Soldier’s eyes have adjusted enough to the dark that the paper glows in his vision.

“I used a pretty big font to start with,” Murdock tells him, positioning the paper in the printer.

It’s a ritual he appears to understand well enough to be able to speak through it, which gets the Soldier’s attention, though he supposes it shouldn’t. He’d accepted that Murdock could fight and mimic the motions of his metal hand. Being able to operate basic technology is hardly an impossible feat.

“They’re spaced out a lot so you can tell the letters apart. The bottom row of text after the alphabet is the numbers one through nine and zero, in that order.”

The page prints, probably. Murdock plucks it out of the machine and stands. He holds it out a few steps away from the doorway. The Soldier pushes off the doorframe with his shoulder and receives it.

“Touch the last line. I should explain how numbers work before you get confused at there being
eleven letters.”

He waits until the Soldier gets the page settled on top of the dresser. Not a second before he has that last line beneath his flesh hand, Murdock says, “Okay, feel that first character? Like a backwards ‘L’?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the symbol we use to say that what comes next is a number. Now feel the rest of them.”

He goes over each one, counting them more than he is reading them.

“Now feel the first line on the page. Notice any similarities?”

The Soldier only has to compare them once to catch what Murdock’s talking about. He looks over his shoulder at Murdock who hasn’t moved since he gave him the paper.

“The numbers are the same as the letters, except for the number sign.”

Murdock clarifies, “From ‘A’ to ‘J’ you get one through nine and zero, yes. Now find ‘K’. It’s the first one on the second line.”

“Got it.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Oh.” The Soldier probes that character with one finger. “It’s two dots.”

“Yes, but which ones?”

He touches again.

“Two dots lined up.” The next character feels similar but with three dots in a line instead of two. He goes back to the ‘J’. “There’s a space between them.”

“Remember that ‘A’ through ‘J’ is one through nine and zero with a difference.”

“The number sign.”

“Yes. So,” Murdock raises his eyebrows. “With ‘K’ through ‘T’ you have basically the same letters as ‘A’ through ‘J’, but with a difference.”

The Soldier looks for the difference.

“This dot: this one.”

“That’s the third dot in the cell. You go from the top left and down: that’s one through three. From the top right and down: four through six. When you’re learning ‘K’ through ‘T’ and ‘U’ through ‘Z’ just remember dots 3 and 6 to tell them apart. It’s only ‘W’ that doesn’t match the others. You’ll know which one it is when you get to it.”

His mind reels already at the influx of information. A dull but competitive desire to learn it and learn it well sings inside him. It’s a peaceful skill to train. It’s knowledge.

“If you’re a quick study I can print out some practice materials, too.”
Slowly, marveling in a small way about his eagerness, he says, “Yeah. Please.”

Murdock smiles and replies, “Sure, Barnes.”

He retrieves more paper from the closet while the Soldier explores the text on the page with his fingers. His metal hand slides into his back pocket while his eyes track the progression of his flesh hand. It’s not too dark that he can’t see the raised dots, but he doesn’t watch them as they pass beneath his fingers.

“You take any longer with that thing Hell’s Kitchen might not make it through the night.”

Murdock huffs a laugh. The printer beeps and hums, shuffling pages as it prints.

“I’ve been listening. Guess the city collectively decided not to fall apart, at least until I get you these pages.”

“Sounds like something Wilson would say,” the Soldier mumbles.

Murdock makes a noise of agreement and gathers the small heap of papers from the printer.

“Could be he’s rubbed off on me. We don’t work together all that often.”

“No? Can’t imagine why.”

“He’s usually not in my neck of the woods,” Murdock says evenly, not biting on the line the Soldier left for him. “From what I hear, he’s been apprenticing under Spiderman. Making an effort to clean up his act.”

“When he’s not taking odd jobs from terrorist organizations,” the Soldier remarks bleakly.

Murdock taps the edges of the stack to straighten them out and gets to his feet. The Soldier grabs onto the alphabet page, bends the top right hand corner so it’s recognizable, and meets Murdock halfway.

“Hydra would have gotten you if he hadn’t taken that job,” Murdock says lightly. “Something I’ve learned since I started this is it’s not always black and white—fact, it rarely is with people. Usually you’ve just got to do the best you can with what you have.”

The Soldier takes the stack. Heat from the printer fans against his wrist.

“Just a note about this text when you get to it: there’s a lot of punctuation in it—like you’d expect. I printed them out on this page.”

“It’s got print and Braille,” the Soldier observes.

“They’re a little harder to explain succinctly on a timeline. You’ll get it.”

Murdock unplugs the printer from the outlet by the closet and places it back on the top shelf before closing the door. He sets the powered down laptop on the bed, grabs his mask while he’s there, and leads the way out of the bedroom into the middle room.

“Thanks, Murdock.”

“You’re welcome. I’m gonna leave my phone here if you need it, okay? Foggy and Karen’s numbers are programmed into it. Here’s the key in case you decide to do laundry. I’ll be back in the morning if you want to walk to the office together.”
Murdock pulls on his mask and heads back into the bedroom. The Soldier hears a window creak open and then the apartment goes silent.

He stands in the dark and basks in the soft sounds of the occasional vehicle driving by on the street outside. When the sense of utter tranquility passes he looks down at his modest stack of papers and sets them down reverently on the edge of the counter. Hesitating to leave them in the open like that in case a fight finds him here, he slides them into one of the kitchen cupboards beneath the plates.

Nonplussed he slips into the bathroom and locks the door behind him. He tests the wood beneath his metal hand. It might be strong enough to withstand the force of a kick. He considers detouring back to Murdock’s room to close and latch up the window he crawled out of, but he doesn’t want to bar him from his own apartment in case he needs to come back while the Soldier is indisposed.

In the interest of keeping his whereabouts in the apartment as subtle as possible he leaves the lights off and the small window over the shower closed with a curtain drawn over the glass. He holds his hand over the shower knobs and squints, tracing the print carvings of ‘H’ and ‘C’ on each one. Murdock probably just remembers which one toggles which temperature feature.

The Soldier takes off his shirt first and promptly checks his stitches. A cursory examination of the medicine cabinet reveals a clean roll of cotton, a bottle of aspirin, and dental floss. He pats his current dressing back down and shucks the rest of his clothing off. The Ka-Bar shudders in place where he sets it down atop the toilet tank with the blade facing the door. His shirt and jeans sit folded on the lid of the toilet seat with his boots pushed up against one wall. He finds a towel from the cabinet beneath the sink and fiddles with the shower until he gets the water to come on.

He explores the products on a shelf beneath the showerhead and they all smell like bits and pieces of Murdock. It’s intensely bizarre, and he doesn’t want it on him.

There’s a bar of clean-smelling soap that he does lather in one hand, not keen on getting soap residue stuck in the metal plates of his arm. He’s cautious with his wounded shoulder, too, as he doesn’t want to get it wet before he changes it. A bit unwillingly he does scrub some of Murdock’s liquid soap through his hair and into his scalp.

He spends the last minute or so with his head under the stream of water. It’s in between warm and hot and it makes his skin tingle under all those tiny droplets.

Some steam has formed on the glass of the mirror and he leaves it there. He has no need of seeing his reflection and he can change the dressing on his shoulder well enough without the aid of a mirror.

Also counter to Murdock’s suggestion he doesn’t seek to borrow his clothes. At least that’s the plan until he actually looks at the mysterious mass of fabric hanging on a hook across from the mirror. He touches it with his flesh hand and picks out a sleeve, then another.

He sighs, bites his lips, and grudgingly looks around at the bathroom bearing witness to his perfectly permissible thievery. The bathrobe is plush and swallows his arms right up to the fingertips. He ties the sash and stares at his bare feet peeking out from beneath the edges of the robe. It’s a dark color but so soft that he doesn’t really care what it looks like. Dripping still, he scrubs the towel over his head several times more to catch the water clinging to his hair.

He pads out to Murdock’s room with the Ka-Bar in hand and digs up a pair of socks from a top drawer. Spotting a pair of slippers tucked in under one side of the bed, he performs quite the comical double take and stares with a dull longing in his chest.

While he’s ahead, why not?
But they’re perfect and the bed is soft when he sits down, and…

He stands right back up, tapping his foot in one pilfered—*borrowed* slipper. It’s a lighter color than the robe.

*Just until mine are dry*, he tells himself, walking back to the bathroom for his clothes and the towel.

Planning for the worst case scenario, he tapes the Ka-Bar to his metal shoulder where the robe lists open to allow his right hand easy passage in. The handle is easy to reach and he practices slowly a few times just to make sure. If he has to move quickly he might snag the robe, but he takes measures so that the blade won’t rub the fabric at rest or in movement.

He wraps his laundry up in the damp towel and goes looking for the detergent Murdock mentioned in the closet next to the kitchen. The quarters are there like he said: rolls and rolls of them in brown paper tubes.

Once armed with the laundry basket he dumps the detergent and a few rolls of quarters into it and grabs the key off the counter. He stares at the phone and pockets it as well, just to be diligent.

He also takes a moment to appreciate that the robe has deep, luxurious pockets on both sides.

“Right, laundry.”

With his laundry packed up he heads out the door and sets the basket on the floor by the door. He listens for movement anywhere in the hall and locks the door once he’s sure he’s alone. There’s a staircase that leads down at the end of the hall and he follows it silently, hugging the wall and keeping his eyes up and open.

The laundry room is carpeted and has a muffled quality about it that gives him a profound sense of being swaddled. He switches on a lamp in the corner of the room and blinks at the dark red cotton of the robe. Murdock’s fantastic slippers are a fuzzy, soft purple.

He carries the basket over to a wall of machines and examines them, looking for the washer. It has directions on how to activate it and he follows them word for word. The water rushes down in response to his pushing the quarters in and he rocks back on his heels, enthralled. He tosses in his things, measures the detergent in the lid as the bottle directs, and closes the lid after pouring it in.

The Soldier stands there watching the machine rumble and lays his flesh hand on top of it. His eyes drift shut and snap open when the rumbling is replaced with stillness. He checks the room and the hallway upstairs before throwing his things in the dryer and repeating the process but without the detergent.

His hair is still in the process of drying but is in a state of cartoonish disarray that he combs through with his fingers while the dryer hums pleasantly. It finishes quickly, probably because it’s a small load, and he moves his act back upstairs.

He goes through the motions of putting everything back where he got it from, pulls on his clothes, magnificently hot from the dryer, and hangs up Murdock’s robe where he found it. It takes him a few seconds of bargaining with himself to give up the slippers and put those back, but he knows, realistically, that he shouldn’t have left the apartment in anything but his boots.

So he gets his boots back on, grumbling all the while, and ambles toward the kitchen for a glass of water. Having seen where the glasses are kept when he stashed the papers, he plucks a tall one and fills it with water from the tap. He takes a sip as he sets the apartment key back where Murdock left it for him. Next he carefully removes the stack of papers from beneath the plates in the cupboard and
walks toward the living room windows.

He carries the papers and his water, one in each hand, and stops in between the two windows, wary of snipers but also curious about the fluctuating neon light on the other side of the glass. Determined to jump right into his study he slides down the wall in between those windows and sits on the floor with his newest assignment—his task. He sets the water down to his left and begins.

The alphabet comes to him in droves. Murdock’s advice for identifying various characters holds true and becomes easy with prolonged exposure to the alphabet. As advertised, the ‘W’ throws him off when he encounters it for the first time, but it’s easy to identify for its being an outlier.

When he begins to memorize the characters based on where they appear on the page he moves onto the punctuation for variation. It takes uncounted mixing and matching to recognize letters based on their feel alone until he finally gives in and closes his eyes.

Without the added benefit of the fluorescent whites and reds from the electrified billboard just outside the window, his senses whittle down into those left available to him: the raised Braille beneath his fingertips, the muddled sound of traffic, the faint aftertaste of the water at Nelson & Murdock, the smell of Murdock’s apartment which is basically a softer version of what Murdock smells like.

Not altogether unpleasant, this assortment of sensations—not now that he’s used his shampoo and dressed himself in Murdock’s bathrobe and has taken to wearing his slippers. It’s a blatant betrayal of his total loss of apathy toward Murdock, but he’s starting to forget why it mattered to him before.

To himself he names the letters as he finds them with his fingers: ‘T’, ‘F’, ‘R’, ‘A’, ‘U.’

He’d lied through his teeth when he said he didn’t trust Murdock on his own merit. It wouldn’t have made sense to trust Wilson without also trusting Murdock.

Back when he was only Daredevil to the Soldier, he’d said he would know if he lied. That’s probably why he hadn’t taken much offense at the sniped comment. It was, all told, a stupid thing to lie about. It’s not as if he would let just anyone touch him. It’s not as if Murdock hadn’t demonstrated often enough that he trusted the Soldier with so much before the Soldier trusted him even an iota.

There had been Claire, after all. There had been Karen and Nelson. Now there’s the apartment.


He hasn’t let himself think too much about why he’d decided Wilson wouldn’t betray him. The abuse he allowed others to savage him with and the sacrifices, big and small, he gave up to clear a path for the Soldier to get away amounts to loyalty. No one can challenge that—no one but Wilson himself. The Soldier owes him that much in return: owes him his respect.

And Murdock hadn’t risen to the occasion to try and uproot that respect. He hadn’t badmouthed their mouthy associate and sometimes-ally. That deserves respect, too.


He moves down the page and feels for the character that denotes numbers: ‘1’, ‘0’, ‘7’, ‘8.’

The light in the apartment shocks him when he opens his eyes. Slipping away in this secondary world of sightless comprehension had loosened the stiff set of his shoulders. It’s not completely comfortable where he is on the floor propped up against brick, but it’s more than he has had in recent weeks, probably even in years.
His hand tracks back down to the bottom of the page.


Confident enough in his ability to try proper words he sets his two reference sheets on his right with their corners folded over so they won’t dislodge. The unread text stares up at him. He keeps his eyes open to start, but he doesn’t look down.

Straight away he comes across a capital sign followed by a word and then the number sign followed by a character. He examines each character separately and then as one line: C-h-a-p-s-e-w #1.

He frowns and tries it again, scoffing at himself when he sees which letters he confused: ‘S’ for ‘T’ and ‘W’ for ‘R’.

Chapter 1.

Okay. So he doesn’t have it all that well.

His third time re-reading the phrase it clicks. He’s still misreading the ‘N’ as a ‘P’, but enough of the word comes into focus that he can guess it. Once he has it identified it’s annoyingly obvious.

The Hound.

He labors over the first sentence. It’s blissfully without too much punctuation and only has the one capital letter marker at the very beginning. The text becomes substantially less overwhelming as he continues on, making fewer and fewer hideous mistakes now that he has a better sense of how the letters come appear on the page. His progress, meager and slow-coming as it is, fascinates him.

Under his breath he mouths the words as he reads them slowly, so slowly: “‘He was not…running…now, but…flying over the…ground, and the scent was…growing stronger…’”

Murdock left him with a text about hunting—told from the perspective of a dog.

“‘With a…roar of fury, the hound…burst from his…barrel into the…false light of early dawn.’”

He appreciates the irony, puckers his lips at the glimpses of himself he sees in the half-bred bloodhound narrating the story. His heart wrenches at the sleep interrupted, the flashes of dreams, the dog’s instinct to chase that comes from the sole desire to feel free for a short while, maddening rage at an enemy, a chain.

“‘…could not have been heard above the…’ What? No…oh, ‘tumult’; ‘could not have been heard above the tumult and sat…’ GLOATING? Hmm, ‘gloating over the…chaos…he was causing.’”

His metal hand clenches into a fist at the fox that can look on animally impassive even while faced with the screams and the hatred of a pack of dogs—screaming and hating for that same animal impassivity, only on the opposite side of the spectrum. The Soldier has been the fox and he has been the hound. He has been shackled to both instincts separately and they have waged war within him, each demanding to be lived over the other.

He reads through the text, learns the dog’s name is “Copper”, and is pleased to discover that the “Master” is not someone with whom he will be forced to sympathize. The fox peaks his interest some, but it’s gone near the beginning of the chapter and doesn’t return so he doesn’t hold out much hope of seeing it again.
“‘By working slowly and syst—system…’” He clears his throat. “‘—systematically from one wisp of scent to the next, the hound was able to…unravel…the line.’”

That final turn of phrase catches him like a barb and he touches it several times, questing to get something just a little bit more from it that the author didn’t leave behind. It’s a beautiful expression: ‘the hound was able to unravel the line.’

The hunt takes an odd turn when it becomes increasingly apparent that the Master knows something Copper doesn’t about what they’re pursuing.

“‘The heavy, sweet-sick…smell of death…was strong. There was also blood.’

“Боже, Murdock.”

At least he can’t really fault Murdock for tiptoeing around him now. It’s not that Copper’s mechanical instinct for the hunt triggers him. He just relates to it too much. That, in itself, doesn’t force his body into a fight-or-flight response, but he can sense the gears turning in his mind: running analysis, drawing parallels, and writing up conclusions about himself vis-à-vis this story.

He keeps reading, sharing in Copper’s dread when the mysterious scent is identified to be bear, which…feels loosely like a metaphor for Russia but that probably isn’t. The author of the text also made amusing efforts to emphasize the strangeness of human behavior through the eyes of animals.

Presumably this section Murdock printed out for him is the complete first chapter of the book. When he gets to the end of it he turns back to the beginning and re-reads the first paragraph, thrilling at how much easier it is to read. He casts a quick paranoid glance around at the apartment and runs one metal finger over the last word in that paragraph: ‘eagerness’.

His right hand reads ‘eagerness’; his left, ‘dghesqet’.

He flattens that useless metal palm on the floor and leans back to gently bang his head on the wall at his back. Good in a fight, not so hot with Braille. Win some, lose some.

But in the interest of keeping busy while the late night hours wind into early morning, he works at training that metal hand. He goes back to alphabet and cheats, using his eyes where his fingers lack the capacity for fine sensation. The general essence of ‘The Hound’ is branded into his mind, but his memory’s only preserved glimpses of the text word-for-word. A lot of it is familiar enough that he can guess at whatever word might come next.

On his seventh read-through he has the first three and the last two paragraphs by heart.

Somewhere in between discovering the bear’s trail and the Master calling off the hunt his body starts to go heavy on him. He looks around at his status and decides to tidy up his station as long as he’s considering a break.

He sets his reading materials on the coffee table and carries the empty glass to the kitchen where he sets it down in the sink. Murdock doesn’t have any dirty or clean dishes sitting around, so with the goal of inconspicuousness in mind, he studiously washes it out, dries it with a towel from one of the drawers, and sets it back where he found it. He folds the dishtowel into a perfect rectangle and leaves it by the sink.

An unbecoming yawn forces his jaws to part. He drops his chin onto his chest and knocks the knuckles of his right hand on the counter like Nelson had at the office.

Maybe sleep would wake him up. There’s a thought.
He doesn’t have a preference for a spot sleep in, so he crouches where he stands in the kitchen. The counter wraps around and provides cover from the windows, and the fluorescent sign from outside doesn’t reach him much from his lower position in the shadow of the refrigerator. If anyone came in from Murdock’s room he’d see them and he’d have time to react. The knife block by the microwave is currently in his sightline, so he’s got that going for him as well.

Sleep finds him in cruel spasmodic waves, pulling him under and then jolting him awake. His mind taunts him with things half-seen and three-quarters forgotten.

The Soldier dreams about a newspaper clipping that he can’t read. In his dream his hands are small and the bigger hands holding the obituary tear it to shreds.

He wakes.

The Soldier dreams about milk bottles and startles awake when one of them shatters in between his feet. He dreams about masses of people and a shiny red car levitating off a raised stage. It crashes in a fit of electricity and shouts from the crowd and he…remains there, watching, clapping.

He’s clapping. He looks down and he can see his hands—both of them.

In his dream he turns around and sees people, lights, and a cheerful night sky. His feet carry him to a place he’s probably been before but that he can’t predict.

‘…kinda missing the point of a…’

His voice and Rogers’ voice, an embrace, two promises. He raises his hand in a salute.

**Foggy, Foggy, Foggy.**

He jerks awake, exhausted and sprawled out on the hardwood like he’s been spilled there.

“**Foggy, Foggy, Foggy…**”

“What the…”

The computerized voice chirps at him from near his foot. It’s coming from the phone. He surges up and answers it, voice scraping out of his throat like gravel.

“Barnes.” It’s Murdock calling him, voice urgent and awake. “Are you hurt?”

“No…” He scrambles to his feet and looks around, hair fanning his face in a clear show of just how much messier it got in his sleep. There’s nothing broken or disturbed in the apartment and the lock on the front door is still engaged. “I’m fine. Was asleep.”

“Oh. Sorry then.”

“Did something happen?”

He squints at the windows. It’s nearing dawn outside, but the sky is still dark.

Murdock sighs.

“What?” the Soldier demands. “What is it?”

“There were Hydra agents at the office. They sacked the place. I got to them in time, but…”
The Soldier’s stomach flips uncertainly. He swallows down his anxious barrage of questions and waits.

“Well the place is trashed. We think they were looking for information about your whereabouts. They didn’t find anything.”

“Foggy and Karen?”

“They’re fine. They weren’t here when it happened.”

“I’ll come down.”

“No—Barnes, you need to keep a low profile.”

“Bullshit, Murdock. They hit the office because of me. For all we know they might go after your people next. I’m going.”

“Barnes,” Murdock sighs. The sound of it is resigned to the Soldier’s will. “Just sit tight, okay? We’ll send an officer over. He was first on the scene: someone we trust. Name’s Brett Mahoney. He’ll do the knock I told you from before. Do you remember?”

“Two then one then two,” he answers easily.

“Yes. Good.” Murdock sighs again. The Soldier should have been there with him. “Okay hang tight. He’s on his way.”

“Does he know me?”

“Oh. Not exactly.”

“All right. I’ll be ready.”

The Soldier hangs up the phone and slips it into a jeans pocket, also grabbing the apartment key and the Ka-Bar. He’d taken it out of his boot at some point after one of his stop-and-start dreams for easier access. He takes care to keep a layer of denim between the blade and his borrowed socks. The socks Wilson gave him are sitting folded in the closet with Murdock’s quarter cache for when he needs a clean pair.

He ducks into the bathroom briefly to check his bandage and flinches at the disastrous mop of hair flared up around his head like an unruly match head. Distraught he searches out a comb.

By now he’s adopted an almost militaristic attitude toward this shared living space. He figures wearing someone else’s bathrobe and slippers will do that to a person—even to a soldier, or maybe especially to a soldier. Whether he’s authorized to make a distinction between the two is anyone’s guess.

His stomach is empty and angry but his hair is presentable when the two knocks then one then two sound at the door. He tugs his sleeves down to his wrist and buries his metal hand in his pocket.

“Sergeant Brett Mahoney, sir. Looks like I’m your ride.”

“Yeah thanks for that,” he says without sarcasm. “I could have walked.”

He pulls the door shut behind him and locks it with the key held carefully in his right hand. Veiling his worry and his irritated hunger with a polite smile he holds that hand out to Sergeant Mahoney. Murdock’s mentioned him before; so has Nelson.
“Don’t worry about introductions. Foggy told me you’re mixed up in the middle of whatever this is. If it was up to me I’d take you into protective custody, but I’m not gonna pull rank here.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Not so fast, okay? It was pretty crazy when I got there. If these guys are as bad as I hear they are, you’re in for a lot more of this. Innocent people could get caught up in it. I just hope you’re ready to turn yourself in before it gets to that point because if you don’t, I will be forced to make an arrest.”

“Understood.”

They walk out to the car together. The Soldier gets in the front on the passenger’s side. He buckles the strap across his chest at Mahoney’s cleared throat and raised eyebrows. The radio croons a quiet verse from a song he doesn’t know and transitions into another song that’s more familiar but that he still doesn’t fully recognize.

Mahoney doesn’t try for conversation, but the silence isn’t uncomfortable. The Soldier watches street corners and parked cars, blinking at the makings of the sunrise over the distant skyline.

Some radio static comes through on the police scanner. He listens idly, not understanding the few transmissions that trickle through. It’s easily identifiable as ten-code but he can’t connect the codes to their meanings—if he’s ever been able to interpret them, he can’t do it now.

“Nelson wanted me to tell you that he and Karen Page weren’t accosted at their residences.”

“Good, that’s good.”

Mahoney sighs and turns the car left down a side street. The Soldier recognizes a Tailor & Boutique from the walk to Murdock’s last night and relaxes in his seat. It had occurred to him that Murdock might have sent Mahoney to drive him to the station instead of to the office. Now that they’re on a path he remembers from last night, however, he has fewer doubts about Mahoney’s intentions.

“Murdock said the place got trashed. How bad was it?”

“It looked a bit like a twister touched down. Neighbors reported sounds of glass breaking and later in the night a fight broke out. I arrived on the scene and apprehended four suspects.” He looks at the Soldier and falters. “Everything I saw could be fixed or replaced. That’s important. I need you to remember that.”

“I’ll remember it.”

They turn onto the street they need and the Soldier leans up in his seat to get a better look at the office. He catches sight of the broken glass littering the asphalt and can see the door has been knocked off its hinges. They could have gone in without breaking down the door; they could have done the job without breaking the glass.

Either they went in with orders to intimidate his lawyers or Daredevil was the tornado that touched down on Nelson & Murdock. It might have been that he gave them so much hell the place just imploded around them.

He doesn’t know which is worse. Both alternatives are ugly to imagine. The first establishes Hydra as an active threat to his legal team; the second forces Murdock’s complicity in destroying his own workplace—the environment he shares with two of his friends and a supposed safe-haven for the Soldier.
Mahoney pulls up to the curb and gets out of the car. The Soldier follows his lead and keeps his hand buried in his pocket, hair haphazardly flung in his eyes and around his face.

“Sarge, who’s this?” another cop says. Judging by his tone, he is, presumably, someone in a lower position of command than Mahoney.

“Client—Nelson says his safety’s been compromised; he wants him close by.” Mahoney steps around in front of the Soldier and waves him through while simultaneously obstructing his fellow officer’s view. “Go on in, Sir.”

The other officer has questions, but they aren’t pressing ones or even mildly suspicious at that. Mahoney talks around his queries and the Soldier doesn’t pay them any mind. He sidesteps the busted door blocking half of the entrance and walks across a blanket of broken glass. It crunches underfoot.

He sees Nelson first, dressed down in jeans and a t-shirt with one foot on the wall at his back. Karen’s sitting in a chair at his left, blonde hair pinned back in a loose bun and one splotchy cheek resting in her palm. The Soldier looks for Murdock but doesn’t see him.

“Mr. Barnes,” Karen calls him.

She drops her hand from her face and wraps her arms around herself. Nelson takes his foot down from the wall and uncrosses his arms.

“Hell of a thing,” Nelson remarks, voice almost whimsical.

An apology sits heavy and unspoken in his throat. They look tired.

“Where’s Murdock?”

“He offered to do a walk-through with one of the detectives. They’re compiling an inventory for the police report.”

The Soldier flicks his gaze from Karen to Nelson.

Nelson cracks a small, unsolicited smile and says, “You’re here to help us sweep this mess up once the cops leave, right?”

“Foggy,” Karen chastises him halfheartedly.

“That’s part of it.”

“Oh.” Nelson tilts his head to one side in a motion that flicks his floppy hair. His tone softens in time with the expression on his face. “Appreciated, man. Thanks.”

Karen stands and touches Nelson’s arm. She says, “I’m gonna make coffee.”

“I can do it. Sit down, you’re falling over.”

“I’m fine, Foggy,” she protests, sounding more fond than annoyed at his interference. “You should sit. You’ve been standing since you got here.”

“I have,” Nelson echoes in a thick voice that stretches into a yawn. “You’re right, I’m going to take your chair now.”

The Soldier snorts and they both look at him, startled. Karen’s mild shock melts into a soft smile
that’s pointed directly at him. Nelson falls into her chair as soon as she’s on her feet.

“Do you drink coffee?”

“Sure,” he says. He has before, in any case.

“Think I’m gonna order out for food,” Nelson mumbles, digging a phone out of his pocket. He looks at the Soldier and then at Karen, asking, “Any requests?”

“What were you thinking?”

“Uhhh,” Nelson drones, sounding as glazed as he looks. “Bagels?”

Karen hums. “See if you can get something sweet to go with the coffee.”

“All righty.”

Nelson raises his eyebrows at the Soldier after Karen’s left to start the coffee.

“Any allergies or otherwise I should be aware of?”

“No.”

He must sound uncertain because Nelson’s hands pause dialing the number.

“Do you have an idea of what you like?” Nelson asks gently, eyes looking awake and attentive. “I can get a little bit of everything if you wanna sample.”

“It’s all food,” the Soldier answers with a bland shrug. At Nelson’s perturbed, though well-hidden, grimace, he amends, “I’m hungry enough for it not to matter.”

That admission appeases Nelson some but not entirely. He taps the screen on his phone with both thumbs.

“When was the last time you ate?”

“Yesterday at 1300 hours,” he answers with the number ready as he’s been remembering that Mexican food compulsively since he woke up.

Nelson stares at him and then stammers into his phone, rattling off an order that makes the Soldier’s stomach growl. He hears footsteps behind him and turns. Murdock smiles, noticeably sleepy even with the glasses shielding his eyes. Disregarding his weariness and the ruined office he still manages to look like he finds something funny about it all.

Or maybe it’s the Soldier he’s biting back a laugh at. He could have heard his stomach rumbling. Murdock doesn’t comment on it if he did.

He just says, “Glad you got here in one piece.”

“Matt, bagels?” Nelson yawns the question.

The Soldier sees his mouth snapping shut when he turns to look over his shoulder. Nelson’s eyes are closed and his head drooping to the left.

Nelson continues with the order and Murdock chuckles to himself. It’s terribly domestic. The Soldier takes this opportunity to investigate the extent of the damage to the place. He’s careful not to venture out of their niche so he won’t cross paths with the police officers still milling about.

A desk near the window has been overturned and the lamp that went with it, smashed on the floor. There are papers and shattered bits of glass strewn unevenly about the floor. One of the filing cabinets has been gutted and lies on its side, drawers yanked out.

“They’ll clear out soon,” Murdock tells him in a stage whisper. “I talked with Mahoney outside. They got what they needed for the incident report. He’s gonna keep a car posted across the street, just for added security.”

“You’re really calm about this.”

“No use getting worked up.” Murdock shrugs. “We’ve got a long day of cleaning ahead of us. Best to just save our energy for then.”

“Coffee’s ready,” Karen announces from around a corridor, unseen.

Nelson slaps his own face and hops up onto his feet, cell phone tucked back into his pocket. The Soldier watches him march blearily toward Karen’s voice with muted amusement.

“You want any?”

“I’ll wait for them to come back.”

Murdock nods.

“What’d you tell the cops?”

“What I could,” he hedges, feeling for the edge of the desk beside the now empty chair. “None of us were here for the break-in, so all we were really able to offer was what we had before that’s not here now.”

“For the inventory,” the Soldier clarifies with Karen’s words.

“Exactly.”

Karen leads Nelson back into the room with her mug held between two hands. Nelson walks with his held up to his lips.

“Shall we?” Murdock asks, holding his hand out and fluttering his fingers.

The Soldier makes a face but walks around Murdock to give him his right arm. He follows Murdock’s lead to the room with the coffee maker and hovers near his shoulder. Murdock rummages through the cupboard and takes down two mugs. They’re plain with big handles: one is a tangerine color and the other is a deep maroon. He squints at them and slides the orange one away from Murdock and toward himself.

“Feel like warm colors this morning?” Murdock muses.

Ears burning, the Soldier mutters, “What, is the orange one chipped?”

“It is, actually, on the bottom.”

The Soldier rolls his eyes but watches Murdock pluck a black square with three metal prongs from a
drawer stocked with napkins and plastic utensils. He positions it over the lip of the maroon mug and slowly pours his coffee until the device beeps.

“It’s a liquid level indicator,” he says, sliding the coffee pot back on the burner.

Murdock sets about preparing his cup with cream and no sugar. The Soldier pours his black and sets the pot back before bringing it to his face. He can smell the rich roast of it and the mug is hot enough already that he blows the steam away from it as a precursor to taking a sip.

“Sugar? Cream?”

“Hmm.” He takes another cautious sip and moves the dark flavor around on his tongue. The depth is good; he likes it. “Sugar?”

Murdock opens another drawer and tells him, “Have at it.”

He tears and stirs in two packets, wincing a little bit when he breaks and adds a third. The thin black plastic spins around in the mug when he lets go of it.

“Smoked salmon, huh?”

“We’ve all got our vices,” Murdock admits, picking up his mug and taking a long drink.

“I guess so.”

“Ready?”

“Should I…carry that for you?” he asks tentatively, hating that he phrases it so callously but Murdock just shakes his head no. “You’ve got your hands full between the coffee, the cane, and my arm.”

“Could I make a suggestion?”

“Okay.”

But Murdock doesn’t say what his suggestion is. He just moves his coffee to his left hand, loops the end of the white cane around his wrist, and switches the mug back over to his right. He holds his free hand out to take the Soldier’s arm with a tranquil smile on his face. The Soldier bites down on his cheek and looks down at his own hands, one of them preoccupied with coffee and the other stuffed in his pocket.

“You should take the other side.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to spill coffee on you.”

“Oh.”

“That gonna be a problem for you, Murdock?”

“No, is it for you?”

“We’ll find out in a minute.”

Murdock presses his lips together and his eyebrows furrow down, but after a moment he shuffles his
things to his other hand. The Soldier steps out in front of him and bends the elbow of his metal arm without dislodging his hand from the safety of his pocket. Friction grazes him and his instinct to fight bristles down the back of his neck but he steadies himself.

“I can walk out by myself, Barnes. It’s okay.”

“Yeah, probably it is,” he agrees, beginning to walk anyway. His heart races in his throat and his face is on fire, so he redirects. “Can’t sense Braille worth a shit through metal. Who’d’ve figured, right?”

His walking companion doesn’t relax, but the tension around his mouth fades. Murdock muses, “It crossed my mind. Didn’t know if you would try it out.

“Not everybody reads two-handed. It’s not a requirement for proficiency.”

The Soldier hums and sips his coffee. It’s nice with sugar.

“The story wasn’t too much, was it? I fought with myself over whether it would be too violent.”

“Too violent? For me?” the Soldier parrots sardonically.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah I know. It was fine. Surprised me, but what do you expect from a hunting dog?”

Murdock huffs a quiet laugh and separates from his arm when they get back to Nelson and Karen. He stays right at the Soldier’s side once they’re disconnected. Sergeant Mahoney just finishes reminding them to change the locks and replace the front door before the end of the day. He catches the Soldier’s eye and nods once. The Soldier nods back.

The food Nelson ordered comes in right then and Nelson leaves to pay for it, asking Matt to go with him to help carry it in if it ends up being a lot to carry. Karen paces slightly and finally busies herself with turning her mug back and forth on the desk. Her mug is the light gray one next to Nelson’s, which is a plain white. He wonders if she fidgets because she’s nervous about being left alone with him.

“Have you been here long?”

“As their secretary?” she asks for clarification. At his nod she says, “Not a year yet, but a while.”

He stares at his coffee. Nelson comes in with Murdock at his left and one huge paper bag in his arms. He angles his head toward the hallway.

“Conference room, I was thinking?”

“Yeah, sure.” Karen grabs both her and Nelson’s coffee and looks at the Soldier. “Come on.”

The Soldier watches them go but waits for Matt to get his coffee to walk with him. Murdock checks with him before reaching for his arm again.

“I should tell you I wore your bathrobe last night.”

Murdock barks a laugh and says, “Did you?”

“And your slippers.”
“In your defense I said you could—and they’re very comfortable. Did you sleep well at least?”

“I kept waking up.”

“Oh on the couch?” Murdock tips his head when the Soldier looks at him. “I figured you would have mentioned the bed if you’d slept in it.”

“I…” He doesn’t say ‘passed out.’ “Fell asleep in the kitchen.”

“On the floor?”

“It was an accident.”

“I’m sure it was,” Murdock answers with a small disbelieving laugh.

They walk into the larger room with the big table where he told them his story a second time. Karen and Nelson are taking everything out of the bags and placing it at the center of the table. Their coffee mugs are placed next to each other on the side farthest from the door, leaving two chairs near the door and the two more stacked in a corner. Murdock takes the one on the right without appearing to give it much thought. Rather than make a fuss about it the Soldier takes the chair on his left.

Karen implores him to dig in but doesn’t encourage him when he waits for them to fill their plates first. He gets an eyeful of his options and cautiously takes two bagels from the box—one smells strongly of onions and the other has blue specks of squashed berries embedded in the bread. Murdock sets down a plastic knife on the edge of the salmon cream cheese container and gestures at it with his hand.

He tears a piece off the blueberry bagel, thinking it smells sweet enough not to need anything and considers his options while his hunger sweeps back over him in waves. The plain spread is good with the bread, sharpens the taste of it against the sweetness of the blueberries.

Admittedly he doesn’t pay much attention after those first testing bites. His ears are trained on the opened door and one of his feet is turned on its heel, ready to run or force him into a lunge if someone comes to bring trouble. The food fills his stomach. He polishes off three bagels and several muffins that come in three flavors: chocolate chip, cinnamon, and blueberry.

They’re smooth and moist to the touch. He eats the edge of one of the paper cups in his haste, but none of his dining companions comment on it. The Soldier glances from the door to Murdock, Karen, and then Nelson. They’re having their own conversation that he isn’t following about someone called Ben Urich.

Nelson catches the Soldier staring at him and asks, “Discover any new favorites?”

Karen looks up at him, curious. Murdock takes a drink of his coffee.

“I like the cinnamon ones.”

“They go great with coffee,” Karen tells him.

The Soldier finished that, too. He’s not craving more, but he has half a mind to refill his cup just to try the pairing Karen’s so sure about. Instead of doing anything about it he stands and starts scooping his empty muffin cups into a pile.

“We’ll just put the trash in the bag,” Nelson says, also standing.
They tidy up the devastated contents of the bag and relocate into the main part of the office where the wreckage is waiting for them. Nelson digs out a broom and dustpan from a hallway closet. Murdock makes his rounds setting overturned desks and filing cabinets back to rights. Karen works on getting their documents reorganized. The Soldier takes the broom when Nelson brings it to him.

“I’m going to make some calls about getting a new door. The one we got’s falling apart.”

“We’ve got broken windows, too,” Murdock calls from his spot crouched by the smashed desk lamp. “You’ll be busy.”

The Soldier squeezes the tall handle of the dustpan in his metal hand. He watches Murdock examine the extent of the damage to the lamp before carrying it to a trashcan Karen brought into the room.

“Where’s your printer?” the Soldier asks him in between the last thing Nelson says and the next thing Murdock is about to say.

Murdock hesitates. The Soldier frowns.

“It went down with my desk. Well, under it.”

He flicks his eyes between the standing desks and approaches the splotch of black plastic shards smeared into the carpet beside one of them. There’s a smattering of glitter in the mess, crushed into fine dust.

“I’m going to make those calls, Matt. Make a list of everything that needs replacing?”

“An exhaustive list?”

The Soldier starts sweeping. Murdock was right earlier. They’ve got a long day of cleaning ahead of them.

After about an hour of pushing the broom in circles around the office and replacing the filled trash bags for new ones, Karen comes back with gloves for all of them as well as a vacuum cleaner that she tells Murdock she rented for the day. It’s supposed to be really high quality and he believes it when it picks up all the glass fragments he missed with the broom.

Murdock and Nelson bang on the crooked door hinges for about fifteen minutes without results. Nelson put the Soldier on the broken windows clearing the remaining glass left in the panes so they could tape them up without the danger of cutting themselves. It hadn’t taken him long. They clear a path for him when he steps up to the plate.

He grasps the door with his hands on one edge, bends his knees, and twists. The hinges rip off the door frame with a single loud crack and one low, metallic whir of his arm. Karen shouts, Murdock gasps, and Nelson squawks.

“Sorry,” the Soldier murmurs, holding the door at an angle across his chest.

“Th-the doorframe was cracked anyway,” Karen answers with a swallow.

“Yeah any chance you could rip that off, too?”

The Soldier looks at Nelson to gauge how serious he is. Nelson flushes red under his blank stare and averts his eyes.

It’s the first time since that morning that the Soldier remembers he’s a thing to be feared. He sets the
dislodged door down gently against the wall and ducks back inside without another word. Even sitting on a chair in the conference room by himself he keeps both gloves on.

Someone comes to replace the door at 1600 hours, and right around that time with the sound of power drills coming from the entrance, Karen, Nelson, and even Murdock slump around him in tired puddles. He doesn’t really know what to do with his energy so he just zips around collecting the plethora of trash bags they’ve accumulated and carrying them out to the garbage bins. They’re plenty heavy, but he carries two or three in each hand and only struggles with getting through narrow doorways.

He makes two trips, using the side alley to get around so he won’t have to interrupt the handyman repairing the front door. As he’s turning to head back inside, the sound of hurried footsteps sets alarm bells ringing in his mind. He’s about to run—his whole body is angled already for an escape—when his feet falter.

“Bucky! Wait!”

God condemn him for a fool, but he does. He waits long enough in his startled panic for Rogers to jog up. He’d been sprinting at first. Perhaps he thought the Soldier would run—thought Bucky would leave him again like he left him in D.C. on the riverbank. Rogers looks much the same as he did the last time their paths crossed. The biggest difference is that he isn’t battered and bloody. No matter how frayed his edges had been when it happened, the Soldier regrets all that blood. He couldn’t at the time, not when it was happening. But he does now.

Rogers’ eyes are wide, scared. He looks determined and hopeful but worried: worried for his determination and for his hope. The Soldier is sympathetic to that worry. It’s no secret he tried his hardest to break Rogers back in D.C. He wouldn’t have to try at all to break his heart. And Rogers, God condemn him, has his damn fool heart in his eyes.

“Barnes.” Murdock appears behind him in the alley. He pauses and the Soldier can feel it now in the throes of his dying adrenaline rush that Murdock isn’t listening for a spoken answer. “Are you all right?”

“Sure, Murdock. Peachy.”

Rogers stares at the Soldier and then at Murdock like he can’t fathom a logical explanation for his being here in New York where anyone would address him by name. Another man he’s seen before jogs up behind Rogers and stands at his shoulder. He looks at the Soldier and then at Murdock, too.

The Soldier takes a step back. Murdock takes a step forward. He hears that he does.

“I’m turning myself in,” he announces in a loud voice, gaze skimming the apples of Rogers’ cheeks and then his eyebrows but not staying too long on his eyes. He takes another step back and Murdock takes a few more forward until they’re side by side. “So before you try and grab me—”

“We’re not,” Rogers says, sounding desperate. “I promise, that’s not…”

“Matt, what are you doing out here?”

The Soldier listens and at length hears Nelson say, “Oh. Matt? Is that Captain America?”

“Is it?” Murdock asks, exasperated.

“Sam Wilson,” the man at Rogers’ side supplies, waving his arm for Nelson’s benefit. He points at
Rogers and identifies him: “Steve Rogers.”

Nelson steps out into the alley and places himself firmly on Murdock’s other side. The Soldier backs further away and his lawyers shield him, probably intentionally, from their unexpected guests.

With a change to his demeanor Nelson says, “Foggy Nelson. This is my partner, Matt Murdock. We’re Mr. Barnes’ attorneys.”

Murdock speaks up and matches Nelson’s even, authoritative tone: “Afternoon, fellas.”

“Nice to meet you,” Sam replies with a curt nod. “We didn’t mean any harm coming here. Just heard there were attacks in Brooklyn and Manhattan. Thought we could do something to help.”

He looks at Rogers and raises his eyebrows. Rogers clears his throat.

“In any capacity that we can, we just wanna make this right.”

“You follow me here?”

“We followed Hydra,” Rogers answers to the contrary. “I didn’t think you’d still be in the country.”

“Where would I go? Russia?” Murdock steps aside to give the Soldier room to stand in between him and Nelson. “That where you think my loyalties lie?”

“You’re not with them, we know that.” Rogers hesitates and drops his eyes. “You’re not with us either. I get it. But we can do something, Bucky, if you let us.”

The Soldier’s grateful deep in his bones that Rogers only assumes as far as their own relationship. He didn’t say, You’re not with anyone.

He supposes Rogers can’t say that to him as long as he’s flanked by two people who look ready to turn Captain America away if he just gives the word. Wilson might not have the discipline to do that for him, but Nelson and Murdock have it in spades.

Just then the power drill from the front of the practice dies down. The five of them stand in silence, ears ringing from the immediate plunge into quiet.

Murdock clears his throat, white cane bouncing in place slowly between his feet.

“We’ve had a rough day. If we’re going to continue this conversation I’d suggest we move it inside. If not, we can give you our cards and set up a day for you to come in and speak with us formally.”

Sam places his hand on Rogers’ shoulder. He looks at Murdock, then the Soldier, and then at Nelson.

Rogers sighs and says, “We’ll take that card if you don’t mind.”

“Foggy,” Murdock murmurs.

“Yeah, got it.” Nelson starts to walk forward with one hand disappearing into a coat pocket. He turns to look at them over his shoulder. “Take him inside?”

“Okay,” the Soldier and Murdock say at the same time.

Murdock raises an eyebrow at him but turns. The Soldier dutifully holds out his left arm and doesn’t even flinch when Murdock slips his fingers into the crook of his elbow. He glances back at Nelson
with Rogers and Sam Wilson (he’d call him Wilson, but Wade already occupies that name in his mind). Nelson is handing them a small, white rectangle and Rogers is accepting it, sliding his gaze once from Nelson to the Soldier.

He tries to communicate to Rogers with his eyes, shouting things in his heart like, *You’re not the hero of my story, Rogers. Just let me go. It’s not on you to save me this time.*

Whether he sees any of those things on the Soldier’s face or not, the tight grimace on Rogers’ mouth only replies back, *I’m sorry.*

Murdock follows the Soldier back through the side door and releases him without a word once they’re in the building. The Soldier’s heart is pounding still high up in his chest and the blood is rushing in his ears and the walls of this practice are like bars on a cage. He tears the gloves off his hands and nearly slams into Karen where she’s passing through the lobby from the newly installed front door. She drops the small bundle in her hands—three unconnected metal keys that scatter when they hit the ground. He looks at them and then at Karen.

“Excuse me,” she starts to say, the words sounding like a breathless laugh until it cuts off too short. Her smile falls and is immediately replaced by concern when she sees his face. “Bucky?”

He’s shaking. His body is cold.

The metal hand at his side curls and uncurls. He holds those fingers straight and grits his teeth. Karen steps around him to give wisely him some space.

“The conference room’s empty,” she tells him in a gentle voice. “Do you remember where it is?”

The Soldier takes a wavering breath. He whispers, “Yes.”

“Do you want me to bring you anything?” she asks in that same soft, nurturing tone that he doesn’t deserve and could never deserve. “You’re probably starving, right? Breakfast was a long time ago.”

“I’m fine,” he murmurs, not meaning it but needing her to believe that he does.

He starts to walk in that direction toward the conference room where they ate breakfast. One of the keys Karen dropped grazes beneath his foot and he stops, crouching to gather the two that are within reach. Karen’s straightening out with the third one in hand. She smiles graciously at him and holds out her hand, palm up, to receive the two he retrieved. He lowers his gaze and drops them into her hand so they don’t touch.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah.” He swallows and looks down, forgetting to be startled and full of self-hatred when he’s so flustered.

Probably sensing that he’s calmed down some, she repeats her previous question: “Are you sure I can’t get you anything?”

His mind bounces around in various directions like an echo through a canyon. He spots Murdock walking around a bend in the hallway.

“You got reading materials here, Murdock?”

At the sound of his name, Murdock stops mid-stride. Karen looks at him over her shoulder, curious about why the Soldier would ask him instead of her when she was the one to offer her help.
“About the only thing I keep on hand here is Thurgood Marshall and copies of legal documents.”

“Works for me.”

“Wait, do you read Braille?” Karen asks, intrigued.

“I learned it last night,” he says a little unsteadily. “Kept my mind occupied.”

Karen hums and follows Murdock into the larger office space where the desks are. The Soldier follows at a distance. He’s more inclined to leave them to their search and hide in the conference room, but he’s also determined to prove to them that he doesn’t need to be coddled or enabled. He can handle tension. Seeing a ghost from his past isn’t going to unravel him completely.

It does stay in his mind for a long time, though. Murdock gives him an intimidating stack of papers: several documents’ worth in case the Soldier gets through them all while he’s clearing his head. They don’t trouble him for another hour and even then it’s only for food.

Karen invites him to go and eat with them, but he prefers the quiet now as he is. Mind still in a state of relative disarray, he just needs the time alone with the text.

He reads Thurgood Marshall through six times. His metal arm isn’t any better at telling the characters apart but he does get to a point of being able to identify the bumps on sight, which is all kinds of ironic and defeats the purpose of learning a tactile alphabet system. A point of actual triumph, though: his right hand is brilliantly fast at detecting and understanding the words.

With Thai food filling his belly and making him warm in all the places his success with Braille doesn’t touch, he collects his trash and discards it in the bin where he sees the other emptied cartons and containers. He rounds back to the conference room for Murdock’s papers and ventures into the main office space to return them.

He finds Murdock sitting on the floor with his legs crossed and his back leaned haphazardly on one of the desks. Nelson and Karen are sitting in chairs on opposite sides of a single desk, heads bowed over splayed open folders. Murdock also has files laid out before him and a blocky device in his lap that looks like a compact typewriter.

The Soldier pushes the door so it creaks. Nelson and Karen look up at him before resuming their work. Murdock’s hands still on the device balanced between his legs.

“They didn’t break all your gadgets at least.”

Murdock smiles, though the sight of it is a little rueful. He says, “The gadgets are the least of my concern.”

Remembering Sergeant Mahoney’s words to him that morning, the Soldier adds, “They can be fixed, replaced.”

“Exactly.”

The Soldier sits where Murdock’s barrier of documents ends and mirrors his sitting position. After a moment he carefully removes the page closest to him and reads the first few sentences. Murdock listens for a few seconds and then resumes moving his hands over the typewriter device in his lap.

**STATUS REPORT: 29 SEPT. 19**

*KGB operative NATALIA ALIANOVNA ROMANOVA received hand-to-hand and weapons training*
under supervision of THE ASSET. NATALIA ALIANOVNA established out of REDACTED. Prolonged contact between agents not advised. See ESTIMATED TIMELINE OF CRYOSTASIS RECUPERATION.

NATALIA ALIANOVNA completed hand-to-hand and weapons training under supervision of THE ASSET and set to resume active duty. KGB operative known as NATALIA ALIANOVNA codenamed BLACK WIDOW for archival reference.

THE ASSET to be removed from the field until further notice. Restricted access to REDACTED and Eastern Arabia. Minimal exposure to REDACTED.


The Soldier places the memo back carefully in its slot between various other documents. In a quiet voice, trying not to disturb the others, he asks, “Where did you get these?”

“They were released in the leak. It’s a bit limited.” Murdock sighs. “But it’s a start.”

The Soldier grabs another sheet and feels for the capitalized words. He picks out a collection of straightforward but obscure locations and obscure but straightforward names: KOSCHEI, FAZAN, and MUKHA. The context is always confusing and ominous.

In one document he reads, Tissue regeneration charts for THE ASSET return outstanding results. Cell counts after Project KALINA deplete, halt, redouble, and resume normal production within twenty hours. Close observation of calcium levels for KALINA crucial to THE ASSET’s survivability during treatment. Immune system strengthens drastically with repeated exposure to high concentrations of solution delivered in a controlled environment.

In another document he reads, Mission failure in REDACTED. THE ASSET subdued via Protocol FAZAN. Two physicians wounded; permanent nerve damage to S. IVANOV. Recommended medical leave. Routine administration of Procedure GAMAYUN rescheduled. New date for examination and repairs to THE ASSET: 14 Jan. 19**.

Clearly it’s shorthand. The names are codes they used to talk about things they did to him in their reports. He can’t remember if they ever spoke them aloud in his presence, but their true meanings are lost to him now. The words themselves are recognizable: viburnum, thrush, pheasant, and so on.

They’ve got to be in the documents themselves somewhere. As a rule everything gets defined before it’s standardized.

He keeps reading, stomach in knots over what he might find. Murdock isn’t worried, or if he is he’s doing a swell job of not showing it. It’s a better approach than sheltering him from it would be. He’d only be more nervous if they didn’t let him see everything they have on him.

After all, Nelson did say that it would harm their case to show up in court with less than the full truth. It’s as true for them as it is for him.

Nelson makes another pot of coffee. Murdock and Karen go to help themselves, but the Soldier refuses when Nelson offers to go grab him a cup.

“Guess you’ve got all the energy you need,” he says, shrugging a bit when the Soldier just stares at him. He looks less skittish now than he did before, which is probably a result of his exhaustion.

“Well, you know. All those experiments. You don’t really run the same as you used to. Like, at a
cellular level, I mean."

“What are you saying?”

“Oh, did you not...you didn’t get to the part about KALINA yet?”

“I did. None of Murdock’s papers explained what it was.”

Nelson’s mouth opens and his eyes widen. He scrunches his eyes shut and mutters, “Matt took the second stack.” The Soldier’s about to ask but Nelson turns and rummages through the veritable mess on the desk he’s been sharing with Karen. He procures a folder with staples littering the top and paperclips sunken into the long side. “Apparently this was one of the first things they got to working on when they took you. It’s...”

“What, Nelson?” he snaps.

“KALINA stands for Calcium-Potassium-Sodium. I can’t pronounce the original Russian.”

He’d read about the calcium part—something about it keeping him alive during the experiment.

“So what does that mean?”

“Foggy?” Karen asks from the hallway. “Did something happen?”

Nelson has a moment of indecision pinging his eyes between Karen’s face and the Soldier’s. He finally just holds the folder out for him to take, explaining as the Soldier reads. It takes him a few confusing seconds to remember how it’s done after so much practice with the Braille, but Nelson narrates just as he’s getting to what the acronym itself stands for.

“They were lethally injecting you with potassium to induce hyperkalemia. I guess the point was to see how long it would take your heart to give out.”

The Soldier flips through the pages, at first irritated that he wasn’t left to read the information on his own, but it’s easier to make sense of the medical jargon with Nelson’s simplified summary. It’s all in the report. The date on the file has been stamped out, but if it was also in Murdock’s portion of the paperwork...

“They listed twenty seven procedures in one six-month period,” Nelson tells him, alerting the Soldier to the fact that he’s staring at Murdock’s fan of papers.

“Twenty hours to recover,” he echoes from the other document in Murdock’s pile that mentioned KALINA. “It referred to a six-month period?”

“That’s just the next time you were reported being out of K-Chamber.”

The Soldier closes the folder and hands it back to Nelson. He’s curious about it, but he doesn’t want to delve further into it while they’re all still watching him.

“What are you thinking, Barnes?” Murdock asks after Nelson accepts the folder from him.

“I’m thinkin’ there’s twenty-four hours in a day and even the shortest month of the year has twenty eight days in a regular year.”

Nelson snaps his head up. “Wait, you think they did this to you every day for a month?”

“Maybe not every day. Doesn’t sound like they knew twenty hours was the minimum for a while.
Doubt they needed six months to get twenty seven of ‘em under their belt, though.”

He turns and sits where he was previously and takes up a page he’s read twice already. Karen, Nelson, and Murdock remain silent behind him and then go back to their designated work stations.

It’s surreal to think that he’s been through so much only for none of it to stick. He has dreams sometimes, sure. Those aren’t always helpful, but usually he’s glad they aren’t. The flashes he sees don’t inspire a lot of confidence. One of the best dreams he’s had lately is one he had when he was still in D.C. His dream was just rain: rain and the slow stretch of dawn over some part of the world somewhere.

He’d fallen out of the tree he was sleeping in at the time, and he supposes, in terms of karmic justice, that he may have had it coming. In truth he’s not sure he believes in all that stuff.

It’d be a dark world for him if he did believe it.

“Mr. Barnes.”

He looks up and blandly meets Karen’s eyes. They’re the same kind of blue as his are. They probably even match the blue in Steve’s—

Rogers’.

The Soldier looks away. He scrubs the back of his wrist across his forehead and clears his throat.

“I thought you’d want to see this one.”


“Not exactly,” she hedges, not wanting to give away—what she clearly deems—a good surprise. “But did you know you could dance?”

He stares at her. She suppresses a smile and offers the file, substantially thinner and less worn than the one concerning Project KALINA. He raises his hand to take it and her smile widens just a fraction before she turns and walks back toward the desk with Nelson.

The file says he learned various types of ballroom dancing for an assignment in Rome where he was tasked with assassinating a politician. There are no coded project names in this document, but perhaps there wasn’t any need to be secretive about teaching an operative steps for the tango, waltz, and bolero.

Apparently he took to the first two as easily as breathing, but the instructor’s or instructors’ notes about his development with the bolero are positively abysmal. His eyes scan down the page. He turns to the next one and finds a memo.

MEMORANDUM

TO: Y. KHLEVNIUK

FROM: A. SHIRKOVA

DATE: 14 JUN. 19**.

RE: Recommended action for REDACTED

Performance scores backslide drastically for THE ASSET following routine tests and experiments by
THE ASSET does not retain newly acquired skills following interference in the brain induced via electric shock. Temporary deactivation Protocol MUKHA must be suspended pending mission completion.

Physicians are advised not to administer GAMAYUN during this time. KALINA and EYFORIYA are also banned as of 0800 hours, 14 JUN. 19** with permission granted by REDACTED. Instructor moves for an immediate transfer of THE ASSET from KONSTANTIN CHAMBER to ZHENYA CHAMBER where remedial sessions training Tertiary Skill No. 14 will resume as scheduled.

He skims the next few pages, mildly amused at Khlevniuk’s scathing response to Shirkova’s memo but not paying much attention to the potential problems he cites. The mission itself involved a convoluted assassination plot focused on an Italian magistrate, Cesare Terranova. Long story short: he didn’t have to kill anyone because the Sicilian Mafia beat him to the target.

Short story long: they sent him there to schmooze at some charity event and gather usable intel from the guests in attendance. The assassination was planned for the following evening, leaving him to his own devices while at the gala in question.

“Oh.”

“What?” Murdock looks up from his typewriter.

The Soldier thumbs the page he’s reading. Its printed words feel every bit as useless to his fingers as Braille does to his metal hand.

“This girl I danced with was blind.”

“What girl?”

Murdock shakes his head, confused. The Soldier catches Karen’s eyes and gestures with the file.

“They taught me ballroom dancing and set me up with…” His eyes search for the name and he turns back to Murdock. “Giulia Miccichè. You said before you thought I had experience walking with a blind person.”

“Think you might also speak Italian?” Nelson asks, turning in his chair to stretch his back. “Because damn.”

The Soldier scrunches up his eyebrows. Nelson stammers and Karen comes to his rescue: “It did sound pretty smooth rolling off the tongue.”

He looks again at the folder in his lap, wondering.

“Something to think about,” Murdock says, the voice of definitive neutrality and endless possibility.

“That reminds me.” Nelson stands to address the room. “What are we going to do about the office tonight?”

Murdock sets the typewriter aside and also stands. Not one to be left out, the Soldier gets to his feet and carries the folder back to Karen. He perches there by the desk so that the four of them are positioned like the points on a wonky rhombus. Everyone can see everyone, though, and he’s not blocking Karen’s way out. That’s what he cares about.

“I think we should take the documents with us. Give Barnes a chance to review them in private.”
“Well that solves that,” Nelson cedes easily enough. “Think we should pair up for the night, lay low? Screw making it easy for ‘em, right?”

The Soldier smirks at Nelson’s initiative. He likes his spirit. Wilson would get along with him—after the initial friction wore down into something less abrasive and more innocuous. He knows from experience now that there’s a learning curve to be mastered.

“There’s the warehouse,” the Soldier offers in Murdock’s direction. He looks at Nelson and then Karen and blanches slightly. “Uh, Wilson. The one Wilson showed me. He said it was off the map.”

Nelson makes a noise like a snort. “I’d feel safe anywhere with an indestructible mercenary watching over me.”

“You should tell him that when you meet him,” the Soldier advises him smoothly, meaning every word. “Too bad I don’t know how to get ahold of him. He’s good backup in a fight.”

“He’s probably still around,” Murdock supplies faintly. “Didn’t Mahoney say somebody in a mask helped him round up the first batch of Hydra?”

“That wasn’t Daredevil?” Karen asks, genuinely curious about the answer.

Nelson says, “Mahoney wasn’t specific in his report about who the guy was. Although I feel like he would have said ‘Daredevil’ if it had been him.”

The Soldier wonders just how often Wilson sticks his neck out for a good cause (he supposes) only to go unacknowledged for his actions. It must not do great things for his self-esteem when he goes unmentioned. He’s not sure how public a persona Wilson—or Deadpool for that matter—really even is.

They end up deciding between the group of them that Karen and Nelson will stay in a church for the night. Murdock says he knows the priest and that he should be able to secure a room for them in one of the recreational rooms. He drops Claire’s name as a suggestion for them and the Soldier’s heart gives a weak little flutter.

“No,” he protests before Murdock’s even finished with the proposal.

Murdock tilts his head, a crease forming between his eyebrows. He murmurs, “I thought you liked Claire.”

“Yeah, enough to not want to put her in harm’s way just so I can sleep with a pillow under my head. I don’t need to stay anywhere tonight. You’re forgetting that I kept vigil on a bridge through the night before even coming to you for help. I don’t need your hospitality, not if it’s going to involve someone who’s got nothing to do with any of this.”

A pause shivers in the quiet room. Murdock cracks a small smile.

“You do like her.”

The Soldier’s heart stutters again. His neck and then his cheeks burn.

“Shut up.”

“Okay,” Nelson says, slashing a hand through the air. “Matt, stop it. Barnes, what do you want to do?”
“I’ll tell you what I don’t want: I don’t want to be sidelined when the next attack comes. Either take me with you so I can make sure you don’t get hurt, or I’ll track down Wilson and Daredevil and make sure other people don’t get hurt.”

“You should come with us, too, then, Matt.” Karen finally gets to her feet, saying, “If we’re all together at the church, you should be there with us.”

The Soldier looks at Nelson who looks at Murdock. Murdock opens his mouth: “Ah.”

“Actually,” Nelson cuts in. “The case files…shouldn’t stay with us. I like that we’d all be together under the same roof, but we’d all be together under the same roof.”

“And one of us needs keep an eye on them,” Murdock adds. “If it’s just me on my own, I can go to the precinct and stay there for the night. You, Foggy, and Barnes should stick together, though. It’s a good plan.”

“I don’t like leaving you by yourself when we’re all grouped up,” Karen insists.

The Soldier’s proud of her for not letting them have their way so easily, especially when their arguments are shaky at best. Nelson looks at him with the kind of desperation he thinks Murdock might if he weren’t concentrating on keeping an impassive expression on his face for Karen’s benefit.

“What about Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson?”

They all turn and look at him. Murdock starts to object. The Soldier doesn’t give him the chance.

“They said they wanted to help. Send someone with the files to them, or bring them here. Probably safer than the cops anyway.”

“Hey,” Nelson says in Mahoney’s defense.

The Soldier counters: “I don’t doubt you when you say he’s trustworthy, but if I heard you correctly before, there’s dozens of Hydra members at that precinct.”

“In custody,” Murdock reminds him.

“I was almost murdered there,” Karen interjects, crossing her arms, “in custody.”

Murdock sighs, defeated. Nelson puts his hands on his hips and tucks his chin into his chest.

The Soldier looks at her, surprised. She gives him a small shrug in response. If there’s trauma, she doesn’t show it to him and that’s just as well. He could see she had stones, but it’s still deeply satisfying to be given more complete evidence of the fact than his intuition alone could provide.

“So,” Karen chirps, less dejected about this turn of events than her friends. “Which one of you is going to go?”

“One of us?” Nelson asks.

“Well,” Murdock says, “we are defending someone they know in court. If nothing else, we could get some work done. Take their statements?”

Nelson nods. “I don’t know, man. If I call them now, they might be having dinner or something.”

After a lot more haggling about what’s to be done, Nelson gets Sam Wilson on the phone and
arranges to have him and Rogers come down to the office within the hour. The Soldier waits in a
conference room for them to arrive and a little longer for Murdock to collect him, but it’s Karen
comes for him.

She tells him that Nelson and Murdock are in another closed off room with Rogers and Sam Wilson,
meaning they don’t see them when they pass through the hallway and walk into the alley. He’s not
sure what disappoints him more: that he didn’t see Rogers or that he looked.

They walk directly to the church since he doesn’t need to stop at the apartment. All his worldly
possessions are on his person already.

“You sure Murdock’s priest is gonna be all right with this arrangement?”

“He called ahead for us while they were getting ready for Steve and Sam to come in,” she explains,
getting his attention when she calls them by their first names. “He also asked the officer who was
watching the building to follow us.”

He looks over his shoulder. Sure enough, there the patrol car is, following them from a block away.

“Couldn’t just catch a ride there, huh?”

“It’s nice out.” Karen smiles at the sky and then at him. “I told him the extra muscle was overkill.”

They walk a while further and cross a street. He holds his arm out unthinkingly when they step off
the curb. She doesn’t hesitate long enough for him to take his arm back. They cross the street with
their elbows laced together. Her arm brushes his side and while it’s unsettling for the first few steps
it’s pleasant once he settles into it. She trusts him touching her and her trust inspires trust from him in
turn.

“So Steve and Sam,” he mumbles.

“Mr. Rogers and Mr. Wilson,” she edits, ducking her head.

She nudges her arm loose from his when they get back onto the sidewalk. He unwinds his arm from
hers slowly.

“What do you think of them?”

“I think they’re nice. They mean well. Matt and Foggy trust them. So do you.”

He doesn’t disagree with her. She has a sense for reading people that he’s detected by now.

“And Rogers,” he says softly without context, holding his elbow out when they get to another curb.

Karen hums and slides her arm through his as soon as he offers it to her. They walk a few steps.

“Did you see him when he came in?” Bucky asks her.

“I did.”

She nods her head smoothly, nudging his side with her elbow when they climb up onto the sidewalk
again. He looks at her and she smiles, keeping their arms interlocked. She furrows her eyebrows and
leans in minutely, conspiratorially.

“He’s taller than I thought he would be.”
He looks away and huffs a surprised laugh. The tension in his neck dissipates with that tiny dose of humor. He flicks his gaze to the sky, smiling faintly while his mind quiets down.

“You know you’re not obligated to be curious about him,” she asks in a gentle voice, “right?”

“Yeah,” he answers after a moment. He hums and says, “But also no.”

“Why?”

Of course no one could force him to cling to the relic of himself that’s been memorialized in archives and museums. If not that version of himself, though, his remaining option isn’t a very positive one. Maybe that’s what she’s getting at: that rather than two choices, he has an infinite number of them. They walk a ways and cross a street before he has any idea how to verbalize the thoughts he’s having. He’s frightened by the restrictions he’s established for himself, but she’s right. There are no obligations outside of the ones he’s created in his head.

“‘Bucky Barnes’ doesn’t feel like my name anymore, but…sometimes I wish it did. And it’s like that with St—with Rogers.” He looks away. “I don’t know how to let go of something when I don’t have it in the first place.”

Karen shakes her head, not looking at him. They cross another street.

“Maybe you have to ask yourself what you’re really holding onto and if you can, let go of that instead. We’re here.”

He looks up at the tall brick building to their right. The police car following them pulls up next to the curb and watches them expectantly. They walk together up the steps and unlink their arms at the door. Karen tries the handle and he holds the door open for her to pass through first. She walks a few feet in with the pews on either side of her and the Soldier pulls the door closed behind him.

“Father Lantom?” she calls out.

There’s a prolonged silence followed by footsteps. The sound of them bounces around the vast room, but the man emerges from a corridor on the left behind the pews. Karen moves back toward the Soldier and he keeps himself in between her and the stranger until the priest introduces himself. Father Lantom speaks formally but cordially with them, bluntly but kindly. He calls Murdock ‘Matthew’ and Karen ‘Miss Page’. While his demeanor is alert and attentive, his words sound sleepy. The Soldier can’t get a read on him when he’s standing still, but Lantom looked weary on the walk over. He’s been on his feet all day, most likely.

“You must be Mr. Barnes,” Father Lantom says in his voice that’s between a croon and a murmur. “Is that your preferred name?”

“It’s as good as any,” he offers after a horrible few seconds of drawing a blank.

Karen gives him a sympathetic look. Father Lantom doesn’t take too much time to fuss over his name or lack thereof. He inclines his head and offers to show them to their accommodations for the night. The Soldier follows them at a distance, scoping out the interior of the church for all the vantage points and possible sniper locations. It’s all clear from what he can see, but his assessment is incomplete without a more careful inspection.

Father Lantom leads them to a recreational room with long tables attached to benches. This place must serve passably as a cafeteria. It isn’t quite big enough to cater to larger groups of people, but it suits their purpose just fine. Father Lantom notices him fidgeting by the door.
“Matthew informed me of your situation.”

“Yeah? How much of it, I wonder.”

“The bare minimum that I needed,” Father Lantom assures him evenly, “to understand that you won’t trust me or this place just because he told you that you could.”

Looking at Karen across the room, the Soldier says, “Not a lot of people left that I trust right away.”

Without following his sightline, Father Lantom tells him, “If it makes you feel better, you can look around; check for the weaknesses in the building’s foundations, count the exits and entry points, memorize the floor plan. As long as you don’t break anything while you’re at it, I’ll give you my blessing.”

They watch each other for a few seconds. The Soldier holds his hand out and thanks him. Father Lantom just sagely nods his head.

The Soldier searches all the topics of interest that Father Lantom mentioned. He makes a mental map of where every hallway lets out, which rooms lead where, the destination of every staircase, which windows open, and how many doors require a key to get through. From the exposed room over the main entrance he scopes out the ground floor. There’s an absolutely magnificent organ behind him that he’s tempted to see if he can play, but he doesn’t for the sake of noise control.

Below, he can see Karen approaching the shrine on the wall opposite his location. He takes one more sweeping glance of the mezzanine and the ground floor before clearing the rail and leaping down. He rolls over his shoulder and bounces up to his feet in time to see Karen start.

“God, Bucky!” she whispers, holding a hand over her heart.

“Poor choice of words in a church,” he muses, slowing his steps until his shoulder is aligned with her shoulder. “That’s the second time you’ve called me ‘Bucky’.”

She watches him, but he doesn’t take lift his gaze from the table in front of them. The candles in their glassy red holders are dark, wicks all burnt down to smoldering cinders. A few that he can see have wax left, but the majority of the candles have been lit by other church attendants.

“Makes as much sense as ‘Mr. Barnes’, doesn’t it?” Karen says, stepping forward to place a folded bill in the tray beside the shrine of unlit candles. “Bucky has a nice sound to it.”

“Really,” he drawls, skeptical but curious to hear more.

“Mmhmm.”

Karen produces a long matchstick from the side of the raised platforms supporting the candles and huddles around a candle in the bottom left corner. She shields the small burning flame with her hand and lights another candle in the center of the bottom row. The Soldier watches the warm orange glow flutter against her palm and fingers when the wick catches. She looks at him over her shoulder and raises the matchstick in a silent question.

“What’s it for?” he asks, knowing that he has no money to offer like she did.

“A few things,” she murmurs thoughtfully, turning back to face the shrine. The Soldier moves forward to hear her better when she continues and the flame she lit comes fully into view. “You can light the candle to pray. You can do it to remember someone you lost.”
Her voice trails off. He steps forward and holds his hand out a good few inches away from hers. She blinks and gives it to him at his cleared throat.

He doesn’t have anything in mind when he locates a full enough wick and sets it alight. It’s soothing enough to watch it burn, illuminating the red glass with its twisting, lonely flame. There are plenty of things he lost; people and names and experiences he can’t remember. A lot of it he’s sure he doesn’t want to remember.

Karen told him before that even if he doesn’t have what he did before, there’s still something else he’s holding onto. He watches that little fire dance on its shortened wick, Karen’s candle immediately to the left of his.

“How do you decide what to pray for?”

“Beats me,” she replies with a little smile.

At first he puzzles over that smile and then he recalls the other reason she cited for lighting a candle. Her expression softens at something she sees in his face and she holds out the elbow nearest to him.

He stares down at it and eventually weaves his metal arm through the loop of hers, glancing up at her face to check for discomfort or pain in case he’s squeezing too tightly. She wore a jacket on the walk here and he hadn’t needed to worry about the plates catching against her skin. He has an alarmingly scant understanding of how his metal arm feels to another person outside of combat conditions.

“What did you pray for?” she asks after they’ve been watching their candles burn for uncounted minutes in the quiet, settling church.

He sighs and forces his shoulders to relax.

In a soft whisper he answers, “Beats me.”

Karen doesn’t look away from the shrine to check his face. She only leans into him briefly, moving so slowly and so slightly that he almost doubts she meant to do it.

“We’re going to get you through this, Bucky.”

His jaw tightens and his eyes sting. There’s so much conviction in her voice there’s no room for argument. She believes in their chances, just like Nelson and Murdock do. Just like Rogers and Sam Wilson.

The flame blurring in his vision as his eyes go unfocused he thinks, You, too, Wilson. Wade.

Father Lantom doesn’t disturb them while they’re at the shrine. The Soldier keeps an ear out for him as they walk back to the rec room together. He can’t tell if the candles are put out or if they burn still, even as his eyes drift closed with his back pressed to a defensive corner near the door. The Ka-Bar stays firmly in his metal hand and Karen sleeps next to the wall farthest from all viable access points, and a safe, advisable distance from the Soldier.

He nods off about two hours into his halfhearted, paranoid watch and dreams of a great fire, unheard words tearing themselves out of his throat in the dream. The world erupts in a soundless fury of burning white and disintegrates into red and angry gold. It fades to black then coalesces into blue.

When he wakes with the dawn his teeth hurt from grinding them together. Karen sleeps still on the other side of them room and after a quick perimeter check, he discovers Father Lantom in a break room fiddling with a carafe and some crockery.
“Good morning, Mr. Barnes.”

“Father Lantom.”

“Miss Page?”

“Sleeping.”

“You like coffee?”

“Sure.”

The Soldier wanders toward the doorway and peers out and around, listening for movement. He’d never been charged with the responsibility of protecting Karen, but he’ll be damned if she gets hurt on his watch. They would have been better equipped if Murdock had come with them, but he supposes Karen might have cottoned onto his being Daredevil if any harm came their way. It’d be an altogether more logical arrangement if Murdock just told her already, but it’s not his call to make either way. It’s barely his business at all.

“Sugar?” Father Lantom asks.

“Yes, please.”

Father Lantom stirs some in and pours in a little more at whatever face the Soldier makes. They take their coffee standing and leaning against the counter. The Soldier holds his cup openly in his metal palm, blowing idly at the steam that rises from the coffee. Father Lantom uses a small saucer to hold his cup when he’s not drinking.

“How did you sleep?”

“Fitfully,” he replies evenly, taking a slow, happy sip.

Sweet coffee is a very good thing. He’s curious about how he liked coffee before and would like to ask Rogers someday if they ever sit down to have an easy conversation about the past. There are more plausible things to hope for than imagining that that conversation could be anything but difficult and likely emotionally devastating to one or both of them. He wouldn’t presume to know which one of them has it worse: Rogers because he remembers what he’s lost in Bucky Barnes, or the Soldier because he doesn’t.

“Sounds like a common occurrence.”

“It is.”

“Dream much?”

“Sometimes.”

They stand and drink their coffee.

“Morning Mass starts in about half an hour. You can take a cup for Miss Page if you’d like. I made enough.”

“Thank you.”

Father Lantom pauses at his quietly delivered sentiment, measuring it, pretty ruthlessly, for honesty. He’s pleased with whatever he sees—and the Soldier has an idea of what it is he looks for because
he has to have done it with his marks in the past.

“You’re welcome. You should attend the service. There won’t be too many people and you can sit in
the back.”

He’s not especially partial to accepting or turning down the invitation and can’t remember if he ever
was a religious person.

“I’ll talk to Karen.”

“Well, always feel free to seek sanctuary here.” Father Lantom rinses his cup out in the low sink.
“And I take confession after as well, if you’re ever inclined.”

With Father Lantom’s permission he carries the carafe and a mug to the rec room and wakes Karen
with the smell of coffee pouring. She drinks it black, which impresses him for no reason at all, and
checks her phone for messages.

“Have you been up long?” she asks.

“No. Just had coffee with Father Lantom.” Keeping his tone and expression neutral he adds, “He
invited us to Mass.”

“Oh, did you want to go?”

“I don’t know. Were you going to go back to the office?”

“Well they didn’t call or text, so either things went really well last night, or…”

“Call them.”

She calls Murdock, greeting him with his shortened name, “Matt.”

He goes with her to return the carafe and the cup to the kitchenette, and he hears her say, “They’re
still there?”

The Soldier sets the carafe back where he found it and rinses out Karen’s cup, considering it for a
moment before washing it and the other two in the sink. He drops a spoon when Karen repeats
Murdock’s question about the others stopping by to catch the church service.

“It’s a public building,” he reminds her, muttering under his breath as he washes the remaining
saucer.

“You know that’s not why he’s asking.”

He swallows hard and says, “I don’t care. They can do whatever they want.”

That dismissal is how he ends up, much to the organist’s extreme discomfort, sitting on the eggshell-
tiled floor of the balcony with his arms wrapped around his knees, listening to the sermon. It’s a
slow, sweet experience—not at all hellfire and brimstone like his dream the night before had been.
He just listens with his head tipped back against the wall, tracing the lines in his metal arm with his
fingers.

The music from the organ is noisy and rushes over him like great gales coming out of nowhere. It’s
filling and undeniably present as well.

He spots Nelson when the service lets out, standing at the door by Sam Wilson. The Soldier searches
the crowd for Rogers before going in the other direction toward the rec room to wait for the throngs of churchgoers to clear out before he dares to loiter among them.

In the rec room he finds Murdock and Father Lantom, each of them standing on either side of Rogers, who looks up when the Soldier walks in. His heart skips a beat and then jumps up into his throat. For a long moment, he wonders if this whole ‘sanctuary’ bit has been nothing more than a ploy to get him to go with Rogers, and if that’s the case he swears he’ll never set foot inside this church again.

Articulately, Rogers says, “Oh.”

“Barnes,” Murdock greets him in the form of a question—as if he wasn’t likely the first one among them to notice his presence.

“I’ll come back,” the Soldier replies vaguely, not having a real reason for coming into this room in the first place.

“I was just leaving,” Rogers counters hurriedly. “It’s okay. I’ll go.”

In spite of saying that and really seeming to mean it, Rogers just sort of stares at the Soldier for a few seconds before snapping out of it. He’s ruffled but doesn’t look all that embarrassed or upset about it.

Cordial as ever, Father Lantom offers to walk with him. “I’ll see you out, Steven.”

“Y-yeah. Thank you, Father.”

Rogers casts his gaze down and the Soldier steps aside to allow them to pass. With just Murdock left in the room, the Soldier moves further in and sits awkwardly on one of the benches, legs facing away from the table. Murdock sits beside him, keeping a good foot between them. His white cane balances vertically between two fingers, palm held serenely supine.

It’s an idle thing: like when the Soldier plays with the Ka-Bar. Definitely looks less threatening with a cane than with a blade, but it’s the same basic concept.

“He’s a Protestant,” Murdock says, possibly, of Rogers. “We were discussing the differences between that branch of faith and Catholicism.”

The Soldier doesn’t reply. He just clasps his hands together between his knees and waits.

“Father Lantom tells me you didn’t have any problems here last night.”

“Did you?” the Soldier asks.

“No. It was all quiet.” Murdock angles his head like he’s just heard a discordant note in their casual symphony of sounds. “You were more open to having him around last night.”

“Anybody ever tell you it’s weird when you do that?”

Murdock has the decency to blush a delicate pink all across his nose. The Soldier props his elbow on his knee and his chin in that hand, saying, “You’re embarrassed. You see now that you’ve made me uncomfortable.”

After half an instant of shock, Murdock chuckles. He drops his head, nodding.

“Okay, yes. You’re right. I am, and I do. I’m sorry.”
“You’re forgiven,” the Soldier replies blandly, though a tiny smile shivers onto his mouth at surprising Murdock like that. He wonders if anyone’s ever turned his ‘astute observer’ crap back on him before. “I don’t mind him being around.”

Murdock makes a noise like he’s about to disagree but stops himself short. The Soldier doesn’t explain his answer. He doesn’t insist vehemently on its being the truth.

Instead he asks, conversationally, “Do you ever light those candles at the front?”

“Every now and then. Why?”

“Who do you remember?”

No pretty adornments or segues dress the question. Murdock doesn’t appear too stunned at his boldness if he is at all. He ruminates over an answer and keeps his response as simple as the question permits it to be.

“My father.”

Murdock doesn’t ask for an explanation to the question, nor does he offer an explanation to his answer. The Soldier stands and a second later, Murdock follows him.

“I need you to know something before we go further with your case,” Murdock tells him in a low, solemn voice. They stop in the doorway and Murdock keeps his hand on the Soldier’s elbow where he hadn’t even registered he was being touched. “Rogers and Wilson want to testify when your case goes to trial. If we allow that to happen, I can’t control what the Prosecution will ask them.”

“So long as you know all the answers, does it matter what the questions are?” the Soldier asks evenly, trying not to react to this news and unsure of how he’s meant to react anyway.

“I’m less worried about whether I know the answers.”

The Soldier blinks. “What are you worried about?”

Murdock sighs, telling him, “You know I won’t force you to do anything you’re not comfortable with. If you don’t want to hear what they have to say before we go to trial, that’s your decision. But it will out in court, Barnes. You will see them there and if you’re not ready when that happens…”

“So set up a meeting,” he cuts in, swallowing the tremor in his words. “Do it if you think you have to.”

“Hey.” Managing to sound hurt while his tone retains its usual crisp quality, he says, “You know by now that that’s not how Foggy and I operate.”

The Soldier looks away, guilty in a small way and anxious in a much bigger way. He doesn’t know how to apologize for whatever he said, specifically, that was wrong. For a lack of those words, he resigns himself to repeating his previous statement: “Set up a meeting.”

“Barnes,” Murdock starts to protest.

“No, Matt.” He starts them walking again to better ignore the way Murdock’s expression clears at the sound of his name. Gentling his voice, he says one more time: “Set up a meeting.”

His skin is tight again and his heart is fast in his chest, but if it’s what they need to do, he’s not going to let them skimp around it for the sake of making things easier on him. Nothing about what happens
next with the upcoming trial and the subsequent reveal of his identity will be avoidable or reversible. They shouldn’t spare him the pinch now when the shot later will obliterate him.

“We’ll get you through it, Barnes. We’ll do everything we can, I promise.”

“Yeah,” the Soldier agrees, as they walk out amid the pews with Karen and Nelson in sight at the doors. “I know you will.”

And it’s the craziest thing, but he believes it.

Chapter End Notes

“The possession of anything begins in the mind.” – Bruce Lee

The Postcards Guide to Braille
http://kurisquare.tumblr.com/post/113345036532

The Fox and the Hound by Daniel P. Mannix

Боже -- God
Taste the Fruit

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Team Avocado collaborate with Captain Murrica, Falcon, and more to evade Hydra! Ooh~!

Chapter Notes

READ THIS YO: There's a cat with injuries from being struck by a car about halfway through this chapter. The cat is already out of surgery and recovering, but she's got obvious wounds from the ordeal, so be ready for that or skip it if that kind of thing stresses you out. Nothing about the way the cat is treated in this fic is violent in any way, shape, or form, and Bucky is basically in love with her from the first, so there you go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The meeting with Rogers and Sam Wilson is scheduled for an hour from now. It’s early and will still be early when the appointed time rolls around. He gets water from the tap in Murdock’s kitchen and drinks in big gulps, standing in a borrowed black shirt that covers his arms. There’s a pair of black leather gloves laid out on the counter that he’s meant to wear when they leave, but he leaves them off for the moment.

Murdock’s shirt is tight on him and has one suspicious tear in the shoulder. The Soldier pinches the frayed edges curiously while he’s waiting for Murdock to finish up in the bathroom. He remembers reading in the paper that Daredevil formerly disguised himself in a black mask. That explanation provides some context for the slight abuse to the shirt’s smooth, breathable material.

The Soldier took the first shower of the morning, which he made quick work of. He skipped the bathrobe and went straight for the clothes Murdock left him: the long-sleeved black shirt and an amusing pair of gray sweatpants that, like everything else Murdock owns, are superbly comfortable. Their height difference is unremarkable, so while there’s little to be desired, the sweatpants don’t fall too short on his legs. They brush his ankles where on Murdock they might break over the tops of his feet.

“Is this your old Daredevil costume?” he asks when Murdock steps out of the bathroom with wet hair plastered to his forehead and no glasses.

Murdock raises his chin at the question and nods. There’s a comb in his hand and a small towel in the other that he rubs indiscriminately over his head. He says, “The shirt is, yeah. I figured it’d be the best fit since we’re not the same size.”

“It stretches,” the Soldier observes of the black material, looking down at the bottom of the shirt and plucking at the ends. He covers the swell of his bloated belly with his flesh hand and tugs the shirt down again with his metal hand. It’s thinner and more malleable than what he recalls of Murdock’s current red getup. “Your suit now’s armored.”
“Supposed to withstand a lot of damage without being too conspicuous.”

“In a few places anyway,” the Soldier amends for him, thinking of the gash he’d managed to inflict with the broken glass in the warehouse. “Make it yourself?”

“I had help from a friend.”

The Soldier hums thoughtfully and examines the tear in the shoulder one more time. He wonders if maybe this shirt is the only one he has left like it that wasn’t discarded after too much action on the streets. His perusal of the slit over the shoulder—jagged, probably from getting caught on something, not a knife—requires that he pull the shirt down again. Its placement reminds him of the wound Chaplain inflicted on the bridge just before Wilson swooped in and saved his skin. That wound barely needs bandaging anymore and it’s only been a few days.

“If it’s too short, I can go look for something else.”

“It’s fine.”

“All right. Well, we’ve got an hour.” Murdock drags the towel over his head a few more times, ducks back into the bathroom to toss it over the rack on the shower door, and emerges combing his hair. “We could go get breakfast if you’re hungry.”

“I don’t really want to go out,” the Soldier says with a small shrug, touching the gloves on the counter with two fingers. “Might be hungry later, though.”

Hesitating for a beat, Murdock says, “Karen’s been making me stock up on minute-meals.”

“What even…is that?”

“They’re these,” Murdock pauses for an abashed chuckle. “You put them in the microwave. Just frozen dinners, mostly. I think there’s breakfast sandwiches, too. Couldn’t tell you if they’re any good, but.”

The Soldier squints at Murdock idly parting his hair with one palm flattened against his scalp. His other steers the comb according where the line of his stationary hand dictates, fingers draped over the back of his head. Murdock stops after a moment and raises his eyebrows, alerting the Soldier to the fact that he’s staring. And that Murdock has caught him staring.

“You want one of these breakfast things?” he mumbles, retreating and heading for the refrigerator.

“If you’re having one, why not?”

Murdock’s teasing tone is audible even without the Soldier having eyes on the smile he must be fighting. He locates the neatly packaged items in the freezer and inspects them for instructions before setting them warily on a plate in the microwave with the wrappers ripped open on one side.

“You know, I’ve probably had stuff like this before.”

“Maybe,” Murdock answers behind him, coming out of the bathroom again, this time without the comb. “Although that makes me feel worse about not having real food to offer you.”

“It’s all sustenance.”

The microwave dings noisily four times and goes dark. He opens the plastic-encased door, peels back the wrapper of one sandwich to poke at it, and adds thirty seconds to the timer after flipping
them over.

Walking loudly behind him to access the cupboard to his left, Murdock asks, “First impression?”

“Slimy,” the Soldier reports solemnly, dutifully.

He hears Murdock sputter over the running water. But the Soldier is diligent in as many things as are feasibly possible, so he monitors their breakfast closely, determined for it to be at least cooked through and not burnt even if he can’t do anything about the overall quality.

“One of these days we’ll go to a nice place: all of us,” Murdock tells him wistfully while the Soldier’s removing the plate from the microwave.

“How long we’re bein’ honest, I’d settle for fresh fruit.”

Murdock hums. “I can pick some up after the meeting. Can’t imagine it’ll take all day. Plus, we still need to get you clothes. Just enough to tide you over between washes.”

“Snazzy though your sweatpants may be,” the Soldier admits ruefully. He extracts a room temperature plate from the cupboard for Murdock and takes the hot plate for himself with the sausage patty that he touched. “Here.”

As if poised for a negative experience, and they very well may be, they remain standing at the counter by the sink with their plates. Murdock leaves his to cool and the Soldier takes a reckless, but small bite, sacrificing taste buds to just get the food quickly in his stomach because he’s not expecting to like it or dislike it.

When Murdock does risk a bite he looks like he regrets his life’s decisions. In spite of the curl to his lip he eats the rest of the sandwich and doesn’t complain about his displeasure. Murdock takes over washing their plates and the Soldier dries. It’s only polite. If he can’t assume half the clean-up and handle his own dish, he ought to take over the second half of clean-up for both dishes.

“Did you like it?” Murdock hazards to ask.

The Soldier stifles his laugh at the tight pinch in the corner of Murdock’s mouth. He gives a vague answer, saying it’s all just food. His palate isn’t refined nor is the opposite true. It’s just unformed, like misshapen clay. Besides, Murdock’s reaction to it is averse enough for two people and there’s really no need to add fuel to the fire by making him feel worse about having offered it.

Their food—or Murdock might say “food”—consumed and their plates neatly tucked away, they agree to leave early for the warehouse in which he met Claire. He gets the gloves on his hands and the Ka-Bar in his boot while Murdock fetches his glasses, finally retrieving the white cane from its hook by the door before they’re off.

On the walk over, he edits the map of Hell’s Kitchen that he has in his head. He’d walked to Nelson & Murdock with Wilson from the warehouse and he’d walked from Nelson & Murdock to Matt’s apartment. Now that they’re going from the apartment to the warehouse, he has a clearer idea of where everything goes.

They arrive at their destination first, Nelson and Karen also having agreed to come for moral and legal support. While they’re mulling about in the wide spacious area, he stops to stand near the chair that he sat in when Claire dressed his wounds. He’d stripped down so she could get at them easier and now that he’s been forced to confront his tender feelings toward her it’s embarrassing to think about.
But she’s a doctor and she’s seen her fair share of naked, muddled individuals, so he tries to convince himself it’s all in a day’s work. He doesn’t succeed so much as he just finds himself even more mortified than before.

Murdock bounces his cane in place between two fingers and stays rooted to his spot. The Soldier takes a moment to actually look at him and recognizes the support beam he’d been chained to when Murdock and Wilson brought him here that night. Perfectly aware of his surroundings and of the Soldier, Murdock tilts his head, twists one shoulder slightly back, and leans sideways into the beam.

“Someday soon I’m gonna ask you how you do that.”

“I look forward to that conversation,” Murdock answers, voice light and soft and lending a sound to the gentle curve of his smile. “Maybe you’ll tell me about your arm.”

The Soldier glances down at his gloved hand and slowly rotates and shifts the metal-plated monstrosity taking up space at his left side. He listens for the shuffling of prosthetic muscles just like he knows Murdock is listening for it, and he hears it. Beneath the muffled whisper of fabric expanding and sliding around roiling, shuttered metal, he can hear the aborted tick-tick-kshh of the part that bends like an elbow and the low whine of his shoulder that a human could only replicate by sustaining a mmmmm sound against the roof of the mouth.

A truck horn some yards away on the street blares and breaks his concentration. He shifts on his heels and waits for more, but the incident doesn’t escalate. Murdock relaxes his stance when the Soldier does.

“I fell from a train,” he says blithely.

Murdock tips his head and replies in the same tone. “I got chemicals spilled in my eyes as a kid.”

The Soldier squints without meaning to. “How old were you?”

“Nine.”

He doesn’t actually plan to have this conversation here while they’re waiting on four other people to show, so he stows his curiosity. It’s unfortunate that he couldn’t have just asked while they were still at the apartment or even on the walk over. Time had moved at the same pace then as it does now, but only now can he feel every second drag and shudder off him. Murdock senses that their talk on that topic has ended before it could begin and turns to lean his back rather than his shoulder on the beam. The change shows the Soldier his profile rather than his front.

“When she was here Claire mentioned she found you in a dumpster.”

The new angle ends up giving him the best view of the deep flush creeping up Murdock’s neck. It’s hilarious to watch. Even if he doesn’t stammer or fidget and even if the Soldier can’t hear his heartbeat go all unsteady in his chest, he can see the rash of red coloring his skin.

“You were discussing me,” Murdock notes, not affronted but intrigued.

The Soldier doesn’t shy away from the truth. He readily admits it: “I was curious how you had a doctor on your payroll.”

“She’s a nurse.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”
Murdock smiles and offers a faint nod. “She’s good.”

There’s another question nagging at the back of the Soldier’s mind when the door to the warehouse opens. His body goes taut like a piano wire and relaxes a few seconds later when he hears Karen’s heels on the concrete ground.

He wishes she’d wear something easier to run in but supposes she walks stably enough in them to be able to handle herself. Knowing Hell’s Kitchen and the general circumstances she’s bound to have run into before he ever knew her, there’s a huge possibility that she can hold her ground in a modest pair of heels. They’re not very high, when he actually looks at them.

He has to blink and tear his gaze away to stop fussing over it in his mind. She’d tell him he was worrying for nothing if she knew what he was thinking, he knows she would.

“We come bearing caffeine,” Nelson announces, looking warm and awake with the tray of four coffees balanced in one arm. In his other there’s a tray with two more, positioned diagonally from each other. He passes the half-full tray off to Karen and sets the full one down on the chair the Soldier’s standing by. “Coffee, Barnes?”

“Is there a sweet one in there?”

“These ones are sweet,” Karen says, brandishing one corner of her tray to him. Murdock passes behind them to retrieve a coffee from the other tray. “This one’s cinnamon and that one’s vanilla.”

“They all flavored?” he asks cautiously, twisting the cinnamon one from its slot.

“Just a few of them. Foggy said someone was bound to like the sweet stuff.”

“Thanks,” he says with a slow nod, turning to look at Nelson who catches his eye as he’s taking a careful sip of the vanilla coffee Karen just handed him. “Sweet stuff.”

Nelson chokes and Karen laughs. Murdock grins and pats Nelson’s back. The Soldier smiles into the lip of his coffee and tastes the steaming drink inside. His taste buds are still stinging slightly from his brashness with breakfast before, but he can pick up on the twinges of cinnamon woven through the smooth milky coffee. He consumes about half of it without troubling his neighbors for conversation, delighting in the heat that bursts all along his throat.

The door to the warehouse opens again and he stops drinking. He keeps the cup stalled over his mouth just as long as it takes Rogers and Sam Wilson to step inside and close the door behind them. They’re quiet and they move slowly, keeping their shoulders in line so that one never walks ahead of or behind the other.

They and the team exchange pleasantries while the Soldier silently maintains the obstruction between their view of him and his mouth. Nelson offers Sam and Rogers each a coffee that they appear to accept more for the sake of being polite than for any other reason.

“Is there a certain way we’re doing this?” Rogers asks, exhibiting all the diplomatic propriety he lacked when their paths first crossed in Hell’s Kitchen.

The Soldier registers how underdressed he is in present company and flexes his toes in his boots. Murdock’s clean socks stretch and shift around his feet. As an afterthought, he tugs belatedly at the ends of the shirt, drawing the unwilling gaze of Rogers, of course, and resulting in a blank, confusing staring contest. Bucky blinks first.

And then he blinks again before looking away, heat rising beneath his jaw and roaring in his ears.
Murdock appears at his elbow, scuffing the floor quietly with his heel and exhaling through his nose. The Soldier holds his elbow out, an automatic response to Matt announcing his presence so audibly but subtly. Without really needing to, Murdock places his fingers in the crook of his right arm just above the joint.

“Right,” Nelson says after a pause. “Obviously we’re without furniture here. I hope it’s okay if some of us just stand.”

In his periphery the Soldier sees Rogers check with Sam who nods and answers, “Sure.”

“Do you want the chair?” Nelson asks Karen in an aside, probably so that she won’t have to stand in heels.

Jesus hell he wishes she had just come in sweats and boots like he did. She’s lovely, but at what cost if they come under attack again?

Karen waves him off and goes to stand by the wall. The Soldier walks that way, too, and positions himself by a window but not in front of it. He tugs on Murdock’s wrist when he starts to walk that way and relaxes when he ends up between the Soldier and Karen. He doesn’t need a buffer from her but he likes that she has a buffer from him, even if it puts Murdock on his left side so that he can be nearest to the window in case of an attack.

Nelson fumbles with the empty drink tray and decisively sets it atop the smashed heap that was formerly a table before the Soldier happened to it. Rogers and Sam Wilson look more inclined to remain standing but ultimately sit when Nelson scrounges up enough chairs for the three of them. There’s a fourth one near the metal cabinet on the other side of the room as well, should they feel the need for it. The Soldier keeps it in the edge of his thoughts, aware of it on the off chance that either Karen or Murdock needs him to be later.

“We thought it would help our client if you could present the facts as you recall them,” Nelson says, producing his phone from the cross-body satchel he’s been carrying since he came in. He fiddles with it briefly, pressing a series of buttons and holding it up so that Sam and Rogers can see the screen. When he turns it so it faces him again, the Soldier can see the red circle in the middle of the display with the numbers all set to zero. Needlessly in a loud voice, Nelson adds, “This conversation is going to be recorded, unless there are any objections.”

Rogers looks pale and sort of ill. Sam Wilson is carved from granite beside him: every bit the resolved well of calm that Rogers plays at but that he can’t truly tap of himself. He’s a rock.

“Foggy,” Murdock chimes in from the Soldier’s left. “Maybe before we dive right into it…”

“What?” the Soldier snaps, daring Murdock to speak for him.

Murdock hesitates. Rogers ducks his head and laces his fingers together between his knees, knuckles going white with tension.

“Nothing,” Murdock cedes gently, in a voice that doesn’t sound his. “Never mind.”

Nelson gives them a final sweeping glance over his shoulder and starts the recording, setting the phone face-up on his thigh. He starts simple, getting them to begin with the attempt on Nick Fury’s life that has the Soldier bristling and holding his breath at Murdock’s side. Rogers explains chasing the Soldier and throwing his shield, talks about seeing Fury’s body in a morgue, and details his travels with Natasha Romanov, who—he...

His heart churns icily and strangles the breath that stops in his throat.
KGB operative NATALIA ALIANOVNA ROMANOVA received hand-to-hand and weapons training under supervision of THE ASSET.


Murdock must sense his posture stiffening beside him because he nudges the Soldier’s ribs with his knuckles. His fingers are still poised on his elbow, actively doing nothing more than maintaining a constant connection until that brush of his hand that bridges the gap between what the Soldier can’t feel with what he can: a phantom weight against metal and then warmth and pressure, the outline of his knuckles pressing into his side.

Murdock nods his head slowly at his unvoiced question, trusting the Soldier’s eyes to be trained on him when he does. There’s a serious set to Murdock’s jaw that looks out of place for him. Even considering Murdock’s characteristic persistence in making sure the Soldier doesn’t go to pieces for one thing or another, that edge to him now is more than just determination and force of will. He almost looks…wounded, personally.

The Soldier hasn’t a single earthly idea what to do with that, so he stops staring at Murdock and looks at Rogers who’s been talking all the while.

“I ordered Maria Hill to fire on the targets. At the time we were still on the Insight Helicarrier—that is, Bucky Barnes and I were still on the Helicarrier. Sam Wilson was on the Triskelion.”

Rogers presses his lips together and the Soldier brings his arms closer to his body in some flawed attempt to make himself smaller. He only succeeds in trapping Murdock’s hand against his side. Although Murdock doesn’t complain or make any indication that he’s even noticed the reaction, he can’t help but fixate on the differences between Murdock’s hand and the Soldier’s metal arm crushed up against the side of his ribcage: soft versus solid, malleable versus unyielding, warm versus cool—even through his shirt.

The Soldier’s grateful Murdock is as discreet as he is observant. He might flee from the building if called out on the chaos his heart is causing behind his sternum. Murdock can hear that happening to him, too, no doubt.

While his first instincts are to detach and close himself off from the fear associated with Murdock’s razor sharp perception, neither happens. He can’t loosen the tension in his muscles or command his body to be less disposed to flight, but he could separate from the inclination. Somehow he knows he could, if he willed himself to.

It’s a choice between can’t and could. It’s a choice between the thing he wants more than anything but that he can’t have, and the thing that has been written into the schema of his identity as sheer reflex—a reflex that is pushing him even now to shut down, to withdraw, and to check out simply because it is the only response that will protect him.

Only when Murdock leans into his side just like Karen had at the church does he realize that he has another option. To stay, to feel.

He unlocks the trap of his arm so that Murdock can free his hand and holds his breath when Murdock makes no move to do so. His arm settles back in against his side, holding that hand naturally in place without crushing it as he had initially. The back of Murdock’s hand skates along his ribs, leaving him with only the suggestion of his knuckles and traces here and there of his metal arm keeping them there but not weighing them down.

Stay. Feel.
His heartbeat doesn’t slow down in his chest, but his feet don’t twitch to carry him away from here either. As much as his mind still screams at him that this peace is false and that it will break with no trouble at all, he forces that darkness out of his thoughts. It simmers down to whispers and he breathes, smelling coffee, traces of perfume, and the smell of Murdock that is a baseline of his own smell now.

He would feel guilty for missing most of what Rogers is saying, but some of it he has flickering memories of and if it’s just the truth repeated from his perspective. This mock trial of sorts is really more a test of the Soldier’s ability to withstand it, which he is. It’s not necessary that anyone moderates how he withstands it.

“The aircraft exploded around us. Barnes was trapped under the fallen debris. I helped him out and attempted to establish a truce. We fought. I fell.”

Rogers stops and looks supremely discomfited by the vast enormity that he left out in the span of those last few sentences. The Soldier can only replay the memory in his mind. It’s one of the few he has no trouble recalling.

Where Rogers sits in his chair, the slight wilt in his shoulders makes him look small and young, chastised despite the only testimony so far being his own and that of Sam Wilson. As he’s been wont to do, sparingly, Nelson interjects with a question.

“How did you attempt to establish a truce?” he asks gently.

“I told him his name. I told him what I could about who he used to be. He…” Rogers flicks his gaze to the Soldier, badly concealing a grimace at whatever expression is on the Soldier’s face. “He attacked me; said I was his mission. Something I said…reminded him who he was.”

The Soldier sets his jaw and looks away, directing his sightline out the window over his shoulder. He listens without watching Rogers continue. It’s easier. Even in a court of law no one could force him to look. They would make him and the world see, but only the Soldier could make the decision to look, to rehabilitate, to remember, or to forget.

“I don’t think it brought him back, but he did stop. Before that it didn’t seem like he knew how. Do you…need me to say what I said again, for the recording?”

_You’re my mission._

_Then finish it. ‘Cause I’m with you…_

He should have grabbed that chair while he could have gotten away with it. Falling into a silent, staring shell on the floor would alarm his companions more than slinking casually into a chair.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Nelson murmurs, saving them, both of them equally, from the truth: from what is only retold reality that favors him rather than condemns him. The Soldier watches the flickering shadows of birds on the roof through the window. Oblivious to the floundering husk of a man behind him, Nelson continues. “You said you fell after.”

“I was unconscious, had lost a lot of blood by that point. I don’t remember swimming to the surface.”

Nelson presses him now where he hasn’t previously. “But you woke up on land.”

“Yes.” Rogers’ voice is uncertain and the Soldier can tell his focus is swinging toward him by the awed tint to the silence. He clears his throat. “I haven’t been…couldn’t explain it. Before.”
And then all the eyes in the room are trained on him. The Soldier pushes off the wall he’s slumped against, tearing himself out from Murdock’s grasp to move. There’s little else he can think to do with his energy, his fear, his agitation, his shame. As soon as he convinces himself that it’s an excess of the first three that have him walking a path along the wall, he really stops and checks himself.

Energy courses through him like fire, but it is ingrained in his system as much as anything else. Fear frozen over but thawed anew sits heavy in his heart, ever present. Agitation sends his fingers twitching.

Shame.

Hatred.

Such burning hatred for a million things and for nothing and for no one but himself. All at once, weapons clamor inside his head without people to man them or to be killed by them but that cause violence within him all the same.

He had thought himself accustomed to violence, but here it is demanding that he acknowledge it and himself as its home, its creator. The Soldier stops his pacing, alerting to how absurd he must look prowling like a caged animal—how much more a weapon than a man he must seem. His hands drop dully to his sides. This, no one needs to tell him, will not be allowed in court. It would not be allowed in prison either, not the kind they would put him in.

Someone calls his name and he opens his eyes. He thought he could do this. He thought he could stand to be torn apart in order to be pieced back together.

What a fool.

“Bucky.”

Karen dares to murmur his name once more. She’s a few feet behind him, doesn’t try to touch him or free him or console him. None of those things are possible, if they ever were. He’s glad she doesn’t presume to be the exception—that she doesn’t assume he will accept that from her or that he will allow her to accept it from him, disregarding whatever he has accepted or allowed before.

“How are you okay?” she asks in that same tender, muted tone. “Bucky?”

He shakes his head, blurred around the edges and feeling faintly as if he never had edges to begin with. Keeping his hands down at his sides he turns slowly and shakes his head again, eyes cast down.

“Hey,” she whispers, catching his eyes and coming to stand more in his sightline.

He shakes his head.

“What is it?”

“I can’t—I…” He sucks in a quick inhale, vaguely aware of Rogers and Sam Wilson standing to their feet behind him. “I can’t do this. I don’t want to do this.”

“Bucky,” she tries again, but he’s still shaking his head and his heart is running from him, faster than he knew it could go. He can’t tell if she’s panicked, she keeps her voice so steady and so calm. “Bucky, at the church, do you remember when we lit the candles?”

Her question startles him and stops him short of sprinting for the nearest exit. He frowns and squints,
managing a strangled, “What?”

She keeps her voice low and soothing. Of the rest of their party, Rogers and Murdock might be the only ones who can hear her words to him.

He appreciates the gesture and a moment later, appreciates that he can see it for what it is. Karen sees him claim that realization and her smile widens a fraction to touch her eyes. She’s tamed him, whether she knows it or not. He suspects she doesn’t, though. If she had ever made it her goal to control him, he would have built high walls and barbed fences and oiled moats of fire to keep her out.

But she didn’t, so he didn’t. And now here they are.

Whatever fire he would have lit inside himself to smoke her out is tranquilly replaced by the memory of candlelight. It’s a memory. It’s hers, his, theirs: two lonely flames dancing against red glass, not the wildfire that would have scorched him through from the inside out.

Peaceful.

Her eyes are bright and clear when he looks at her. She’s not ashamed to have brought him back. She’s not ashamed that he needed. What a terribly human thing of him: to have needed anything and to have been too proud and too ashamed to just say that he did.

“Okay?” she asks with a tiny, impossibly happy smile.

He takes a deep breath and then one more. Her expression doesn’t waver. She doesn’t look away from him, nor does he look away from her. Claire was here with him before and she’d said she had no reason to be afraid of him. Karen’s not afraid of him either and he never wants either of them to be, but he can’t fathom why they aren’t.

“Yeah,” he sighs. There can be no other response. “Yes.”

“Let’s go.”

She doesn’t take his arm and he’s relieved for it. His outburst was childish, foolish. He’s wasted their time for nothing.

“Sorry,” he mutters to the room in general when Karen returns to Murdock’s side. An unpleasant pinch blooms in his chest when he sees Murdock take her arm as if to steady himself, but he can’t think about it now. There’s no room for whatever that emotion is or why he’s having it. He turns his attention more solely on Steve, capturing his face with his eyes in that intimate moment of reclamation that skitters and passes as quickly as it came. He says, “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t…”

But Sam touches Rogers’ arm and tips his chin to communicate something that goes unsaid between them. Rogers makes a face like he’s dying and nods jerkily.

“I forgive you.”

The ugly cacophony of murderous filth beneath the Soldier’s skin quiets and smooths over. Forgiveness is a balm to his wounds. He might not believe yet that he deserves it, but there it is, presented to him throat bared and belly up: incorrigible Rogers with his heart in his eyes.

All he can say next is the truth that he owes. “I pulled you out of the water.”
“Why?”

“Because…” He looks down and then back up, seeing Sam edge slowly toward Nelson’s chair where the latter is also standing.

*Because it wasn’t the end. Because it couldn’t be.*

“Because you…needed me to.”

Rogers’ eyebrows loosen, tension going out of his face as if an interior switch has been thrown. The Soldier braces himself for Rogers’ disappointment, chanting that he doesn’t care and that it’s Rogers’ fault if he expects anything more than that from him now. But Rogers only smiles, a small, vulnerable curve to both sides of his mouth that flickers despondently in his eyes.

He isn’t ready for that to be enough and his heart squeezes awfully, painfully. For the first time he wonders if Rogers looks at him with everything he has because the Soldier has made a habit of doing the same. Not that he has much, but he’s made few efforts to conceal the little he has left anymore.

Perhaps Rogers does have an idea—the very faintest—of who he is and not just who he was once. Maybe he heard the shouts stirring in the Soldier’s heart saying, *This isn’t the end. It can’t be.*

All the feeling in Rogers’ eyes, it doesn’t bleed remorse or apologies. It whispers, *Bucky.*

Recognition and forgiveness and gratitude and relief. Pain. Solidarity in releasing that pain into another’s thrall.

Nelson clears his throat. The Soldier angles his head in that direction and sees Nelson thumbing the phone before pocketing it. His eyebrows shoot up to his hairline and he shows the Soldier a thumbs-up.

Before he can bury his reaction, the Soldier rolls his eyes. The gesture is strangely fond and Nelson cracks a smile to have earned it. Karen and Murdock rejoin Nelson, flanking him and engaging Sam in an easy, idle conversation the Soldier doesn’t monitor.

“Thanks,” Rogers tells him, taking a slow, unassuming step back, though they hadn’t even stood within arms’ reach of each other before he moved away.

“What?”

“For saving my life,” Rogers says, the lines of his face softening from their previously worried severity. “Thank you.”

The Soldier blinks, stopping himself from hissing, *I nearly took your life.*

“Would you…prefer it if I didn’t call you Bucky, for now?” he asks haltingly, fumbling for words he clearly hadn’t expected to use today.

“You can,” he answers thickly, panicking at the way his permission knocks down all the defenses Rogers had left against him. It’s frightening, the extent of that power and the jarring openness on that familiar-but-not face. The Soldier also takes a step back, preparing to fortify those defenses for both of them even if Rogers himself doesn’t see any use in doing so. “You shouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

He shakes his head and pointedly avoids the abundance of hope in Rogers’ eyes. Trying for stoicism
he says, “Because I could hurt you and you’d let me.”

“No, I…” Rogers considers him and swallows hard. His wounded, wide-eyed expression turns mollified and then steels into something more suitable and infinitely less terrifying.

But it would not do to be cruel for the sake of teaching him when Rogers is already paying attention and accepting his terms. The Soldier longs for a division from cruelty and from the gnawing ache of resentment that hums inside him at all times. People here are working with him, helping him to heal and learn new things and to communicate in more ways than he thought was possible.

“I can’t…hurt you like I did.”

“I’m here, I’m alive,” Rogers says as if it’s enough to nullify the Soldier’s wrongs.

He makes his voice soft and holds Rogers’ eyes with a look in his own that is anything but soft or cruel. “That’s not what I mean.”

Rogers’ shoulders stiffen and then slump, as if he had made up his mind to argue on the point but stopped himself short of carrying through. His eyes are harder when he catches the Soldier’s eyes again, but they’re as glassy as they’ve been, shining for his optimism or for his affection or for his sorrow. The Soldier doesn’t try to name it. He can’t reciprocate a single one, not now.

“All right, Barnes.”

The Soldier grits his teeth but allows the shift. It’s appropriate, for now. He slides his right hand out of its glove and slowly extends it for Rogers to shake. He looks fittingly bewildered but takes it.

Rogers’ skin is warm but not sweating. The ridge between his palm and fingers are clear of blisters or callouses. There’s power in his grip that is not engineered to subdue or to threaten but to protect. Bucky—

The Soldier wants his own grip to feel like that. He yearns to protect and not to harm.

“You said you wanted a truce.”

“Oh.”

Rogers blinks and squeezes the Soldier’s hand once before releasing him. The impression of his palm stays sharp and defined in the Soldier’s mind. Sam approaches, looking between them with keen, seeing eyes.

“Hey.”

The Soldier nods and holds his hand out again, bone tired and functioning on automatic responses. Sam takes his hand and he realizes too late that he would have been well within his rights not to want to touch the Soldier after the last time they met—any other time they’ve met, honestly.

“I’m sorry about your wings,” he blurts, trying not to yank his hand out of Sam’s firm but escapable grip. His hold is powerful and amply strong just like Rogers’ is.

“Aw they weren’t mine,” Sam counters airily, letting their hands separate. “Sides, I’m all right.” He knocks on his chest with a loose fist, the one the Soldier had just been holding. “While we’re airing it out, though, there was this one time when I flew up on you and kicked you. Like, several feet.”

The Soldier frowns, sliding his gaze to Rogers, who nods. Straight-faced he says, “Yeah, he did.
You both flew that day.”

A muscle in the Soldier’s jaw quivers. Rogers glances at Sam, cracking a smile. Sam rolls his eyes but chuckles at his joke, and the Soldier, as ludicrous as the situation is in general, huffs an annoyed but mildly amused sigh. They’re ribbing him. It’s too soon, but the intention itself is harmless enough.

Sam apparently has the dual effect of giving Rogers courage and calm simultaneously. Meanwhile, all the Soldier can do is clumsily excuse himself and shuffle back to his team where they receive without words or fuss of any kind.

As they’re preparing to leave, Nelson fusses with disposing responsibly of their collective garbage while Karen finally agrees to sit. Sam and Rogers offer to stick around a while longer and let the Soldier and his team leave first so that they don’t have to walk together, but the Soldier has other ideas about getting them back to the office safely.

“I think you should go out first,” he tells Rogers, looking at Sam before he continues. “I can guard the rear, but Karen and Foggy need cover from the front, too. Please.”

Sam looks surprised and then honored at the request. Rogers merely smiles and acquiesces.

“Maybe we ought to walk in groups of threes. Matt can come with us,” Sam proposes. “Karen and Foggy can go with you.”

“If we do that and one of us gets swamped, we’re gonna be bogged down by assailants and trying to protect civilians at the same time. I don’t like putting them in harm’s way like that.”

“I guess partners is out of the question then.” Rogers thinks out loud. “If we do it like you said with us in front and you in the back, where does that leave Murdock?”

“With me,” the Soldier replies, forgetting himself and that Murdock’s abilities aren’t known. He revises: “We’re more likely to be faced with an attack from the front and anyone we come across is bound to be looking for me, which should give us enough time to provide cover for them. If you get overwhelmed, Karen and Foggy can come back for Matt and I can move forward to assist you. That way they’re protected from all angles by soldiers and heroes.”

He tries not to wince around the taste of soldiers and heroes in his mouth, an endeavor made easier by the delighted smile that breaks across Sam’s face. His eyes light up at the word hero.

Rogers’ reaction is more neutral. He considers the strategy, accepts it as sound, and doesn’t question it further. The Soldier has no cause, then, to confess that he also needs distance between them so that he and Rogers wouldn’t overhear each other’s conversations.

Karen, Murdock, and Nelson join them by the exit and file out neatly after Sam and Rogers. The Soldier explains while they’re assuming a protective position with Sam and Rogers walking out farther ahead and he and Murdock lingering back. Karen and Nelson don’t object to his method, though Karen does argue for Murdock’s sake that he should walk with them in case they do get jumped.

Murdock shrugs like Karen’s asking him about the weather and not about his protection. He says, “I trust him.”

The Soldier’s heart leaps up into his throat. Karen’s gaze turns soft and she doesn’t argue beyond that point. She trusts him, too. Nelson dispels the tension hanging around the Soldier’s head space by saying, “Yeah, I mean, he’s no Wade Wilson, but he gets the job done, right?”
Murdock scoffs and the Soldier smiles. He’s happy that he isn’t the only one who thinks to mention his friend and ally in conversation, especially when it’s been a few days since anyone’s seen him. It also makes him happy, almost deliriously, that Nelson is so openly fascinated by Wilson and that he never smother or hides his curiosity about him.

“You haven’t heard from Wilson?” he asks when Nelson and Karen start talking about something else.

“No, but he goes a long time without making contact sometimes. If Hydra’s after him now, it’s not hard to imagine that he’d have trouble moving around New York undetected.”

“But you haven’t heard him. You haven’t heard him anywhere.”

Murdock hesitates but says, “No.”

The Soldier sighs, not liking that Murdock has gone days without hearing a peep out of anyone with a mouth like Wilson. It’s just not natural.

“I should have gone with him,” the Soldier mumbles.


“We’ve been lucky so far, but that luck’s gonna run out and someone’s going to get hurt, bad, because of me. You shouldn’t be around me.”

“And here I thought I’d proven I could keep up,” Murdock counters teasingly, purposely being obtuse.

“I don’t want anyone else getting hurt because of me. Honestly it’s a miracle civilians weren’t killed or wounded that first night on the bridge.”

“They weren’t in any danger from you, Barnes.”

“But they were. They were, Matt.”

“You can’t do that to yourself,” Murdock insists, immune or pretending at immunity to the Soldier using his first name. “You can’t assume the blame for what other people do. In the short time that I’ve known you I’ve seen that you don’t enjoy hurting people. No matter what’s going on beneath the surface—no matter how hard they push you to lose control—there’s no malice in your fight.”

“How can you even know that?” he grumbles back, wary of Karen and Nelson who are still chatting away, giving him and Murdock their privacy.

“I grew up believing I had the devil in me.”

“The devil?” the Soldier murmurs back, mildly astonished at the idea.

Murdock huffs a soft, unbidden laugh that lingers in the curve of his mouth a while after the sound has stopped. He lifts the shoulder nearest the Soldier and says, “It was something my grandmother used to say, about my dad. God-fearing Catholic, my grandmother was.”

“Ah.”

“I’ll tell you about that, too, sometime,” Murdock promises. “But I know rage and where the line that splits it from malice is. Maybe I can never know what you feel when it comes over you, but I know I have it in me. My father had it in him. You can’t let it consume you just because you let it out in a
fight. Give yourself time to have more than that feeling. You can judge what you are then.”

The Soldier considers asking about Murdock’s father or what it means to have a devil inside him. Murdock’s willingness to let heavy subjects go in favor of lighter ones has him shying away from it. He squirrels away his questions and changes his tune.

“I might just take the bed tonight.”

He’s reeling, raw and drained from the miniature hell of guilt that this morning has been. Murdock’s bed is probably every bit as comfortable as everything else in Murdock’s apartment is.

“Really?” Murdock marvels, sounding genuinely amazed. “I haven’t been able to get you to sleep on a surface that wasn’t the floor since you agreed to stay.”

“Yeah, well,” he mutters. “Wearing your clothes and using your soap already. What’s sleeping in your bed gonna do that’s not been done already?”

Murdock doesn’t answer for a moment, but there’s warmth in the apples of his cheeks. He shakes his head like he’s trying to clear it from his face lest it bother or offend his walking companion. The Soldier wishes Murdock didn’t have to worry about that sort of thing, but he doesn’t know how to put it to words.

“We wouldn’t have to share clothes if you would just let me take you shopping, you know.”

“Bad enough I can’t foot the bill for your legal help,” the Soldier mumbles. “I’m gonna repay you for it when I can. I will.”

Just as Rogers had before, Murdock opens his mouth to object but stops short. The look on his face is bewildered.

“You know if you need anything you can ask. Right, Barnes? You know that?”

“I guess so.”

Murdock keeps his pace even, unimpeded. He tilts his head like he does when he finds something suspect. The Soldier sighs and tips his chin back to watch the sky.

“Yeah, Murdock, I kn—.”

Murdock freezes. The Soldier doesn’t think about what happens next, only shoving Murdock into the wall beneath an awning and vaulting himself at Karen and Nelson. He gets them down before the bullets fly.

“Oh God, Matt!”

The Soldier’s stomach sinks at Karen’s scream, but not a second later, Murdock yells back, “I’m fine! Get them out of here!”

Sam and Rogers run in their direction. Rogers bolts for Murdock at the Soldier’s redirect.

Sam stays with the Soldier’s group and keeps close to the brick wall. He shepherds them to a side door while the Soldier shields Nelson and Karen with his back. The building’s owner opens the side door for them at Sam’s barked instruction, allowing Karen and Nelson shelter from the gunfire.

With a single terse shout for them to lock the door and call the police, Sam forces the door shut. Rogers and Murdock are taking cover from an unidentified shooter while a second attacker leaps
down from the roof.

“Can you see?” Sam asks, bullets ricocheting around them.

“No.”

But he fumbles the Ka-Bar out of his boot in one fluid motion, snagging Murdock’s sock on the way, and aims for the thigh of the guy trying to get the drop on Murdock and Rogers. Bereft of his only weapon when the guy goes down, he rubs at his forehead with the heel of his hand and slams his shoulders into the dumpster at their backs. They’re pinned down.

It’s ironic that a dumpster would be the thing saving their hides right this second. He’d been so ready to tease Murdock for the next year about Claire discovering him in one.

“Takes a lotta courage, don’t it?” Sam drawls, deeply unimpressed and interrupting the Soldier’s train of thought. He waits for Sam to mention Murdock’s blindness, but he says, with the same ironic disdain, “Shooting at a bunch of unarmed people.”

“You don’t have a gun?” the Soldier asks, sounding as irritated as he really is.

“It’s been a quiet few days!” Sam bites back, equally agitated.

So of course that’s when another stream of gunfire opens on them from a different angle and three more guys run into their alley from the street. Looking skyward once more, the Soldier mutters, “Not a fair fight anywhere.”

“Did somebody say spray cheese?” a familiar voice booms, and not a moment too soon.

The Soldier smacks his temple on the corner of the dumpster in his haste to look behind him for Murdock and Rogers, checking to see if they’re still covered. Sam draws him back by the shoulder with the firm, serious touch of war in his hand.

In front of them Wilson faces off the three attackers on his own, absorbing bullets in his back and in his legs without flinching. After a handful of seconds, the hail of bullets from the roof cuts off, one stream of gunfire at a time. Sam stands and warily approaches Wilson, not getting too close but obviously ready to back him if he’s needed.

Secure in both the absence of gunfire and in having Wilson and Sam both at his back, he goes to retrieve his knife from the whimpering man’s thigh, knocking him out before he gets the opportunity to try anything stupid. The man goes limp and the Soldier’s hand lingers indecisively on the hilt of the knife.

He’s not sure if yanking it would be the best thing for the guy’s chances. Another masked, red-suited man swings down from the roof, immediately raising his hands when the Soldier abandons the Ka-Bar to lift the unconscious agent’s gun. He trains it on the red-suited stranger, geared up to shoot him center-mass.

“I’m with Deadpool!” he protests. “I’m with Wade.”

The Soldier tentatively takes his finger off the trigger. The second masked man cautiously raises his arms, winds the gossamer threads protruding from his wrists around his hands, and pulls down so hard he doubles over. Four wriggling bodies tumble off the roof and land in heaps at their feet. The Soldier lowers the gun to his side.

“Name’s Spiderman,” the new guy says. The Soldier can imagine him grinning cheekily from behind
his mask.

“Barnes,” Murdock calls, stepping out with Rogers from their defensive position.

“I’m all right.” He waves in Murdock’s direction with his metal arm and sees Murdock relax, much to Rogers’ obvious confusion. He ejects the magazine from the Browning, slides the magazine in between his boot and the leg of his sweatpants, checks the barrel, and sets the Browning back down. “Wilson’s here.”

“I gathered that, actually.”

Spiderman lifts one hand in the direction of the roof and shoots something from his wrist. The Soldier flinches away from him, unwittingly giving Spiderman more room to swing up onto the rooftop. He frowns at the spot where Spiderman had been standing and shakes his head.

Superheroes.

He crouches to retrieve Murdock’s white cane where he dropped it and slides it back into Murdock’s right hand. Wilson takes down the last guy in the alley with an assist from Sam when the Soldier turns around. He catches Rogers’ eyes and nods, grateful and hoping to communicate that he is with his eyes, with the slow, upward curl of his mouth.

Rogers’ nose tints pink across the bridge and through his cheeks. The Soldier averts his eyes, more to let it stop there than because he’s embarrassed or uncomfortable. He reaches for Murdock’s arm and leads him to the door Karen and Nelson had disappeared through.

“Wilson & Wilson, bam!” he hears Wilson enthuse. “We make a great team, buddy!”

“Yeah man, sure,” Sam huffs, grinning slightly at Wilson.

Battle camaraderie suffused with adrenaline is a great thing.

“Foggy and Karen?” Murdock calls from the Soldier’s side, addressing both Sam and the Soldier. He’d been listening for them when the first shots were fired, clearly.

“I got ‘em,” Sam announces, slipping around the edge of the alley, presumably for the front entrance where he’ll be seen through the windows.

“Tin man!” Wilson preens once Sam passes him by. “Did you miss me, baby?” The Soldier sincerely tries to be annoyed, but he’s just too pleased at this outcome. He’s about to say so, but Wilson holds up his hand to caution him. “Whoa Nelly, you’re bleeding.”

“What?”

“What?” Murdock echoes.

“From where?” Rogers asks, looking chagrined to have asked when the Soldier tosses a glance over his shoulder at him.

The Soldier pats his front down with both hands, searching for the cause. A thick line of it oozes down his ear and his hands go still, stomach flipping at the placement. He tears off his right glove to probe at his ear and then along the side of his head. Wilson winces with him when he feels it, eyes fluttering closed at the burst of pain that floods his senses. His hand comes back red, dripping with the stuff and trembling.
“That’s head wounds for you,” Wilson says calmly, the words sounding like a reply more than a statement.

“What?” Murdock says again, voice thick with worry that the Soldier sighs at.


“It’s like he says, Murdock. He might bleed on you, but he’s gonna be fine. We just needed to meet the wound quota. Last chapter was kinda, well, bloodless. Here buddy, I got dis.”

The Soldier doesn’t know what Wilson’s going on about, but he stays still when Wilson approaches with his hands clearly visible. Sam opens the door at their side and steps out with Karen and Nelson behind him for Murdock’s benefit.

They stay inside, but Nelson has to physically stop Karen from coming to investigate the blood on the Soldier’s face. Sam holds his post by the door and Rogers remains a sentinel at the Soldier’s back. Murdock ducks inside so that his friends can see that he’s alive. Karen frets over him like she can’t decide whether to hug him or shake him.

Nelson stands at her side pretending to be just as worried although he knows better in actuality. Murdock bears it all silently, only offering softly spoken apologies here and there for scaring Karen to death.

“What happened to him?” he hears her ask either Murdock or Sam.

He tries to twist to look at her, but Wilson makes an ‘ah-ah’ sound at him and blocks his face from turning with his free hand. Wilson’s always careful not to touch him needlessly, and now is no exception to that rule. He’d only make contact with the Soldier’s jaw if he refused to let Wilson keep him in place, holding him stationary without touching him.

It’s smart. For all his strutting, Wilson has never once employed anything less than a clear, unshakeable understanding of the Soldier’s boundaries, real or imagined.

“S a good thing this shirt’s black, Murdock,” he says out the corner of his mouth, flicking his gaze only once at Wilson when his other hand comes near his face. Wilson scoops at the worst of the blood with a red square of smooth cotton, sweeping the material around his ear to clear the mess. He tosses that one and then a second before taking to the Soldier’s head with a length of clean white gauze. The whispers embellishing the silence of the alley drive him slightly mad. To no one in particular, he insists, “It’s just a graze.”

Wilson, not to be affected by noise or a lack of it, hums a chipper tune under his breath. Sometimes words make it through his mumbling. The Soldier surprises himself by listening for them.

“Here he comes, holy gee! See him dreaming his way down the street, here he comes. Woe is me! If he smiles I’ll just faint at his feet. Should I show him I…would it please him, would it bore him? There he goes, passing by. Oh what a guy! Gee…Oh golly he’s so handsome and tall, so whatchama call it, masculine!”

The Soldier bites his lip to stop his laugh, but Wilson’s head jerks to follow the sound. His hands stay focused and gentle where he continues folding the bandage into a secure hold.

“We gotta stop meeting like this, tin man.”

“What, with you serenading me in combat zones?” the Soldier muses. Wilson laughs his usual big
laugh and holds his hands out, guilty but free in his guilt. “I worried they got to you.”

“Who, me? Aww Sarge, you know I’m indestructible.”

The Soldier fights the urge to shake his head. He waits for Wilson to drop his hands and looks over his shoulder. Rogers is keeping vigil with his eyes looking out to the street in case more people come. His gaze ticks slowly to meet the Soldier’s, pausing reluctantly at the bandage on his head.

“Rogers.”

His gaze flits back to the Soldier’s. He hums once in question.

“This is Wade Wilson,” he says tipping his head in Wilson’s direction. He watches Rogers look around him and feels the sentiment in his heart freezing over at Rogers’ hardening eyes.

“Deadpool.”

“Captain Devastating-Face!” Wilson croons, either oblivious or willfully ignorant of Rogers’ rigid stance. “Fancy meeting you here in this alley.”

“I’m sure.” Rogers brings his attention back to the Soldier, both of them blinking when they realize at the same time that the Soldier’s been staring at him. “You know this guy?”

“I do.”

“All right,” Rogers allows, looking unhappy but saying nothing about it.

“Wait, wait,” Nelson says from his right and Wilson’s left. “He’s Wilson?”

“I’m Wilson!” he confirms cheerfully, rounding on Nelson in time with the sirens starting up several blocks away. “Whoa, what, is everyone in this universe woefully attractive? What the F, man.”

The Soldier plucks another red square of cloth from a compartment on Wilson’s belt and notes Karen’s blush and Nelson’s stammering. Murdock merely adjusts his glasses. The Soldier fits his other glove back on, hand stained with blood but dry.


“I…what?”

Karen badly muffles a laugh and Murdock grins. Nelson’s face goes red. The Soldier trots back to the agent with his Ka-Bar, resigned to leaving the knife behind, beautiful though it is. In the spirit of negotiation, he works the guys’ belt and holster off, fastens the belt as tightly around his hips as he can without belt loops, and slides the Browning into the holster.

Sam leaves his post by the door to walk toward the street and says, “Steve,” summoning Rogers immediately to his side. They run to the end of the alley and check the growing wail of sirens.

He jogs back to the door where Nelson looks thoroughly scandalized and Wilson, Matt, and Karen just look amused. In spite of how pleased he is with whatever he’s said to Nelson, duty inevitably distracts Wilson from his fun.

“How we lookin’, Spidey?” Wilson calls up at the roof.
The Soldier angles his head back to look for Spiderman but doesn’t see him. A few seconds later he hears his voice: “We got a bus five minutes out using the main roads.”

“Like a…school bus?” Wilson asks, snickering. “Not much of an emergency response.”

“An ambulance, Deadpool,” Spiderman intones, exasperated and peeking over the edge of the roof. “We should head out. I don’t see any more hostiles in the immediate area, but if yellow tape gets us stuck here we’re gonna be sitting ducks.”

“The spider’s got a point,” Wilson exclaims.

Nelson speaks from Murdock’s side. “We can stay here. Barnes, you should go with them.”

“We’ll stay, too,” Sam shouts over the growing whine of sirens. He points a question in Wilson’s direction: “You got a way to coordinate?”

“Like I’m not making this up as I go along?” he replies.

Spiderman leaps down from the roof. “We’ll take him to a safe house. When it’s clear, send someone to the New York Bulletin. There’ll be a message with a location. Deadpool, come on.”

The Soldier turns to Murdock, Karen, and Nelson. “I’ll see you soon.”

“You better,” Karen says, not even shaken anymore. There’s still some pink in her cheeks from laughing at Wilson’s heavy handed flirtation.

“Keep them safe,” he tells Nelson, whose eyes widen as he nods. The Soldier looks at Rogers and Sam to include them in that order, briskly claps his hand on Murdock’s shoulder, and takes off down the alley after Wilson and Spiderman. “I hope it’s your safe house we’re going to, Wilson. We don’t have anything like that at our disposal.”

“Don’t give yourself wrinkles, tin man.” He gives a little salute while they’re running. “It’s all good.”

They pass the warehouse where the meeting was held and go north. Their path runs parallel to the Hudson River. Wilson appears to know more about where they’re headed than Spiderman does, but it’s Spiderman who leads them. He swings ahead to make sure the path is clear while Wilson gives directions from the back. It doesn’t occur to the Soldier until they run into trouble in Manhattan that they’re guarding him the way he made it his job to guard Nelson and Karen.

On the roof of an apartment on Lenox Avenue, they stop. Spiderman looks unhappy about where they are, but Wilson waves off his concerns and assures the Soldier that there’s no problem.

“Does he even know we’re here, Deadpool?”

“Spidey, we didn’t know we were gonna be here until like, an hour ago. I drop by unannounced all the time. Weas won’t mind.”

“Because you’re on such good terms with your arms dealer,” Spiderman says, laying it on thick how unimpressed he is. The Soldier can hear him rolling his eyes behind the mask. “I don’t like this. You know I don’t like this.”

“Honey,” Wilson coos, attempting to defuse the argument before it starts. “You know I only have eyes for you.”

“Can it, will you?”
The Soldier crosses his arms and flicks his gaze back and forth between them, supremely confused at the situation. He feels like he’s been well and truly forgotten when Spiderman turns to him and crows, “You think he won’t tell his friends at Hydra that we brought him Public Enemy number one?”

“Oh puh-leaze. Sarge is like a hundred times better looking and two hundred times more badass than John Dillinger.”

“Thank you?”

“You’re welcome. And hell-o, Weasel worked for them for a while, but he was totally pulling the wolf over their eyes the whole time he was there.” He points his face in the Soldier’s direction and says, “There was a teleportation device involved. It was really cool.”

Spiderman heaves a blustery sigh and taps his foot. Wilson waves his hands.

“What? It’s neato having a genius in your corner.”

“Yeah you’d know, I guess,” Spiderman mumbles. “And you mean he was pulling the wool over their eyes. Hydra. He was pulling the wool over their eyes.”

“If you say so, baby boy.”

“Deadpool, I’ve told you not to—”

“So tin man, here’s the deets. My good frenemy Weasel lives here. It’s like Spidey said, he’s my weaponeer and contract nerd.”

“You said he had ties to Hydra.”

In his periphery Spiderman crosses his arms. Wilson rubs the back of his head through his mask. Forcing the bravado a bit, he says, “Yeah and a teleportation device. You’ve got selective hearing, buddy.”

“Explain.”

“It was a stupid thing. Happened years ago, before…you know.”

Wilson fumbles momentarily with his thumbs before bunching his mask up over his brow. He gestures in Spiderman’s direction. Spiderman doesn’t move or volunteer to speak for him.

“It happened before I tried cleaning up my act—I mean, cleaning it up for real and not just for show. He got left at a facility. They found out he was useful and put him to work. Turns out the thing he built them sent its users directly to Guantanamo. That was all it was good for. We got him out after that, and that was the end of it, on my honor.”

The Soldier looks from Wilson to Spiderman, believing that it’s the truth when Spiderman has nothing to add. He rubs the heel of his hand on the butt of the Browning and stares out at the city. Wilson pulls his mask back down over his chin.

“You should go check with him before you take me down.”

Wilson giggles. “That’s the second time you’ve told me to ‘take you’.”

Spiderman smacks his palm over his forehead and groans. It’s actually a bit of a relief to see that Wilson is like this with everybody and not him exclusively. If it was just him, he might shy away
from the intensity of Wilson’s attention.

As they are, though, Wilson boldly approaches the ledge of the building and saunters with a bounce in his step as he passes Spiderman. If anything he’s been censoring most of his peacocking and saving it for his partner, who—the Soldier remembers now—Wilson had bragged about having ‘an ass that just won’t quit’.

He doesn’t have time to wince at the thought, making a startled sound in the back of his throat when Wilson clears the ledge and plummets down. Spiderman turns to the ledge and hisses, “Wade, you idiot.”

“What, what?” Wilson asks innocently, peering back over the ledge at them.

“You…I…” The Soldier blows an exhale through his teeth. “I thought you jumped off the roof!”

He crosses stormily to the ledge and looks, giving Wilson a spectacularly irritated glare when he sees the drop only goes about eight feet. It’s not a balcony, exactly, but it’s a ledge wide enough to stand on. Wilson is supported with his fingers curled over the rooftop ledge and one toe buried in a crevice in the brick. His other leg hangs straight down, slack. Clearly he knows his way around the building.


“You do that.” The Soldier straightens out and steps away from the ledge, giving Wilson his back.

Behind him he hears Wade swoon, “What a guy.”

“He looked ready to push you off the roof,” Spiderman retorts flatly. “And you know what? I’d’ve let him.”

“You’re a cruel, cruel mistress, baby boy.”

Spiderman sighs again and then Wilson is gone. The skies today are half blue and half gray, tinting orange with the fading afternoon. A particularly white band of clouds ambles by over the silhouetted skyline.

“So ‘baby boy’, huh?”

“‘Tin man’,” Spiderman quips back in turn.

Indifferent to the nickname by now, the Soldier merely holds up his left hand and peels the sleeve back above his wrist. Metal glints dully in the bleary sunlight. Spiderman stares at him. The Soldier calmly rolls the sleeve back down and tucks it underneath the glove.

“Tin man.”

Smirking, the Soldier says, “‘Baby boy’?”

“You know what he’s like,” Spiderman says after a few seconds’ worth of floundering. “We’ve been working together the last few months.”

“Uh huh.”

“Maybe you can tell me something,” Spiderman clumsily changes the subject. “Deadpool didn’t explain beyond just saying that you’re a liberated prisoner on the run from Hydra.”

“What else is there?” the Soldier deadpans.
“Look, all I wanna know is that we’re not harboring a fugitive. Can you tell me that we’re not?”

The Soldier watches him, not trusting that Spiderman’s really looking at him through the eyeholes of his mask. He considers the articles he’d skimmed on Daredevil back when he first appeared in Hell’s Kitchen.

Narrowing his eyes, the Soldier asks, “A fugitive by whose definition?”

Spiderman stares back at him and then looks away. He lowers his voice to say, “So it’s like that.”

“It’s like what?” the Soldier inquires, shaking his head.

“Good guy with a bad reputation.”

“I don’t know if I’d go that far.”

“Darlings!” They both snap their heads in the direction of the ledge. Wilson folds his arms over the ledge and looks at them expectantly. “We’re good to go.”

“Much as I wouldn’t mind scaling the side of a building, I don’t suppose we could take the stairs.”

“You could,” Spiderman tells him. “If we get sighted in the hall in our costumes, it might draw some attention.”

“Point,” the Soldier sighs.

“We’re on the seventh floor, Sarge,” Wilson says, jutting his chin to the Soldier’s left to indicate the Roof Access door. “Apartment 12.”

“Are you sure?” Spiderman asks, addressing the question to Wilson.

“What, do you think I’m gonna run?”

“No, I’m actually asking if he’s sure,” Spiderman asks, still pointedly looking at Wilson. He turns to the Soldier and clarifies, “He’s sent me on a wild goose chase more than once because of a misremembered address.”

They both stare at Wilson, who throws his arms up. And then shrieks a string of curses before falling the length of the drop.

Spiderman looks at the Soldier and the Soldier looks at him.

“I get the sense that he really does mean well.”

“He does, oddly enough,” Spiderman cedes after a pause. He walks to the ledge and looks over. “Deadpool, are you all right?”


Spiderman shrugs and swings his legs over, throwing a salute the Soldier’s way. “We’ll leave the door cracked so you know it’s the right apartment. Just in case he gave you the wrong number.”

“Thanks.”

“Mmhmm.”
The Soldier waits a while after Spiderman’s jumped down to join Wilson and then goes to the door. He attributes its being unlocked to Wilson’s familiarity with the ins and outs of the building. The stairs take him down three floors, hand riding the rail for each flight of stairs until he reaches the seventh floor. He listens for activity and then quickly scans the apartment numbers down the hall, heading to the right.

He comes upon the deep blue door with ‘12’ emblazoned on it in bronze lettering. The handle twists and he yanks his hand back. The door halts awkwardly and then swings open. Spiderman appears to squint at him through his mask.

“Come in.”

The Soldier crosses the threshold. He hurries through the claustrophobic entranceway and walks into the main room of the apartment. Once clear of the narrow hall, he sizes up his surroundings and cases out the single wide window as a possible exit.

He sees Wilson daintily waving a pair of handcuffs in front of a slouched man in a blue hoodie. The cuffs slot into a locked position at the back of Wilson’s belt. From the looks of it, that segment of the belt is magnetized. Wilson isn’t an especially tall man, but in comparison to the hunched figure on the faded gray futon, he’s a hulking giant. He looks weirdly aggressive even at rest.

“You could have used mine at least, Wade, damn,” the guy rubbing his wrist grouses.

“Yours are padded, Weas,” Wilson sings back. “Where’s the fun in that? I know you prefer industrial steel.”

Weasel rolls his eyes, annoyed, and spots the Soldier studying them from the hall. He points at him with his chin, asking in a lazy, apathetic drawl, “He the reason you cuffed me to the radiator?”

Wilson straightens out and they lock eyes—the Soldier thinks they do; he doesn’t like talking to Wilson through his mask. It’s less infuriating than it is with Spiderman since he actually has an image of Wilson’s face in his mind, but it’s still irritating. In combat it makes things somewhat easier not being able to see another’s eyes. In a domestic situation, his sense for intuition is blunted far more than it is in battle.

“You make a habit of handcuffing your friends, Wilson?”

“When the situation calls for it. I handcuffed you, when the situation called for it.”

He thinks back on the warehouse when they’d gone there the first time after the Rail Yards. Weasel alternates gawking at Wilson and then at the Soldier. Spiderman bustles around in the room, digging through the mess on the coffee table for something.

“What, is this a drug bust, Officer?” Weasel sneers, leaning back on the futon and forcefully setting his bare feet up on the edge of the table.

Spiderman looks up at him. “It’s a sweep, but not for drugs.”

Weasel laughs, a slightly nasal but gleeful sound. Wilson and Spiderman pause to stare at him.

“The spider’s lookin’ for bugs,” he announces with a wild, mischievous grin on his whiskered face. He’s a young man, but he’s like Murdock in that he looks like he could be in his twenties if not younger when he smiles. “Bugs.”

Wilson unleashes a raucous laugh before Weasel’s finished gasping the single falsetto word.
Spiderman’s shoulders wilt and he turns a look on the Soldier. He looks defeated even through the mask and even in spite of the Soldier’s discombobulation.

The Soldier just shrugs for the lack of a better response. Spiderman shakes his head and resumes his search before moving onto the kitchen.

Weasel and Wilson laugh like boys. It’s the strangest sight.

“Why does it smell like dog in here?”

“You know why. I can’t meet with clients in the Upper West Side without Al gettin’ wind of it, and when she knows I’m in the area I end up bringing Deuce back here. It’s been a month and it still smells like pooch in here.”

Wilson snorts. “I told you she didn’t want a guide dog.”

“I won him fair in a card game, Wade. It’s bad form to turn down a haul like that.”

The Soldier turns his attention to Spiderman and watches him slink away to the front door, feeling along the door frame for surveillance equipment. Wilson either doesn’t care about the threat or he doesn’t perceive that there is one. The Soldier’s not surprised. He looks utterly relaxed in Weasel’s company, which strikes him as odd and he can’t put his finger on why.

“Uh.”

“Find something, Spidey?” Wilson calls out, hands on his hips and attention trained wholly on Weasel.

“Well.”

“What is it?”

“Aw Wade just—”

“Ah-ah-ah. You stay. Spidey, whatcha got?”

The Soldier hugs his arms around himself, wishing he’d just stayed on the roof rather than coming down here and boxing himself in. Spiderman emerges from the hallway, presumably having just searched the bathroom.

“There was a cat,” Spiderman reports uneasily. “Didn’t find anything else.”

“You got a cat, Weas?”

“I really didn’t,” Weasel sighs, dragging a hand through his short curly hair.

Weasel mentioned drugs before, so it’s possible that he really is exhausted but just too wired to let it show in his demeanor. He has few wrinkles—lots of scruff, but virtually no wrinkles on his face outside of the bags beneath his eyes.

“She’s not mine. I’m sort of…responsible for her, though.”
“She? Her,” Wilson repeats, loving Weasel’s discomfort.

The Soldier traipses toward the bathroom, intrigued. He can’t remember the last time he saw an animal before the shaggy dog Cindy in the Garment District. Weasel watches him go but doesn’t lift a finger to stop him. It’s the first time he’s really fully looked head-on at the Soldier, and it registers as significant in his mind and in his concept of Weasel’s character.

Spiderman is occupied with writing out a note on the kitchen counter and doesn’t interfere with the Soldier’s exploration. He does, however, halfway lift his head to ask, “You got street clothes I can borrow, Hammer?”

“Ugh, don’t call me that.”

The Soldier slowly pushes open the bathroom door and locates the carrier immediately. Its top half is black, its lower half is beige, and the container itself is overlarge for a cat. He’s pretty sure just by the look of it that it could fit a medium-sized dog. Weasel’s left it balanced over the bathtub, obstructing the path to the toilet but secure where it is. He peers inside, sees the litter box pushed to the back of the cage and a cone around the cat’s head. Then he sees her.

There are angry, red abrasions on her cheek and the eye on that side has been sewn shut. The fur on her left forepaw is cleanly shaven all the way around. Her other eye opens temporarily, allowing her to blink sleepily at him.

She settles back again on her makeshift bed of garish pink blankets and huffs a noisy little shuddering breath, drawing his attention to the stitches protruding from beneath her mouth. He crouches in front of the cage without lifting his hands to the grate. She doesn’t pay him any mind as he looks at her, taking in the greasy look of the white fur on her chest. She’s the same brilliant white all over, not a speck or strand deviating from it save one deep black whisker on the right side of her twitching pink nose.

Without any indication that it’s about to happen, she sneezes. He almost does reach out at her resounding mewl, weak and watery. She notes him a few seconds more with her one green-hazel eye, pupil blown wide and round, blinks at him, and closes it.

“The vet said six weeks max,” Weasel says from where he’s leaned into the doorframe. He’s abandoned his hoodie for an unbuttoned blue shirt over a black tee.

Keeping his voice even, the Soldier prompts, “You said you were responsible for her.”

“Yeah. I didn’t hurt her,” he adds quickly, holding up his hands. “I was just there when it happened. Wasn’t even a job, you know? No clients, nothing like that. Just some asshole at a public park went peeling out onto the road too fast; didn’t look—or she couldn’t get out of the way or maybe he meant to do it—and he hit her. There was kids, even, and they all saw her, right after.”

“You took her to a hospital.”

“Me and some woman there with her screaming infant,” Weasel clarifies with raised eyebrows. He doesn’t like kids, apparently. “She said we had to help. I had the funds to help. You can ask anyone; I’m not aces with people, but I got nothing against animals. They’re better than us. We should take care of them when other people won’t.”

The Soldier has a dozen follow-up questions that don’t all revolve around the wounded but recuperating animal in the cage. He settles on the easiest one, which is no loss on his part since he wants to hear the answer just as much as he wants to hear the others.
“What’s her name?”

“Oh, um. I guess I haven’t…”

“She doesn’t have a name?” The Soldier stands slowly, dragging his eyes away from the sleeping cat only when he’s sure he hasn’t woken her. “Why the hell not?”

“Well I’ve… I’ve only had her a week. She’s mostly been on drugs the whole time. I’m not sure she’s really aware of me in general.”

The Soldier’s jaw twitches and one side of his upper lip curls.

“Oh, maybe—maybe you…you could name her? If you want, uh…”

The Soldier quietly turns the doorknob and pulls the door soundlessly shut behind him before stalking his prey, inexplicably angry for the cat’s sake. Wilson gets in between them, barring him from pursuing Weasel when he ducks into the kitchen.

“Yo, tin man, get some of that murder outta your eyes, why don’tcha?”

“Why don’t you take off the goddamn mask, Wilson?” he snaps. “It’s not like we haven’t all seen your face.”

Spiderman stops what he’s doing in the corner of the room, one of his red gloves in the process of being removed and the other already being tucked into the pocket of Weasel’s blue hoodie. The pullover dwarfs him just like the too-long, baggy pair of khakis do. His one unveiled hand that the Soldier can see is dark—darker than Wilson’s skin, even for the layers upon layers of scarring. Spiderman’s still wearing his mask. He pulls the other red glove off and tucks it similarly into the front pocket.

“So I’m gonna take this note to the New York Bulletin for your lawyers, um. Don’t kill each other while I’m gone?”

“Not in someone else’s home,” the Soldier mumbles.

“Yeah well don’t throw anybody out of the window either.”

The Soldier gives Spiderman a flat glare, not having it in him to fly into a rage. There’s a wounded animal sleeping in the next room and he can’t imagine the walls are thick enough to protect her from the sounds of violence.

Spiderman shrugs at the Soldier’s silence and starts to take a step, pausing mid-stride. The Soldier turns to follow his gaze where Weasel’s staring at Spiderman with a conflicted expression. From the relative safety of the kitchen and with Wilson separating him from Spiderman, he flicks eyes down before lifting them guiltily to Spiderman’s masked face.

Weasel swallows what looks to be nausea or words and presses his lips together to seal them away. Spiderman visibly stiffens through his shoulders and raises his chin. His stance invites a challenge and the slow curl of his fingers cautions against it.

Wilson sighs and fidgets with his gloves. He offers, voice sounding brittle, “Kick ass out there.”

Spiderman takes that as his cue to leave and walks briskly for the door, pulling his mask off once he’s safely cloistered and hidden by the narrow entranceway. The back of his head reveals full, black
hair and a wide neck the same shade as his hands. He stuffs the mask into another pocket and lets himself out of the apartment.

The Soldier squints, his previous anger forgotten. “What just happened?”

“Dude have you not been on the internet?” Weasel asks a few seconds into the awkward silence.

“I mostly just read up on what came out in the leak. Hydra.” He shrugs vaguely. “I’ve seen newspapers, but.”

“Oh man. Wade, permission to educate,” Weasel asks without the inflection of a question.

“Granted,” Wilson intones, pulling his mask up and off his head. He tucks it into his belt so that it hangs off his side like a handkerchief.

Weasel digs up a laptop from the dresser pushed up against the wall opposite the futon and powers it up. Wilson sidles up next to the Soldier.

“What’s the deal with the cat?”

“She’s injured.”

Wilson raises his eyebrows at his response, repeats the word, “She.”

“Badly.”

“Her expensive team of doctors said she’d recover,” Weasel cuts in.

“Weas, what did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything!”

“Keep your voices down,” the Soldier tells them both quietly, menacing them with his eyes.

“Right, right, fine. The moody soldier wants quiet, I can do quiet,” Weasel grumbles.

“Who said I was a soldier?”

Weasel gives him a judgmental look. “You’re standing at parade rest.”

Wilson coos at him while he shakes his hands out and Weasel clears the coffee table to make room for the laptop. The Soldier sits on the futon across from Weasel who’s knelt on the floor and scans the title of the webpage when Weasel rotates the device to face him. Beside the photograph of a boy in a white hoodie the bold font reads: Trayvon Martin.

Weasel left other tabs open beside it with other names: Dontre Hamilton, Eric Garner, John Crawford, Michael Brown, Tanisha Anderson, Tamir Rice…

His eyes slow and he reads each one, confused and then horrified and then furious.

He starts to smell food cooking and glances toward the kitchen, seeing Wilson armed with a spatula and Weasel sitting atop the kitchen counter at his left. There’s a frilly apron draped over Wilson’s suit but he’s left his mask off. The Soldier looks back at the screen and closes out of the tabs, every one of them representing a life lost and a battle steadily beginning.

Hand stalling over the top of the screen, he pauses and considers the vastness of the resource literally
at his fingertips. When he’d last had access to the internet, he’d still been in D.C. and had been constantly looking over his shoulder, hiding his face from video cameras and shying away from public computer labs. Weasel’s laptop could be hacked and remotely activated without notice, but the webcam itself is covered with a round black and red sticker that resembles Wilson’s mask.

There’s more in the way of protests happening all over the country when he elects to look: political unrest defamed as ‘riots’ and hate crimes treated in the reverse manner, prettied up by media outlets and protested by various internet communities. It’s a mess of wars, killing, and fear.

The Soldier sighs and closes the windows he’s explored, trading global distress for statistics and estimated recovery times skull and jaw injuries in cats. He’s only a little bit satisfied that the internet seems to support Weasel’s claim. Six weeks should be sufficient time for the cat to heal.

Wilson interrupts his contemplative silence with a plate of steaming pancakes. He slides it next to the laptop and offers a fork that the Soldier frowns at.

“Oh come on, Sarge. You gonna try to tell me you don’t like pancakes?”

“Isn’t it usually a breakfast food?”

“Breakfast is for dinner if you want it to be for dinner. Welcome back to America, my Soviet cupcake.”

Weasel snorts from the kitchen where he’s eating standing up, hunched over the counter. The Soldier closes the laptop and moves it onto the futon where there’s the smallest chance of him dropping food on it. Wilson grins at him when he finally accepts the fork. He uses it to push the fat square of melting butter around on the topmost pancake. Wilson brings syrup and leaves it near his plate within reach.

He drizzles a meager amount of syrup over the edge of the pancakes and watches Weasel break away from the counter to jog to the bathroom. The door opens and he doesn’t hear it close behind him.

“Oh heyy,” Weasel declares from the bathroom. He peeks around the corner. “She’s awake. Come see your girl, soldier.”

“It’s Barnes,” he says, getting up while Wilson stays seated and chows down on the plate he had intended for the Soldier.

Mouth full he says, “I’ll make you fresh ones when you get back.”

He raises an eyebrow at Wilson and sidesteps Weasel to get into the bathroom while Weasel dashes back into the kitchen. She’s pawing at the litter box filled with shredded newspaper when he gets eyes on her. Her fur is a mess all over with one triangular patch missing from her back. Weasel comes back into the kitchen with a tray of things: liquid antibiotics, a tube of something that doesn’t look appetizing, a fragrant serving of mashed sardines, and a bowl of what might be chicken broth.

“All of this,” Weasel points as he closes the door behind him, “needs to go in her mouth.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Oh you’re helping me.”

The Soldier just turns to the cat, who makes a trilling sound. He squints at her wakeful eye and she tilts her head at him, reminding him, hilariously, of Murdock.
“Yeah sure.”

“Shit, really? Damn, okay.” Weasel opens the cage. She hobbles to the edge of the cage and catches the cone on the door. “You can just lift her out from under her arms. Normally I keep her at ground level, but it’s easier to contain her in a small room like this. After she’s had her meds I’ll take her back out there.”

“It’s quiet in here.”

Weasel sits with his back to the door and the tray balanced on the sink where he can reach it without standing. The Soldier awkwardly situates his hands to catch her before she can leap out of the cage. The misery he saw in her the first time he encountered her in the cage has dissipated somewhat. She can probably smell the sardines and broth and knows it means she’s eating soon.

“That’s good, too. Long as Wade’s here, probably best that she stays in here anyway.”

The cat passes the Soldier up to investigate the dishes Weasel’s placed in front of him. To their mutual amusement, she takes to the fishy paste Weasel made for her and eats about half of it. She’s less interested in the broth, but she consumes more of it, albeit over a longer time span.

“You’re not gonna eat the sardines because I put the gel in it,” Weasel says with a pout. “Killin’ me, girl.”

“Do you have something else?”

Her tail twitches. Weasel’s hand disappears behind the curved shell of the cone. She makes a noise, sounding like a pigeon more than she does a cat.

“She likes lox. Gonna need her to eat the rest of the sardines later so she can get the gel, too.”

“What is it?”

“It’s just vitamins. She’s supposed to eat it right up, but the first time I tried giving her some she spat it out. And then shook her saliva at me in revenge.” Weasel looks from the cat to the Soldier and narrows his eyes. “That funny to you? Because it was seriously not cool.”

“Might not have been,” the Soldier answers vaguely. He drops his gaze to the cat turning in place and meowing up at him. “Hello.”

“Keep her busy while I go get the lox?”

Weasel makes a speedy retreat while she’s examining the Soldier’s foot. Her eye looks closer to reddish brown than its previous green-hazel in the clinical bathroom light when she raises her head to gaze at him.

She bumps his leg with the cone and purrs when he offers his hand, still gloved. He’s careful not to touch the bottom half of her jaw and runs one finger over the top of her head, bending and unbending his knuckles to scratch. She tries to turn into his touch but she’s clumsy and he has to take his hand away so he won’t graze a sensitive spot by accident.

Her claws sink into him through the sweatpants where she kneads at his calf, her one eye squinting but not quite shut. Murdock had best not be allergic to cats.

The Soldier’s torn between making her stop and finding a way to communicate that he’ll keep her safe from now on; that nothing else will harm her. It’s a premature thought to have. He’s not sure
what Weasel’s intentions are for her or if he plans on giving her up once she’s better. Inspired by her indiscriminate displays of affection, he slides the glove off his right hand to touch her and stops.

His hand is stained red and tacky with his blood. There’s blood caked under his nails, in the lines of his knuckles, and in the sloping creases of his palm. He tucks his hand back into the glove and lets her brush her side up against him, purring enthusiastically the whole time.

Weasel returns with a platter that she ignores entirely and sighs. He measures the antibiotic she needs and gestures to the Soldier to bring her over. She’s pliant and has a soft body. He’s nervous that he might hurt her or grip her too tightly, but she doesn’t struggle to get out of his hold. He carries her to Weasel and carefully sets her down in front of him, dishes with food and broth thoughtfully moved out of the way.

“She hates this, just a heads up.”

“What do you do if she runs?”

“Calmly recapture her and try again,” Weasel answers with a limp, weary glaze to his eyes. They’re not bright and clear like Rogers’ or Karen’s. His grayish blue eyes are dark, closer in color to stones than to sky. “If she goes your way, just keep her out of the tub. She might sneak past you, but it’s not like there’s anywhere for her to go.”

It is an ordeal and a half feeding a cat medicine. Weasel barely approaches with the rubber and plastic dropper when she hisses at him. She growls and claws and her tail bristles when she cottons onto what they’re conspiring to do.

“Didn’t think she had it in her,” the Soldier remarks blandly, peripherally impressed at the extent of the animal’s fight.

“Yeah, the doc said she’s ‘ornery’, so that’s fun.”

The Soldier tries to pacify her. “I didn’t get that impression from her.”

“She’s an alley cat,” Weasel concedes with a shrug, shuffling closer on his knees. “What’re you gonna do, right?”

“I guess.”

They have to coax and distract her for a long time before the full dosage has been administered, and by then they’re all tired and look visibly betrayed. For their efforts, the Soldier ends up with pink globs of amoxicillin stained high up on one of his shoulders and a speck of it dried to the underside of his jaw. Weasel had laughed when she drooled on him and then abruptly stopped when she gave him the same treatment.

He asks the Soldier to grab the litter box in the cage and swaps it out for a fresh one from under the sink. The Soldier lifts her back into the cage and leaves the sardines in the cage with her when Weasel slides the dish over.

“You’ve gotten this down to a science,” the Soldier says, aiming for a teasing tone.

Weasel snorts and he can’t tell if his intention was heard. “It’s been a week. You get a routine established and anything can run like a well-oiled machine.”

“Spoken like a professional.”
“Eh.” Weasel shrugs and pushes with a groan to his feet. The Soldier stands, too, after he closes the door to the cage. “You adapt. Nothing else for it. Now if you’d been here the first few days I had her,” Weasel sighs and widens his eyes.

The Soldier smirks and looks between him and the cat trying to cover the sardines with her blanket. “Yeah, I believe it.”

Wilson laughs at both of them when they come out of the bathroom, Weasel with the tray and the Soldier with a surplus of white cat hairs stuck to him. There are tiny cat scratches, new and old, scarring the backs of Weasel’s hands that the Soldier hadn’t noticed before.

“Hungry yet, Sarge?”

“Yes, please.”

Weasel finishes up with his plate in the kitchen while the Soldier slips back into the bathroom to wash his hands. The cat mewls at him, sounding worlds more innocent than the hissing, spitting animal she was not five minutes ago. He keeps the gloves off and slips them beneath the band of his belt before slinking out of the bathroom again, leaving the door cracked.

He fires up the laptop and runs a search on the team Rogers named in his account, coming up with professional bios, public relations, and of course, the Avengers Initiative. Sam Wilson has connections to D.C.’s Veterans Affairs. Maria Hill is connected to Stark Industries and several of Tony Stark’s most recent charity events. Natasha Romanov hasn’t been seen in any official or unofficial capacity since the incident with the Insight Helicarriers. Neither has Nick Fury.

As for Rogers, a simple internet search yields the usual results: an enormity of pomp and merchandise, reports of his service in the employ of S.H.I.E.L.D., his role in ‘the Battle of New York’, and dated documents from his time in the military during the Second World War. It’s all pretty interesting, but it’s little more than that.

The search on Wilson is something more of a surprise. He comes across blurry photos from crime scenes, pages and pages of bad press, and a few ‘rumored’ sightings of him in Queens with Spiderman. There’s nothing about his involvement on the Brooklyn Bridge or assisting the NYPD with rounding up the remaining Hydra agents all over New York. It’s no wonder Rogers was displeased to see him rally to the Soldier’s side. His alignment, in the public eye, is not with the heroes but with the villains.

Wilson distracts him from his disheartening search with a second plate of pancakes, which he eats with butter and too much syrup. No matter what he’s done in the past, Wilson makes excellent pancakes. The Soldier asks for seconds and moderates his syrup intake with more scrutiny, getting it right this time. Wilson’s smile turns fond and wide at the Soldier’s request for more butter.

Spiderman returns after they’ve cleaned up and turns down Wilson’s offer for pancakes as soon as he walks through the door.

“Where’d you pick for the meet?”

“I didn’t, but I got this.” Spiderman produces a cell phone from the front pocket of his hoodie. “Karen Page got there before I did. She thought I was a messenger. It’s just a burner phone.”

The Soldier stands and takes the small device. Spiderman shucks off Weasel’s borrowed clothes, folding them before dropping them on the far end of the futon. There are six numbers programed into it: ‘Bathrobe’, ‘Candles’, ‘Cap’, ‘Sergeant’, ‘Sweet Stuff’, and ‘Wings’.
He surprises himself by laughing at their codenames and dials ‘Bathrobe’. Murdock answers on the second ring and the Soldier shakes his head.

“Subtle,” he says. “Rogers’ and Mahoney’s could use some work.”

“We didn’t know if your guy would be intercepted.” Murdock doesn’t laugh but he still sounds like he has the usual faint smile on his face. “Foggy pointed out that direct communication would be more efficient.”

“Guess so.”

“Where are you?”

“Harlem,” he says, looking around at Wilson, Weasel, and Spiderman. “What’s our next move?”

Murdock hums. “We were just discussing that with Mahoney.”

“Yeah? Why don’t I like the sound of that?”

The Soldier turns away from his party to lean his back against the wall. Spiderman, Wilson, and Weasel aimlessly shuffle about with Weasel eventually disappearing into the bathroom with more broth. He pulls the door shut behind him.

“He said what he’s been saying, Barnes. He wants to take you into custody; stop the violence on the streets.”

“Put me in a cell and make it easier for them to target me? Makes sense.”

“I know it’s not ideal, but…”

“Not ideal? I could survive on my own and evade these assholes, easy. It’s because you’re making me play by your rules that they keep catching up. We’re chasing our tails hoping they’ll forget to look for me in New York, but that’s not how it works, Matt. They’ll remember I’m here until they catch me, kill me, or chase me out. Those are the choices. You keep acting like there’s another way, but I’m not seeing it.”

“What would you have me do? As it is, Mahoney’s walking a thin line not bringing you in. He could be suspended if there are charges filed against you and he goes on record saying he knew your whereabouts but didn’t report them. It could discredit him completely if they find a way to place the blame for Hydra’s recent activity on you, especially if he admits to having viewed you as an antagonist.”

The Soldier covers his forehead with his right hand and kneads at his temple, inching two fingers beneath his head dressing to scratch at his skin. He grits his teeth around a nonsensical grunt, pondering his dwindling options.

“So what do we do, Matt?”

“Do you remember what I said about getting ahead of this?”

“Air it out before they have the chance to.”

“Right now they’re realizing that they can smoke you out. That’s why they made a move on you, in public, with guns blazing and not enough men to make the grab.”

“What, you’re saying it was a ruse?”
“We think they thought that if you were found at the scene of a shooting, local PD would’ve been forced to apprehend you. It’d’ve been quiet. They could have lifted you from a cell before you were even charged with no one being any the wiser.”

“I don’t get where you’re going with this,” he admits slowly. “You were just saying I’d be safest with the police. Now you’re saying it’d be a cinch for them to get to me there.”

“Only if we’re the only ones fighting for you—fighting over you.”

The Soldier frowns and ruffles his hair, the pieces fitting together after a spell.

“You wanna go public.”

“I wanna go public,” Murdock repeats easily, sounding as determined and confident as he ever does. “I want everyone paying attention to you and writing articles about what happened to you after the train. I want so much visibility that it’s impossible for them to stash you in a lab or a prison cell somewhere. We’re not letting them take you away, not again.”

“No you wanna hand feed me to them instead,” the Soldier says quietly.

Murdock softens his voice, too. “I know it sounds like it’ll never work. Bucky, I’ve seen it work, okay? Do you have internet access where you are?”

“Yeah.”

“All right. I want you to search ‘Wilson Fisk’. He was a major crime lord in Hell’s Kitchen some time ago. What I’ve been telling you we can do, he did. It made him almost invulnerable. We couldn’t drag him into the light to bring him down because he beat us to it.”

“You force his hand, too, Murdock?” There’s terrible silence and the Soldier’s throat aches. “I’m sorry.”

“No you’re right. You can tell me to back off if you don’t believe in my pitch. It’s your right.”

The Soldier rubs his left hand over the back of his neck, cooling his hot skin with cold metal. Murdock waits on the other line.

“Fisk, you said?”

“First name: Wilson.”

Popular name.

“I’ll look him up.”

“If you don’t think we have a shot, we’ll come up with something else. Okay?”

“Yeah, fine. Okay.”

“And…because you asked,” Murdock says, unprompted and reluctant to continue. “We did force his hand, when he stepped into the spotlight.”

The Soldier opens and closes his mouth, murmurs, “Noted.”

“Call me after. Or call Karen or Foggy.”
“Right.”

He closes the phone and turns it over in his hand, silently working his jaw and regretting the tone he used with Murdock before hanging up on him. Wilson stands from the futon, Spiderman nowhere to be seen. Weasel is still with the cat.

“Where’d he go?”

“Spidey’s keeping watch from the roof. He’s quicker at climbing walls than I am. Go figure.”

“Go figure,” the Soldier mumbles.

“Hey. What’s up?”

“You didn’t hear all that just now?”

“Well yeah, obviously. I was four feet away.” Wilson shrugs, still without his mask. The Soldier reaches for his side to feel for his gloves, still safely tucked beneath his belt. “Sounds like there’s trouble in paradise, though.”

“Paradise?” the Soldier scoffs. “Hardly.”

“Eh poor choice of words, maybe.” He throws his hands and stares at a random spot in the ceiling. “Not like it’s up to me.”

“Wilson.”

“Hmm?”

“What can you tell me about a guy called Fisk?”

“The Kingpin?” Wilson asks with a touch of incredulity to his tone. “Oh buddy, you gotta be more specific.”

“Murdock was saying he went public or something before they were able to take him out. That they…couldn’t discredit him because he’d already come clean and spun it to his favor.”

“Huh? Ahh—is that what happened? Bring it in, tin man. It’s story time.”

It’s a story. Fisk, or the Kingpin, had willingly come out of the shadows to make it look like his own choice. Wilson says it hadn’t been clear at the time that that was his strategy, but with context from Murdock he says it makes more sense that he’d been manipulated into doing it.

“Not the wisest thing for someone trying to dominate the criminal ranks, get my meaning?”

“Yeah.”

“Now I didn’t have anything to do with him when he fought his way to the top, but Big Boy Fisk had a bad rep even before the exposé. The more unscrupulous types in the community had problems with him being a bit jumpy with his trigger mitts.”

“Trigger mitts?”

“You know, like a trigger finger, except he used his fists to kill people, not a gun. Old Fisky was a huge guy, and I mean a full head and a half taller than Weas huge.”
“Huh.”

“Anyway ever since he beat one of the Ranskahov brothers to death and tried to pin it on DD—”

“What?”

“Oh yeah it was a whole thing.”

“Ranskahov?”

“Russians,” Wilson clarifies. “Should probably check out your, uh.”

“Oh. Sure.”

The Soldier starts to undo the bandage. Wilson drops a spool of white gauze and a red square of cloth from his belt onto the coffee table. He ducks into the bathroom briefly and comes out with a brown bottle and a comb.

“That cat looks like I did after I took my first slug to the face,” he says, voice curiously fond.

“Hmm.”

The Soldier waits for Wilson to come back from the kitchen with a plastic plate and a crinkled bag. He sets the plate down and holds the bag open for the uncoiled cloth. It’s promisingly dry but has sections saturated with fresh blood that must have been closer to the wound.

“She’s hairier than you are.”

“Don’t I know it?” Wilson agrees sulkily. “Used to have black, black hair. Kept it short mostly, except when I was a kid.”

“You lose it because of the…Build-an-Übermensch Initiative?”

“Well first it was the cancer,” Wilson says, moving all of Weasel’s clutter from the table to the floor. He gestures with his hand for the Soldier to sit. “Then it was Project X—the Build-an-Übermensch Initiative—then the…being blown up a bunch of times. I’m mostly scar tissue these days. Kinda how you can’t grow flowers in bad soil. Ish.”

Wilson crouches to the left of the Soldier’s knees and pokes gingerly at the Soldier’s hair with the pointed tail of the comb. The Soldier closes his eyes and Wilson hisses through his teeth.

“Yes,” he chirps. “That’s gonna need disinfecting.”

“You were saying about the Ranskahovs.”

“It was a bad call,” Wilson picks right up, going about the motions of flushing the wound with hydrogen peroxide and catching the excess with the red cloth. His voice is flippant when he continues. “Everybody knew he’d acted out of turn. But, by the time Fisk gave his speech to the good people of Hell’s Kitchen, his partners in crime had forgiven him for it—lame. The Russians were obliterated by that point, so I guess they were willing to just turn a blind eye. Shitty if you ask me. No honor among thieves, apparently. Sorry, sorry, sorry.”

“You’re fine,” the Soldier grits out.

Wilson sighs and wraps another length of cotton around the Soldier’s head. “Are you fine? What’s the deal with asking about the Kingpin anyway?”
“Murdock thinks it’d be wise to use his tactics.”

The Soldier studies Wilson while he ponders. He can’t imagine him with hair, not with the raised scars and deep, sealed gashes that occupy every expanse of skin that he can see. There’s no evidence of a shotgun blast to his face—nothing that stands out beyond the bulk of his other scars to suggest that kind of wound. To the side of his mouth there’s one especially jagged impression dug into the discolored scar tissue, but he can’t tell what made it or when.


“What?”

“You’re staring at my mouth and it’s distracting.”

“I’m not staring at your mouth. I’m staring at a scar next to your mouth.”

“Hey I take what I can get,” Wilson argues, actually sounding breathless, which is what he gets for harassing Nelson earlier. “Are you asking for my opinion about this? Because I’ve got one if you wanna hear it.”

“Your opinion about whether I’m staring at your mouth?”


He cleans up the fresh mess they’ve made on Weasel’s coffee table and scrubs it down with disinfectant after the bloodied things have been stuffed into the trash.

“Sure, let’s hear it.”

“The reason it worked for Fisk was that he was able to keep the really damning stuff under wraps, for a while. Eventually that made the news, too, and he went up in smoke. Sort of. He’s in prison now.”

The Soldier squeezes his hands at his side and paces.

“But I gotta say, I don’t think he lost because he would have lost eventually—or because bad guys pay the price in the end anyway. Usually that’s not realistic. Usually the bad guy gets away with it and sinks the good guy in the East River. Crime continues, the body never turns up, you go to Sunday Brunch, life goes on.”

The Soldier raises his eyebrows. Wilson shrugs.

“Fine I’ll bite. Why do you think he lost?”

“Because of Daredevil, man. Because of…Ben Urich and Karen Page. Because of Elena Cardenas. He stacked the deck in his favor and it still wasn’t enough.”

“And what if we try to stack the deck in my favor and it’s not enough?”

“Then fuck ‘em. We’ll bust you out, send you somewhere, get you a new identity, something. If we can’t clear you the right way then the system’s broken and it’s not worth following anyway.”

“Except for the part where I really would be a fugitive if you broke me out.”

Wilson frowns and recites, “But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their
duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.”

The Soldier stares at him, mouth open. “Where did…?”

“The Declaration of Independence,” Wilson clues him in, tapping his own forehead with one finger. “Didn’t know I was a government man, didja? You’re sooo impressed with me right now.”

“You can’t incite anarchy for one man.” The Soldier holds up his hand to stop Wilson’s objection. “Don’t tell me King George was one man. Don’t. I can’t imagine anyone else agreeing with your master plan,” the Soldier mutters with a cynical edge to his words.

“Daredevil is basically a vigilante—he’s not registered in some fascist superhero registry where people can look up his stats. For the longest time when he was getting started, the people he was protecting thought he was a terrorist. Spidey? Basically the same thing. Hell, when Pierce tried to enact his plan for mass genocide, he turned Captain America into a bad guy and had him hunted down—had you and all of S.H.I.E.L.D. hunt him, hunt Fury, Widow.”

“What’re you getting at, Wade?” he seethes without meaning to. “That they’ll say I’m a villain?”

“I’m saying that you’re not.”

The Soldier stops and hears himself breathing, sucking in huge shuddering gasps of air. Wilson drops his hands to his sides, a terrible look of sadness coming over his features.

“Not in any version of reality, not for anything anybody ever made you do, are you a villain. Not for wet work, espionage, or…whatever other orders you had. Saying you’re like Fisk? Like me, how I was?” He shakes his head. “No.”

Swallowing hard and looking away, the Soldier says, “My long list of offenses probably rivals yours and Fisk’s. Not sure a jury’s gonna give a shit about brainwashing, torture.”

“And if that’s the case,” Wilson allows, “we won’t let them have you.”

“Why is this so important to you? And don’t…” Trying to lighten the tension he says, “Don’t say it’s because I’m dreamy.”

Wilson cracks a small smile, mumbles, “Filed away under things I never thought I’d hear but can never unhear.

“But nah I guess…I guess it’s just because I did get out, or away from it, at least. And, um, I lost a friend, doing it. Sucks.” Wilson clears his throat. “I’ll tell you about him sometime if you want. He was…” He gives a rueful shake of his head. “Believed in me. Just like we believe in you.”

The Soldier sits on the edge of the coffee table, not moving away when Wilson sits beside him. He feels around for the phone he left back on the futon and dials ‘Wings’.

Sam Wilson answers on the fourth ring. He sounds more curious than surprised, but it’s clear from his greeting that Murdock gave him the number to the phone. Ostensibly, he also gave the number to Rogers.

“I just, I had a question.” He fiddles with Murdock’s gloves. “Didn’t want to ask Rogers.”

“Okay.” There’s the sound of footsteps and then a sliding door. He hears muddled traffic in the distance on Sam’s end. “Shoot.”
“Why…why did you try to find me? After everything?”

“Aw man.” Sam makes an indecisive noise. “You sure you don’t wanna ask him?”

“I know what he’d say. I wanna hear your reason.”

“That’s fair,” he sighs after a short pause. “Tell you the truth, I warned him against trying to save you, that day with the Helicarriers, you know? I tried telling him, ‘Steve, he’s not the kind of guy you save. He’s the kind you stop.’ And I believed it, back when all that craziness went down and you weren’t yourself. He saw it, too, that they’d done somethin’ to you. Broke his heart. He kept sayin’ even when he had nothin’, he had you.

“It was like he couldn’t process that anything in the world might be strong enough to keep you at a place where he couldn’t bring you back. Like he wouldn’t accept that you were gone, even when you were for a while.”

He listens to the traffic on Sam’s connection and keeps his back straight, unmoving.

“And after, when he was in the hospital and you were gone. Romanov and Fury split to go God knows where. It was just us standing over an empty grave with your file and a picture of you in it, frozen over with your eyes closed lookin’ just how you look now.

“I couldn’t go. Steve said he could look for you by himself, but hell no. And only partly because I was worried you might shoot him again.”

“It’s a common misconception that I enjoy shooting Captain America.”

Sam huffs a laugh. Wilson snorts.

“Why else?”

“Because I realized that nobody asks for what you got. Nobody. But when we looked at your file and I could see that Steve would have so it could’ve missed you and hit him instead…you can’t leave that behind, man. You gotta go after it.

“Plus,” Sam adds after a slight hesitation. “That kinda intensity demands constant supervision—a helmet at the very least. I’m pretty sure this boy’d walk into an active volcano for you. And sweet as that is, it’s destructive. And unhealthy. Somebody’s gotta protect him from himself.”

“From me,” the Soldier edits.

“Nah. Not you. Not you.”

“Thanks.”

“That it? I was just getting into it.”

The Soldier chuckles at Sam’s enthusiasm. It’s good that Rogers has someone in his corner: someone who can be there for him when his previous ‘someone’ isn’t.

“I’ll see you.”

“You got it, Barnes.”

“Um, will you…uh. Can you tell him, for me, that…I—”
Sam cuts in to say, mercifully, “I’ll say hey.”

“Thank you.”

He hangs up the phone and stares at the blank screen, blinking and bewildered at himself. Beside him he hears Wilson muttering to himself.

“—is a **totally** cute ship name. Better than *winterpool*, obviously.”

The Soldier dials Matt’s number and agrees to wait for Nelson and Mahoney to collect him at his location in twenty minutes. Spiderman barrels in through the window as he’s hanging up the phone and says, “We’re out of time.”

“What?”

“What’d you see out there, Spidey?”

“As far as I know our cover’s not blown, but there’s…chaos, everywhere: carjackings, muggings, shootings. We need to be on patrol, Deadpool.”

“Shit, um. Okay, I’m right behind you. Barnes, stay here until you get word from that Sergeant guy. I mean it. Make Weasel give you a hat or something to hide your head wound. Wear the gloves. Uh…” He paces around and then tugs his mask on over his face. “It’s gonna be all right. You’re gonna be fine.”

“Deadpool, come on.” Spiderman holds the window open for Wilson to go through and a scream tears through the silence down below on the street. “Deadpool!”

Wilson goes. The apartment is quiet. He calls Murdock again and calls Karen when Murdock doesn’t answer. Weasel steps out of the bathroom.

“What the hell is going on?”

“I need something to cover my head.” He brings the phone back to his ear. “Karen, we’ve got trouble in Harlem. What’s the situation over there?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you inside?”

“No, I’m walking home. What’s going on?”

“Is Matt with you?”

Karen says they separated at the office. Murdock told her he was going to the precinct to wait for Nelson and Mahoney to return with the Soldier, but he suspects he’s really out doing his Daredevil bit. The Soldier takes a breath and maintains his calm to relate his fear to her.

“There’s been a spike in violent crimes here that I’m worried might hit Hell’s Kitchen at any minute, so I need you to get inside as soon as you can.”

“Can you stay on the phone?” she asks. He can hear her running.

“I’m here.”

He takes the beanie Weasel offers him and works the soiled gloves on over his hands, holding the
phone between his cheek and shoulder. Weasel goes rummaging through the closet across from the bathroom. It’s a verifiable arsenal. The Soldier watches him while listening to Karen’s breathing in his ear and pulls the beanie on his head. He winces at the pressure it puts on his graze.

Weasel walks away from the closet with two items draped over his arm. The first that he hands over is a leather shoulder holster that the Soldier fits his arms through. He shucks the pilfered belt and holsters the Browning in the left side. The pouch on the other side is already stocked with ammunition. Weasel holds the black leather jacket out for the Soldier to shrug into it. He takes a sweeping glance up and down and nods.

“Consider it payment for helping with the medicine.”

The Soldier nods gratefully, digging the ammo cartridge from earlier out of its sweaty deposit between his boot and calf to tuck it into an easy-access jacket pocket. He checks for Karen’s status, hoping he warned her in time. She tells him when she’s at her door, when she’s stepped inside, and when she’s locked it behind her. He stays on a few minutes more so that she can make sure there are no intruders and lock up the doors and windows.

“Just stay inside,” he pleads. “Promise me you’ll stay inside.”

“I promise.”

“And don’t worry about Matt. If he’s near the precinct and shit hits the fan, he’ll be protected.”

“Be careful, Bucky.”

He ends the call reluctantly and pockets the phone in one of the jacket’s many compartments. Weasel leans his shoulder against the wall near the bathroom.

“You know I’m turning myself over, right? So giving me weapons…”

“Yeah, Fisk had a botched arrest, too. I heard Wade telling you about him.”

“Botched?”

“The police were transporting him and his ride got hijacked. If there’s noise out there now, I wouldn’t put it past the guys who are lookin’ for you to be behind it. Kicking up a fuss so they can sneak off with you like thieves in the night.”

And that had been the point before, hadn’t it? To draw the police to him so he’d be apprehended, so they could extract him in the confusion.

“Fuck.”

“Eesh,” Weasel says with an alarmed look on his face. “What?”

“What else do you have in that closet?”

Weasel freezes for a moment and then dives into action, turning and flinging open the closet door. He has Bowie knives, Columbia M16 folders, fixed blades with G-10 handles made from tool steel mounted on one wall, kerambits and neck knives on the opposite, and even a vicious-looking tomahawk protruding proudly from the mess of weapons. There are guns, too, but he has a gun already. A knife is in order.

“You keep Ka-Bars in stock?”
Weasel pulls open the third drawer of the huge, heavy tool cabinet. The one he presents to the Soldier isn’t simple gray steel like the one he left in the alley. Its blade is black and the handle is the color of polished wood with black bands carved around it. Its sheath is soft brown leather.

“You can attach it to the shoulder holster,” Weasel tells him, pointing to the spot he means.

The Soldier follows his recommendation and also takes a kerambit that he can wear around his neck. He tugs at the sheath to test how secure it is until he’s satisfied that it requires a firm grip to detach from the blade. The sheath itself is melded at the top to the chain so there’s no chance of breakage. Weasel encourages him to also take a Smith & Wesson H.R.T. False Edge to tuck into his boot, and at this point it becomes clear that Weasel has forgotten the real danger afoot in favor of losing himself in his expertise with weaponry.

“I think I’m good.”

“You don’t want to look at the grenades?” Weasel sounds crestfallen.

“I already can’t pay for what you’ve given me.”

“Oh please, I’ll just overcharge the next hundred weapons I sell to Wade. I’d take his money over yours any day.”

“Does he…treat you okay?”

Weasel’s reverie sours just enough for the Soldier to recognize that this subject change is unwelcome. He looks away and scratches at the back of his neck, tugging on his earlobe without appearing to be aware of it.

“Overcharge him, and make him pay for her remaining medical bills.”

Taking a moment to stare at him, Weasel cracks a smile, murmuring, “I like you.”

The Soldier awkwardly pats down the jacket and reminds himself where his weapons are.

“Maybe you need new gloves?”

“Weasel.”

“I can see how stiff they are from here. They bloody on the inside?”

The Soldier sighs and ducks into the bathroom while Weasel goes rooting through the dresser in the main room. He peels off the gloves, washes his hands in the sink, and crouches in front of the cat’s cage. She’s sleeping and doesn’t stir when he opens the door to touch the soft spot between her ear and her eye. Her eye stays closed, but she starts to purr anyway. She doesn’t even budge when he dabs at the crusty build-up in the inside corner of her eye with one steady swipe of his pinky.

His phone rings. ‘Sergeant’ is calling him.

“I’ll come down.”

“We’ll meet you in the lobby. It’s bad out here. You shouldn’t be unattended.”

“I’m armed. I have to be.”

Mahoney pauses like he’s trying to think of the best way to protest. He sighs. “All right, fine. Nelson says you’re an ally and not a threat, so I’ll allow it. But only because I don’t wanna be the only one
with a gun up against…all this.”

Weasel hands him a new pair of gloves, black leather like Murdock’s.

“My friend’ll buzz you in,” he says pointedly, looking at Weasel to make sure he gets it. Weasel jogs out into the hallway. “Make sure you’re not followed.”

“S not my first rodeo.”

He hangs up the phone and tucks it into an internal pocket, staring at the sleeping animal before him.

“Eat your sardines,” he whispers. “And behave.”

Weasel comes back to the door. “They’re in. You sure I can’t get you to take some nonlethal grenades to-go? Better safe than sorry.”

“No. Thanks.” He closes the cage and gets the gloves on. “You ought to call her Мурка.”

“Whoa, if I could pronounce it, you mean.”

The Soldier shrugs and leaves with a final press of his hand to the carrier. He strides out to the door, Weasel calling out for good luck behind him. Outfitted as he is for battle, he can’t help but think he won’t need luck keeping himself and his people safe tonight, even in spite of the mayhem ensuing on the streets.

He hopes it’s not hubris to think he can handle it—that if it is arrogance, his will be the only downfall tonight.

Chapter End Notes

“Isn’t He Adorable?” by Bea Arthur from “Between Friends”

Мурка – someone who purrs, but also a Russian 'criminal song'
http://lyricstranslate.com/en/murka-murka.html-0 (lyrics)

Also because I feel the need to let y'all know who I see when I write these dorks (and why I didn't make Wade blond).
My Deadpool is Jose Pablo Cantillo: http://tumblr.co/Z2bmrr1n2HNeA and http://tmblr.co/Z2bmrr1n0GAVF
My Spiderman is Donald Glover: http://tumblr.co/Z2bmrr1n06RxQ
My Weasel is Rami Malek: http://tmblr.co/Z2bmrr1n0CEwJ

^That's my tumblr btw.

And yes Weasel's alive here and he's a total animal lover. Fight me.

Unbeta'd as per usual. Mistakes are mistakes.
Resign Yourself

Chapter Summary

Our heroes have to restore order to New York when Hydra incites riots and violence across all five boroughs to flush out their former asset. More alliances are made! Social media will be utilized! And Wilson will tell Bucky just what the heck is up with shipping, sort of.

Chapter Notes

PLEASE READ: There is some drug use about halfway through this chapter (medical marijuana, if you squint, ish). And also, Wade calling it a 'doobie'. Which is fabulous.

As you may have noticed, I upped the chapter count from 5 to 6. Because I love to torture myself with long fic, apparently. This is a tentative switch, but I'm pretty sure I'll need 6 instead of 5.

Cheers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Soldier sprints down seven flights of stairs and skids to a stop seeing fire outside the windows. Mahoney calls his name twice and waves him over to his and Nelson’s location.

“What have you got?” he asks in lieu of a greeting.

“Browning Hi Power 9mm,” the Soldier says, pulling the flap of his jacket to reveal the pistol. “And three knives for close quarters combat.”

“That’s it?” Nelson asks, looking as if he hadn’t meant to speak when the Soldier slides his gaze to him.

“Last time Hydra agents engaged me, they supplied me with weapons. If it’s civilians out there, I can’t use excessive force.” He looks from Nelson to Mahoney. “What’s your read on the situation?”

“Hard to tell if any of ‘em are pros. Might be some opportunists taking advantage of an already-screwed night.”

Nelson adds, “And between those two categories, it’s impossible to pick out the ones who are just trying to get clear of the violence.”

“Did you call for backup?” the Soldier asks Mahoney.

“No need, man. This shit storm was already blowing up on the scanners before we pulled up. But with how quickly it’s escalating, come morning we’re gonna be looking at a lot more bodies on the streets than in prison cells. I don’t know that we’d make it back to Hell’s Kitchen until it settles down.”
“Especially not in a police-issued vehicle,” Nelson points out.

The Soldier appraises both his companions. He takes in Mahoney’s authoritative calm and Nelson’s steadily dwindling panic. It’s sobering to see them balance each other out. The Soldier can’t tell if they’re friends, but he sees that they know each other.

“We’ve got Spiderman and Deadpool in the vicinity,” the Soldier reports. “Orders, Sergeant.”

Nelson glances between them silently, eyes wide but not with fear. Mahoney checks Nelson and clears his throat at Nelson’s raised eyebrows.

Mahoney says, “You’ve got a friend upstairs?”

“Seventh floor, apartment 12. Blue door. His name’s Weasel.”

“Foggy, I need you up there. At least until we can stabilize this mess.”

Without giving him a chance to object because he won’t allow it, the Soldier says, “Tell him his cat has one eye and one black whisker.”


“You’re staying here,” he and Mahoney intone at the same time.

“You can’t just shelf me, Brett,” Nelson protests, voice climbing in decibel.

“Oh yes I can,” Mahoney counters. “Think of it this way. There’s clearly a trove of weapons in that apartment. If we need assistance, we’ll call for reinforcements. Be our backup.”

Nelson glances over to the window and mutters a harsh curse word. “Fine. Seventh floor, blue door. Which unit?”

“Twelve. The cat has one eye and one black whisker.” The Soldier clarifies, “If he asks for proof that I sent you.”

“All right,” Nelson sighs. He hesitates and pins the Soldier with his eyes. Their color’s indiscernible in this light, but they look dark even for their shine. “Karen called. She said she’s inside, but it got bad in Hell’s Kitchen, too. Uh, thank you, for warning her.”

The cluster of harried thoughts in the Soldier’s mind slows to a halt. “Of course.”

“Okay, um. Go fight crime. Be safe.” He looks at Mahoney. “As safe as you can.”

“We’ll keep you posted,” Mahoney promises, turning to the Soldier when Nelson jogs for the stairs. Without preamble he says, “Let’s go.”

Mahoney leads them out the door once Nelson’s disappeared from view and the noise swallows them. First he sees people running, the majority of them at the back whooping and hollering and those at the front screaming. There’s a line of police cars cutting off the outlet. They accept the frontrunners, a few of which just keep running. One of them crumples beside the back of a squad car. Three of them attack the officers managing the blockade. Bullets tear into the cacophony. The Soldier’s ears ring.

He stays close to Mahoney’s side for the first few steps and draws the Browning from its holster. He aims the muzzle of the gun away from his body, inserts the magazine from the shoulder holster, and racks the slide to chamber the first round. They jog out onto the street and Mahoney waves for the
Soldier to follow him to the police blockade.

It becomes immediately apparent to him that he doesn’t like being out here. The most he can do is disarm individual attackers with as little force as possible, providing cover for Mahoney if they get swamped. He keeps his shots low, seeking to maim rather than kill. A few times he does aim higher for a person’s hand or shoulder, but he never trains his sights on center-mass and he avoids headshots, period.

Nelson was right. It’s damn near impossible to tell who’s who right up until the three seconds it takes for the person to try something. Even then, it usually isn’t until he’s got them on the floor that he can gauge the extent of their training and experience. He incapacitates and disarms two dozen armed civilians before he encounters someone that he thinks might be a professional. The rest of the assailants, he just feels sick about.

An explosion claims a police cruiser from around the corner. The Soldier loses time.

He doesn’t lose the night altogether, but he does blink and find himself separated from Mahoney, which is awful and rolls in his guts worse than fear and nausea combined. He backtracks to try and find their last point of synchronicity, but the city’s framework has collapsed and sunken them into oblivion.

Upon re-examining his location, he sees that he’s taken himself a few blocks away from Weasel’s apartment. The distance doesn’t reassure him.

He can’t find Mahoney anywhere and he can’t hear himself think beyond the din in the streets. Spiderman and Deadpool are around, somewhere. They can’t have left. He looks around for them, too, and doesn’t see any sign of them.

There are people screaming and shouting and guns going off in every direction, and for a few long seconds he has to stop with his hand holding him up on the side of a building. He wonders with his head bowed under a terrible weight how he ever let this happen—wonders if it could really be happening because of him.

Because he had the audacity to go home, and to think that it could still be that for him.

The Soldier picks himself up off the wall and blinks hard against the memories trying to short his vision. A uniformed officer pulls a gun on him, blinding him with a flashlight.

“Drop your weapon!”

He drops the Browning. He mentally catalogues the Kerambit on the chain around his neck, the H.R.T False Edge in his boot, and the Ka-Bar at his side on the shoulder holster. The officer approaches him with her weapon drawn from the isosceles stance and he can see as she draws nearer that her finger isn’t on the trigger.

“Hands behind your head.”

He follows her instructions. The sound of broken glass distracts them both.

Someone hits him over the back of his head before he can turn around. The next thing he knows the officer is firing over him at his attacker while his head spins. All sound blurs in his head like wind whistling in his ears. He closes his eyes and feels the world shift beneath him, concrete and broken glass pressing up beneath his gloved hands. He raises his head and sees the officer crouching to help him.
She supports him with a hand under his arm and lifts him straight up like he weighs nothing, standing him up against the side of a car while he blinks. Its alarm goes off when he slumps into it, but it’s hardly a novel addition to the rest of the noise.

“You’re coming with me,” she tells him.

“I’m really not,” he slurs, trying to get his legs back. “No, listen. I’m with Sergeant Brett Mahoney of the 27th Precinct in Hell’s Kitchen.”

“Brett?” she repeats, narrowing her eyes at him.

“Brett,” he confirms. “He was the officer in charge of the round-up in Brooklyn last week. He’s working in conjunction with Matt Murdock and Foggy Nelson to build a criminal case against an organization that calls itself Hydra.”

He struggles to focus his eyes. The pounding at the base of his skull eventually softens into a dull, continuous thud. She’s much shorter than he is but built solidly, probably muscle through and through. Her head is shaved on the sides and the remaining black hair atop her head is dark and tightly coiled like Spiderman’s had been when he took off his mask in Weasel’s apartment.

She casts a critical gaze around them. His gaze follows her pointed glance at the person sat up against the tire of the car with its alarm still baying forlornly. His attacker, presumably, is already restrained with his weapons well out of reach.

Perhaps needlessly, he asks, “Is he dead?”

“I emptied a whole clip of beanbag rounds taking him down,” she says, looking uncomfortable. “He’s got a pulse, but he’s going to look like hell when he wakes up. Won’t be too happy either. How do you feel?”

“Like I got hit by a bus. But we can’t stay here.”

A flare lights up the sky and casts everything in a molten red glow. She watches it and shakes her head.

“No, we can’t, but you shouldn’t be on your feet right now. You’re probably concussed.”

“I’m not going inside until we find a way to restore order here.”

She taps her fingers nervously on the translucent glass of her flashlight and sweeps her gaze up and down the street. There are bags under her eyes—not as puffy or low as Weasel’s but indicative of exhaustion. Her eyes are vivid brown in the dim light of a lamppost on the street corner.

“What’s your name?” he yells over the sound of one long, uninterrupted pulse. The blaring car horn isn’t the one behind him but a different one about a block over. “Officer?”


“I’m Bucky.”

She stares at him and for a moment he worries she’ll go back to arresting him, but she just averts her eyes after a moment and nods. Her narrow jaw clenches.

“Thought you looked familiar,” she murmurs, and he only knows that’s what she says because he reads her lips. Louder, meaning for him to hear, she adds, “I wondered what Brett was doin’ on our
beat. Guess he was here for you.”

He nods, not wanting to strain himself to shout a single word in the affirmative. She paces away from him to retrieve the fallen Browning, brings it back to him, and offers it handle-first. He accepts it and Jones nods once, gravely. She watches him holster the gun and he lifts the flap of his jacket just a bit more to display the Ka-Bar and the Kerambit in a show of good faith.

“There’s another one in my boot,” he tells her.

“Good for you. We need to move,” she tells him, sounding apologetic even for how she has to shout to be heard. “Can you walk okay?”

He pushes ambitiously off the side of the car, sags dizzily, and loses his breath when her response is to pin him to the car by his shoulders. It keeps him from toppling over into a heap of limbs on the ground, but the impact stings deep in his bones and rattles in his brain.

_I thought you were smaller._

“Give me your arm,” she demands, pulling it across her shoulders when he shakily complies. “I last saw Mahoney near Frederick Douglass and MLK. I’ll take you to him if I can.”

Jones is _strong_. The hard line of her shoulders digs into the underside of his right arm, the impression of her muscles impressive and undeniable. It’s strangely, bizarrely familiar, being carried as he is. He has the distinct thought that she’s exactly the height she ought to be, though he’s not sure where the idea comes from and he can’t put his finger on why it gives him the sensation of warmth oozing out of his heart.

The Soldier keeps his metal hand gripped around the Kerambit on his chain in case they come across hostiles. They cover a block before his balance returns to him. She checks to see that he can stand unassisted before letting him go.

They get to Frederick Douglass Boulevard and encounter more trouble. He almost doesn’t unsheathe his Ka-Bar in time to parry the attack that comes from his left. His assailant doesn’t let up and he has to slide across the hood of a car to put some space between them.

His opponent stalks around the front of the car, face obscured by a clear plastic mask that looks like a bottle at the bottom. He can see that their hair is pinned back in a tight bun, but that’s no more a gender marker than the sharp jaw or the thin, wiry body that accompany it.

Jones remains on the sidewalk, engaging a man in hand-to-hand and exhibiting not just the power of her strikes but the precision of her skill in combat. He considers calling out to her, but he doesn’t want to break her concentration and cost her the fight. As it is, his own attacker pursues him and slashes near the vicinity of his throat with a knife.

He blocks a hard jab with his arm and flings them off when they try to grapple with him. They leap back onto their feet and yank off the mask covering their face.

“Chaplain?” he says, frowning. “What the hell?”

She doesn’t reply so much as he runs at him with a knife of her own. Her charge is too fast for him to identify the make of the blade, but her deftness with it doesn’t parallel her ability with the katana.

“Guess your swords aren’t low-key enough for a common brawl in the middle of a free-for-all,” he muses, goaded on by her sneer. “You jump off the bridge before the cops could get you? That was _my_ plan before Deadpool showed up.”
The mention of Wilson strikes a nerve and her hits become savage, brutal, and unfocused. He remembers her capacity to change her tune in battle, so he doesn’t allow himself to grow comfortable with her style. It turns out to be a good move on his part because once she’s settled into a groove she eases back into lightning fast swipes he’s almost too slow to stop.

Her fist does, in fact, connect with his jaw and then with his gut.

“It was a kindness, us letting that freak work with us,” she hisses, reaching behind her back for a CEW. “Should’ve known he’d betray us.”

He pulls hard on the Kerambit and sinks it into her shoulder, rolling out of the CEW’s range even as the knife wound causes her to drop it. There are more men with her—he notices when he looks up by necessity to check for Jones’ status. She’s defending against four people now. Two of them attack her at once while the third and fourth bar her only possible escape routes.

Chaplain pulls a gun on him and he kicks it out of her hand, one shot ringing out before it clatters onto the asphalt. She uses his momentum to force him flat on his back and follows his descent. One hand holds him down and the other jams into the side of his neck, setting his world on fire.

His body jolts and he’s sure he’s made of nerves and nothing else, not even skin. There’s nothing in the way of meat or blood to his chemistry. All he is, is jumping, electrified impulses.

The watery pitch that is his sight brightens to blazing white the likes of which he’s seen before—lights cramming their dead, immortal influence into his eyes: white, efficient light on an operating table, cutting him open before the scalpel, before the drill, before the forceps ever do. That brilliant, burning white cuts out like a flash. It fades into desolate black.


Life. Gasping breath. One, two. Another.

Pain.

_Barnes? Bucky, hey. No, no, no. Hey come on. Open your eyes. Open—okay, look at me. I’m right here, buddy, just look at me. Bucky!_

“Fogg…”

There’s a hand on his face; lifting and connecting, lifting and connecting. It remains flattened there against his cheek for a three-count before resuming its former pattern. His eyes flutter open.

“Hey!” the person gently slapping him half-laughs, half-sighs. “There he is!”

Foggy’s face filters in through milky grays and washed out blues. The red has bled itself from the sky. His face is pale like the blood has drained from it, too. The smile on his mouth doesn’t falter, but one corner of it trembles, just slightly.

He bats at Nelson’s hand and winces at the sharp bite of pain below his jaw. Trying to say _ow_ without moving his mouth too much, he manages an eloquent, “Ugh.”

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“Your friend with the bun got you with something called an ‘electromagnetic pulse’. Detective Jones says your heart stopped.”

_Did it?_ he tries to say, but comes out garbled. _You were supposed to stay back._
“What, this?” Nelson says conversationally, gesturing at whatever he’s wearing that the Soldier hasn’t seen yet. He grins a bit and shrugs airily, though his general demeanor is off. “Your friend said he’d need it back after tonight. Guess it’s just you who gets freebies.”

He flicks his gaze behind Nelson to see Mahoney marching a handcuffed Chaplain toward a police cruiser. It’s possible he regrouped with Nelson and drove them around looking for him.

“How?” he asks, trying to sit up.

Nelson helps him and a moment later Jones is also there at his side. She’d been giving them room, apparently, but hadn’t wanted to be too far away.

“I gave you CPR,” she informs him. “You weren’t gone for long.”

“Huh,” he says, uselessly, too low to be heard. To himself, he mutters, “Stand.”

Nelson shuffles to pull him up. Jones waits until he’s halfway and stable to lift him up the rest of the way. The Soldier slides his gaze from her to Nelson and pauses, furrowing his eyebrows.

“Is that Kevlar?”

He’s suited up to the nines, by a mercenary’s standards. Fitted out in a bulletproof vest and wearing a string of grenades on one side, Nelson looks the part of a determined bank robber. The grenades, he, realizes, are the nonlethal type Weasel tried to get him to take.

“The works,” Nelson says affably, appearing to relax finally. He offers the Ka-Bar hilt-first. The Soldier must have dropped at some point. He fumbles to receive it, fails superbly at controlling his fine motor skills, and paws at his jacket and shoulder holster. Nelson follows his hand and fiddles the knife back into its sheath. “Haven’t needed it yet, but it’s good.”

“You come in…guns blazing?” the Soldier rasps.

“Nonlethal grenade, Weasel called it.” Nelson drops his gaze briefly. “I’m not a good shot with a gun. I’d probably just get it taken away from me. You all right?”

“Yeah, just need to keep moving.”

“That’s the exact opposite of what I’d recommend,” Jones counters. “If you didn’t before, I’m positive you’ve got at least a concussion now.”

“Mahoney’s got a ride out. I suggest we take it while we can, Barnes.”

“What about all this?” he asks, sounding pathetic to his own ears.

“You’re not a cop,” Jones reminds him gently. “And you’re wounded.”

“You’re hunted,” Nelson adds. “We’ll take you back to Hell’s Kitchen in the morning, but until then, we need to work on crisis management. None of this was in the plan.”

But it happened. It’s happening. And it is because of him.

He lets Nelson and Jones lead him to the sidewalk and he can hear that the noise has quieted some. There’s still violence a few streets away—feet drumming on pavement, glass breaking, and people yelling, but no screaming, no gunfire. No one’s on them now. Things must be winding down if they aren’t over yet.
The Soldier straightens out, takes a few shuddering breaths, sucks in a deep one, and yells, “Wilson!”

His lungs pinch around emptiness and he coughs, doubling over. Nelson grips his shoulder when he stays hunched over.

Jones asks Nelson, “Who’s Wilson?”

“Wilson,” the Soldier tries but ends up gasping instead.

He can hardly explain the urge to call out for his friend now, but he believes he’ll hear him. Even muttering and struggling for breath, he’s sure Wilson can pick up on his cries in that way that he picks up on everything.

Wilson talks a lot, but he hears a lot, too. He hears things all the time that nobody else can and he’ll break the rules to hear the Soldier now if it’s possible.

“Come on,” he breathes, letting Nelson coax him to stand upright.

“Buddy, hey, can you hear me? You’re all right. It’s okay.”

It’s not. He tries again, steadying himself on Nelson’s shoulder before he sucks in another deep breath, lungs tinkling like static behind his ribs. He feels crazed, like an animal caught in a trap.

“Wilson!”

“Barnes…”

“This is like that part from Cast Away when the volley ball floats away.”

The Soldier whips around to peer at the red blip peering out at him from over a rooftop. He heaves a weary sigh and can’t fight the wide smile that spreads across his face. Wilson jumps down and sticks the landing without making him call out again.

“You rang, my darling?”

He stumbles into Wilson’s space, lifts his arms as an afterthought, and lets himself go slack right there pressed up against Wilson’s front. His fingers squeeze together, fabric bunching up in between his knuckles. A tense moment flickers and then Wilson closes his arms around him to hold him tightly in place against his chest. Wilson is a few inches shorter than him but the Soldier drops his head on his shoulder anyway.

Wilson’s heartbeat is uneven but not rushed. The longer he listens to its palpitations the more certain he is that arrhythmia is Wilson’s default.

“I’m surprised but he was due for one eventually, right?” he hears Wilson say from where he’s listening for words with his ears and with the lines of his face. Wilson’s voice vibrates down his nose, in his cheek, and even hums a little in the orbital ridge over his eye, tickling his eyelid. His suit smells like smoke and gun powder. Quieter, Wilson asks him, “How’d you know to do that, tin man?”

“Do what?”

“Put out a beacon to bring me here,” Wilson tells him. “I wasn’t even in the area. Should have been out of earshot.”
“No you were,” the Soldier agrees easily, swaying when he registers the lack of shouting from the next block over. “You didn’t hear me.”

Haltingly, Wilson says, “Well, that’s…weird?”

“Calling yourself weird, Wilson?” he asks, throat hoarse from all the shouting.

“Undoubtedly. I mean, duh.”

The Soldier leans out of Wilson’s hold and straightens up. His head hangs heavily between his shoulders like a bruised piece of fruit, but he’s standing, if unsteadily, on his own two feet. He glances in Nelson’s direction to reassure him and finds Nelson already giving him a soft look as if he’d had the same intention in mind.

“Didja miss me, Foggy?” Wilson asks, drawing Nelson’s attention and making him flush red despite their dire circumstances.

In the interest of time, the Soldier redirects. “Where’s Spiderman?”

“Back the way I came. He said he had to hold down the fort until the cops could get a handle on things. It’s nicer over here, I see.”

Wilson gestures widely with his hand and the Soldier follows the casual sweeping motion to its incidental targets: Jones and Mahoney, conferring over something by his vehicle.

“Holy—” Wilson waves his hands over his head and bounces on his heels. “Is that Chaplain? Oh man.”

“She’s really irritated at you right now.”

“Looks like she took it out on you.” Wilson indicates his own neck, appearing to wince through his mask. “You feel right, tin man?”

“I’m fine,” he *whistles* with his broken voice. “We should regroup, when the dust settles.”

“Will do, Sarge. You gonna take your police detail with you?”

Nelson touches Bucky’s arm and walks over to the officers to join their conversation.

“He looks badass all tricked out like that,” Wilson swoons. “And dare I say it, I think I recognize that Kevlar.”

“We sent him to Weasel for protection.”

“I see that,” Wilson remarks, tilting his head to the right and then the left. “Yep, that is what I see.”

The Soldier blearily follows his gaze. “You don’t do that just to make him uncomfortable, do you?”

Wilson crosses his arms and locks one hip. The Soldier can imagine him raising one eyebrow—if he had eyebrows. “Do you ask because you’re concerned for his honor or because you’re concerned for mine?”

“Both,” he admits unreservedly.

“Oh. That’s so sweet! But really, it’s kind of incidental if it makes him uncomfortable.”
The Soldier rolls his eyes. Nelson comes back with Jones and Mahoney flanking him. Jones speaks first as she’s holding her hand out to Wilson: “Detective Charlotte Jones.”

“Wade Wilson,” he answers dutifully, shaking her right hand and saluting with his left. “And Sergeant—we’ve met.”

“Oh,” Mahoney drawls. The Soldier can’t tell whether the inflection behind his tone denotes a positive or negative experience. “Here’s how we’re doing this. I’ll take Nelson and Barnes back to the safe house. Wilson, you’re with Jones. Questions?”

He waits a beat and then turns abruptly, waving for Nelson and the Soldier to go with him. Nelson goes ahead of him and the Soldier hesitates a few seconds to look at Wilson.

“I withstand a hell of a lot more than a volley ball, Barnes. I’ll see you when the dust settles.”

The Soldier nods and catches up with Nelson and Mahoney. He watches Wilson lead Jones around a street corner and stays close to Nelson’s side the whole trek back to Weasel’s apartment building.

“He seems like a good guy,” Nelson offers while they’re running.

“I told you he was.”

“Well yeah, but. I didn’t realize.”

“Didn’t realize what?”

“I mean.” Nelson pauses. They sprint across a street and up some stairs. Mahoney jabs the button outside the building to buzz Weasel’s apartment. Huffing, Nelson says, “I didn’t realize you were so close.”

There’s nothing more to say on that point, so while they’re waiting for Weasel to buzz them in, the Soldier looks away from Nelson to catalogue the night’s developments. Everywhere in the street there’s litter and smashed windows on cars. One building in his sightline is torched. Someone’s splayed out in the road, motionless, a few buildings down.

He breaks apart from their huddle by the doors as Weasel’s buzzing them in. That unmoving body has no pulse when he reaches it. Nelson calls after him and so does Mahoney. Judging by appearances only, the victim looks homeless, dressed in layers to guard against the cold of evening and nightfall and wearing an unkempt beard. His shoes are worn and old. The Soldier stares at that wrinkled, sunburnt face and he doesn’t know what he expects to happen.

Nelson and Mahoney have to work together to drag him away from the body. They tell him there’s nothing he can do. They’re right and he goes back up the stairs with them, obedient.

It’s quiet. Somehow the noise from before was easier to bear. It held more possibility and less doom—the likelihood of destruction without the actual devastation of it. This silence now is heavy. It suffocates him.

Weasel buzzes them through, asking only that the Soldier tell him his suggested name for the cat in place of a proper password. The Soldier almost can’t remember it.

Mahoney leaves them once the front door is firmly closed behind them. They watch him run back for the street and vanish. Nelson tries to get him to take the elevator, but the Soldier doesn’t trust it not to malfunction while they’re in it. Nelson walks him to the stairs without further argument.
The climb up to the seventh floor is slow-going and of an even worse stillness than outside had been. Nelson tries to talk to him a few times but can’t seem to pinpoint a proper beginning.

Weasel opens the door for them as soon as their shadows darken the doorway and makes a noise as they pass through. The Soldier ignores him and makes a beeline for the cage that’s been moved near the futon. He plops down into a cross-legged position in front of the door and peers inside.

She raises her head to acknowledge him and meows once. Something stony in his expression softens like warm butter, his mouth flickering into the slightest of smiles.

“Мурка,” he murmurs, tapping the pad of one finger soundlessly on the grate. “You didn’t eat your sardines. Ну и что мне с тобой делать?”

“Is he okay?”

“He’s had a rough night.”

“You’ve only been gone an hour.”

“Yeah well time flies when people are trying to kill you, I guess.” There’s a loud snapping sound. Nelson shuffles out of the Kevlar vest and passes his things off to Weasel. It all gets filed away back in the closet. “I had to use a grenade. The vest is clean, though.”

“All in a day,” Weasel replies, closing a drawer in the tool cabinet and gently shutting the closet door after it. “Hey, um. He should probably try to sleep. Looks sort of like death, and not just around the eyes.”

Nelson sighs. The Soldier removes his gloves and opens the cage in clear defiance of their idea for him to rest. Мурка hesitates a moment and then slinks out to brush up against his leg. He runs his fingers down the length of her spine and trails up her twitching tail. The very last bone in the curve is bent inward—a fracture that didn’t heal correctly.

She turns, stealing her tail back and fixing him with her one hazel-brown eye. He blinks at her and she meows, as curious about him as he is about her, maybe, for that one instant.

And then she swings her head to look the other way and goes to investigate Weasel. He crouches to receive her and the Soldier stays where he is on the floor, watching after them hollowly. Nelson comes over and sits on the edge of the coffee table, to the right of the cage and to the left of the Soldier.

“A dog would pay more attention to you.”

“Мурка не собака.”


“I said she’s not a dog,” the Soldier translates for him, lifting out the uneaten sardines to glare at them. “But I bet it’s just as hard feeding a dog medicine, right?”

“I guess?”

“Then what’s the difference if she doesn’t come when I call?”

“I think I’m not understanding you.”

The Soldier sighs. He puts the dish back in the cage.
“We play our cards right, something like this never happens to her again. That means this is the worst shape I’ll ever see her in, God willing. A dog in this condition, by your estimation, wouldn’t be any less difficult to treat, and by own estimation, the only thing I dislike about that cat is that she tried to spit medicine in my face.”

“You actually looked like you enjoyed that,” Weasel chimes in, walking on his knees and herding Мурка back in their direction. “Somethin’ about her fight or I-don’t-know-what.”

Мурка rediscovers him and pokes her plastic collar at his knee, trying to smell him. He offers his metal hand without thinking and yanks it back when she licks one of his fingers. A good few inches away from her nose, he points a metal finger at her and sighs when she makes another go for it. He switches hands and points at her again.

“Нельзя.”

Weasel laughs when she licks his thumb. “Guess she doesn’t understand Russian either.”

He stays seated on the floor while Weasel goes into the kitchen to get some water for her in a shallow bowl. Nelson scoots off the coffee table and sits next to him on the floor.

“Maybe you wanna take off your Badass Gear for now, Barnes?”

The Soldier keeps his eyes fixed on Мурка. She tires of him just as easily as she’s wont to do and goes sniffing around Nelson’s shoes. He takes the opportunity with his hands free to slide out of the borrowed jacket, carefully removes every weapon from his person, and considers the False Edge tucked away in his boot.

“You keep that one,” Weasel offers, setting down the bowl where Мурка can see it. “Just until we know for sure that you won’t need it.”

Weasel folds the shoulder holster, the Browning, and the Ka-Bar up in the jacket. The Soldier belatedly sets the chain for the Kerambit on top of the pile.

“I couldn’t retrieve the knife. Sorry.”

“I’m going to take that to mean that they guy’s alive, or that you ditched it in favor of getting out in one piece. Either way, good job and don’t sweat it. Wade’s covering your tab, remember?”

“I still feel like I owe you,” he says, clearing his throat when his voice breaks around raw soreness. “You’re a businessman for Christ’s sake. You can’t just lend this stuff out to me for free.”

“And I’m not.” Weasel lifts one eyebrow at him. “Someday you’ll be in a better situation to talk payment, by which point Wade will probably still be working off the Kerambit alone. If you still want to cover the cost when that day comes, be my guest, Barnes.” He slides his gaze away from the Soldier to the left, presumably to look at Nelson. “But, now you mention it, there is one thing I can think of that I’d consider at least on par with the going rate of that flash grenade Fogster used.”

“Fogster?” Nelson repeats from behind him.

“What’s that?”

“You, sleep.” Weasel points at the futon. “I’ll get you a pillow and everything. Try to find you a blanket that doesn’t smell like munitions.”

The Soldier frowns and gives Nelson an indignant glare. It falls clean off his face at seeing Мурка
happily deposited in his lap. She kneads at Nelson’s stomach and purrs. He sneaks his fingers beneath the collar to scratch at the very base of her throat and she makes the pigeon sound at him, clearly pleased.

“What?” Nelson asks, startled to find that both people in the room with him are staring.

“Fine,” the Soldier sighs. “But I don’t need the futon.”

He starts to stretch out on the floor where he is at the mouth of Мурка’s open cage and only stops to make sure that she’s still in Nelson’s lap and not suddenly behind him. Weasel stands still and starts into motion a full handful of seconds later.

“Let me at least get you a pillow,” he tries, without success. The Soldier closes his eyes and Weasel complains, “He looks more dead like that.”

“I’m right here, Weasel.”

“You look more dead like that,” Weasel revises, walking in the direction of the dresser.

“He’s right, you kind of do. Ow!” The Soldier cracks an eye open and sees Nelson cautiously working one of Мурка’s claws out of his shirt. He closes his eyes.

“Blanket incoming.”

“I don’t—”

The blanket is soft, threadbare but smooth. It’s an old thing and not too warm. He reaches up with both hands to inch the beanie off his head without disturbing the bandage around his forehead. Once it’s off, he twists onto his other side so that the floor won’t put unwanted pressure on his graze. The flattened beanie cushions his cheek.

His neck aches all along the pulse point. Since it faces the floor, he can keep the blanket pulled up to his chin without chancing an accidental brush of fabric against it.

“EMP you said,” he murmurs, loud enough for Nelson to hear.

“According to Detective Jones. She said she used to be a trauma nurse, so I trust her evaluation more than I would my own.”

“What’s it look like?”

“Well…”

“Like you got splashed with boiling water. Or acid,” Weasel answers, still moving nimbly and quietly around the apartment. “Actually, have you seen that patch of skin on the top of Wade’s head? Right on the crown of his head? That’s what your neck looks like.”

“Do you know how to treat burns from electrical shock?” Nelson asks, somewhat doubtfully.

Weasel sniffs, “Yes. Not that I’m a hundred percent on what it would really do, treating it. He’s obviously fine.”

The words aren’t spoken disdainfully, but he can hear Nelson bristling at Weasel’s reply. He takes on his lawyerly voice and says, “It’ll treat the burn. Do it.”

There’s a pause. Weasel coughs.
“You want me to look at that for you, Barnes?”

“Not if you need me to get up,” the Soldier mumbles. His body turned to lead about ten seconds into lying down. “Might have to move me around.”

“I can do that,” Weasel says, voice shrinking as he turns away. “You’ll be an angel after her.”

The Soldier slides his eyes open and turns gingerly onto his back again.

“Wanna take her off my hands?” Nelson asks, dusting his hands so that white cat hairs fly off of him. “You’d be saving my shirt.”

“Not sure it’s a good idea as long as I’m about to get bandaged up.”

“Why’s that?” Weasel asks, coming out of the bathroom with a clear baggie of different types of cloth and a basin. “Think you might freak out and start throwing elbows?”

“No.”

Weasel kneels at his shoulder and dunks a square of cotton gauze into the basin until it’s soaked through.

“This is water. Best case scenario, it’ll feel nice.”

“Worst case?” the Soldier asks, tracking that sopping wet square with his eyes.

“It won’t.” Weasel shrugs and gets to work.

While it isn’t unpleasant, the cold water on his neck mostly just chills him. Weasel’s quick about dabbing the wound on his neck. His fingers don’t ever touch the Soldier’s skin, that’s how meticulous he is in his work. He sweeps the Soldier’s wet hair out of the way with the gauze and tapes up a huge portion of his neck without so much as brushing him with his fingers. A few cold drops of water creep down the Soldier’s jaw and stick to the collar of his shirt.

“How long you known Wilson for?” the Soldier asks when Weasel starts to pack up his supplies.

“Long enough for him to know I own padded handcuffs,” Weasel quips, winking when all the Soldier does is stare at him. “Although the reason he knows that about me is really sort of mundane and not interesting at all.”

“Why, what happened?” Nelson asks, setting Мурка down by the Soldier’s hip.

He pulls the blanket back up over himself and turns his head to the right. Мурка presses one paw into his thigh and purrs. The Soldier closes his eyes and listens to Weasel’s voice.

“Well see, we were doing this job in Queens. Actually Wade and Spiderman were doing the job. I got called in to look at this prototype for a cochlear implant with properties similar to a cyanide capsule. Except instead of leaking poison when detonated, it would cause ischemia or edema on command. And not just that but balance problems, too. It was like a brain-nuke.”

“Jesus,” Nelson whispers.

“Yeah they had this thing they were doing. Trying to get P.O.W.s to cough up state secrets, or else. Real nefarious shit.”

Nelson’s reply swims around in the Soldier’s head. Мурка sticks him with her claws and his eyes
snap open.

“—managed to get the thing shut down, but only after their surgeons managed to stick Wade with an implant. That was an experience. He wouldn’t shut up about it for weeks. He kept saying he got a back alley trephination done. The drama queen.”

The Soldier sees Nelson duck his head and smile. The Soldier also smiles and closes his eyes, one hand venturing down to catch Мурка’s paw on his leg. She settles in against him for warmth and curls up to sleep, thankfully, though the paw in his grasp clenches and unclenches. Her claws let out little screeching noises where they scrape ceaselessly against metal.

Sounding like he’s miles away, Nelson says, “I barely know the guy, but that sounds like him.”

Weasel snorts and the murky sea of the Soldier’s thoughts calms to a hush. There’s more to the story—something about restraining Wilson to a table at a morgue they broke into for the purpose of extracting the cochlear implant, but he stops listening and drops off, away, away…

He opens his eyes to a field: to endlessness and sand-colored wheat and warmth. It’s warmer than he remembers being in all his life. There’s no sun when he looks for it and no clouds either. Murdock’s there, though, standing right in front of him without his glasses. His eyes are unfocused and his head is tilted to the side. It’s the look he gets when he’s openly studying someone.

“Think it’s about time we had that talk, Barnes?”

“Which?”

“Your arm, my eyes.”

“It’s a metal arm. What’s there to say about it?”

Murdock shrugs, a small smile playing on his lips. “That’s what I’m asking.”

“It’s…” The Soldier flexes his hand and rolls up the sleeve of his shirt to watch the metal move. “It’s separate.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well not that I know from experience, but I’m pretty sure it’s detachable.”

“Literal,” Murdock muses. “I can work with that.”

“I don’t see how.” Murdock opens his mouth, closes it. The Soldier says, “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I see a lot that you don’t.”

“Like what?”

“Like your mercy.” Murdock nods and steps in closer, putting them at arms’ length from each other. “Your decency.”

The Soldier shakes his head. Murdock raises his chin.

“Your hatred.”

His protests shrivel up. Murdock’s voice stays soft and immeasurably kind.
“You can let go of it now, Barnes.”

“Not without letting the rest of it go.”

“Would that be a bad thing?” Murdock shrugs, genuinely asking for the answer. “Change is a part of growth. Maybe the good can’t really be good until the bad’s gone.”

“Showin’ me your Catholic side, Murdock?”

Murdock shakes his head. “The side that lost a father and had to bury him.”

The Soldier swallows and turns away to look out at the field they’re standing in. Wheat stalks stretch out on all sides as far as the eye can see. Their golden tips shiver and whisper in the breeze.

“A funeral,” the Soldier says, struggling to say the word. “That was the point of ГАМАЮН. Anytime they needed to shave off bits of my stump to make room for a neater replacement: ‘asset plays possum in a coffin while we amputate his arm’. Like a bad headline or something.”

“Is that how you feel now?”

“Dead?” he asks. “And not just around the eyes?”

“Yes,” Murdock answers crisply, like he’s talking about the weather and not death.

“Do you?”

Murdock manages a tiny smile. He says, “Around the eyes, maybe.”

The Soldier scoffs. Murdock’s smile widens.

“Walk with me?”

Their arms link up and they walk, the wheat parting around their steps but remaining otherwise intact and untouched. They pass through like specters, and the thought makes him realize that that’s what he is.

“I’m a ghost.”

“You’re not a ghost,” Murdock counters airily. The Soldier looks at him and Murdock raises an eyebrow in his general direction. “You’re not. You, James Buchanan Barnes, are very much alive. Regardless of what your feelings about that may be.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well.” Murdock tips his chin in front of them, eyes not moving from their blank, fixed point. The Soldier turns his eyes away to look out in front of them and jerks to a stop. Murdock stops, gracefully, beside him. “It doesn’t go away. You know it doesn’t.”

All around them the wheat field has turned gray, the harvest all but incinerated. Heaps of ash are left in their place. At his feet the dead homeless man is sprawled out in a horrible heap of limbs, half-covered in dirt. Some feet away from him another small plot of earth rises up. The Soldier strays from Murdock’s side and drops to his knees beside the mound.

He digs with his hands, breathing fearfully through clenched teeth when his fingers uncover a cold hand. It leads him to a wrist, an arm, a shoulder, and…
Karen.

“No.” His heart leaps up into his throat and his body shivers. “No, no. No, Karen. No.”

“Is she a ghost?” Murdock asks, the question devoid of every thinkable emotion that it should be dripping with.

He brushes the dirt away from her face with hands that shake beyond his control. Another grave rises up out of the earth, shocking his hands into fists, fingers raking through the dirt and pulling at him, at Karen. He scrambles after her, trying too late to save her and screaming when her eyes flutter open and she sees him, more terror in her eyes than he’s ever seen from her, right before she’s gone.

The gaping maw of the earth tries to swallow him next and he clambers out, already running for the next grave in sight and crying in anguish when he loses Wilson the same way, when he loses Claire, Nelson, Sam, even Steve.

And when he thinks he’s lost them all he stands, bent and breathless, over the gutted field. His eyes find Murdock across the long stretch of ruined ground and his body goes cold. He runs.

Murdock crumples as soon as he touches him, blood frothing out of his mouth. His eyes roll back into his head, convulsions slowing and finally stopping. The Soldier cradles him close, not knowing what else to do but only wanting to shield Murdock from the inevitable darkness that will reach up to engulf them.

“Don’t, don’t. Okay? Don’t, please.”

“The good with the bad, Barnes.” Murdock opens his eyes and looks right at him, looking unrecognizable in his recognition. Teeth stained red, he whispers, “The bad with the good.”

The ground rumbles and shakes around them. Instead of darkness, his body twists into a knot, ice expanding around him and locking him into place. He shivers and gasps awake, eyes flying open and body curling inward on itself in rebellion to the cold beckoning him into its thrall.

Somebody says, “Barnes.”

“Bucky,” someone else says.

32557038.

“Give him some room.”

He plants his right hand in front of him, wincing at the gritty pain at his head where his graze is digging into the floor. Water splashes his face, a freezing cold puddle of it beneath his hand. He blinks and pushes, flinching when someone touches his arm from behind.

That hand retreats and he sits up unassisted, legs bent at the knees and splayed out. He covers his face with both hands and breathes. His shoulders and back slouch.

“Weas, bring that blanket back.”

“Maybe a towel first? He’s sort of drenched, Wade.”

“It’s just water. Albeit freezing cold water. Kind of a dick move, I’ll be the first to admit it.”

“You dumped water on me,” the Soldier repeats thinly. His voice isn’t as strong as he’d like. In fact, it’s raspier than it had been before he fell asleep.
“Well when I tried shaking you awake, you broke my jaw,” Wilson answers pertly. The Soldier peels his hands away from his face to stare at Wilson through his mask. “Quiet efficiently, I might add.”

Wilson tugs his mask off at the Soldier’s blank look. The lower half of his face is bloated, swollen entirely on the left side and bloody in the left corner of his mouth. A deep purple bruise has flowered on the curved point of his mandible.

“Oh God,” the Soldier breathes. A panicked breath steals out of him like he’s just been punched in the solar plexus. He looks around, slipping on the puddle beneath him. “Oh my God, no.”

“She’s fine,” Weasel assures him. He walks to her cage with its closed door and points. It’s been turned around so that he can’t see inside, but he can see her tail swishing through the round holes in the side of the cage. “We moved her once you started moving around. She’s okay.”

He buries his head in his hands and sinks his fingers into his hair, gripping tight and pulling.

“Hey, hey, none of that,” Wilson chides him, inching closer and holding his hands out. “Barnes, stop it.”

The Soldier looks up at him and lets Wilson slowly take hold of his wrists. After a few seconds’ resistance, he lets Wilson pull his hands away from his scalp.

“You were having a nightmare. It’s over now. You’re awake.”

Nelson walks into view behind Wilson, not saying anything but obviously there and receptive. He’s real, alive—looking at him through eyes bright with awareness, not agony.


Wilson keeps the Soldier’s wrists in his hands when no attempt is made to pull away. He gestures with a tip of his head for Weasel to do something.

“I’m just gonna put it around your shoulders,” he warns. “You might want to get up. You’ll catch cold or something.”

The Soldier nods and shuffles to his knees before standing upright. Nelson offers him a plastic cup filled with water. He drinks it all and hands it back as he catches his breath.

“Feel like you could handle a shower, tin man? Don’t want that beastly arm of yours to rust.”

He nods and stops by Мурка’s cage just to verify with his own eyes that she’s okay. She doesn’t react to him outside of just staring at him.

“I didn’t…?”

“No,” Weasel says firmly from behind him. “No, Barnes. You didn’t.”

Wilson nods at the Soldier’s worried glance and points to the bathroom.

“Go. Clean up. We’ll get you sorted after.”

Weasel doesn’t have anything elaborate stocked in the shower, so washing up is a simple ordeal. He scrubs the dirt off himself methodically and allows the water to run freely over his wounds. The water rains down at its hottest setting, but he still keeps it short, not liking the occasional unpredictable bursts of cold.
There are clothes folded by the door on the bathroom floor when he gets out and on top of them is the burner phone that he’d misplaced at some point in the night’s confusion. He thinks he had it in the jacket and forgot to take it out before giving it back to Weasel, which would explain how it’s circulated back to him now if Weasel found it while he was sleeping.

He can tell by the blue of the shirt that the clothes are Weasel’s. It’s the same shade as the hoodie he’d lent to Spiderman before. The wrinkled khakis fit comfortably enough, but they’re not comfortable like Murdock’s clothes are comfortable. The shirt is a better fit, long enough to cover his navel and with sleeves that don’t cling to his arms.

He drags his fingers vaguely through his hair and steps out of the bathroom barefoot and more awake than he was. The phone is an anchor in his pocket.

“Oh, socks,” Weasel notes, rising from his place crouched in front of Мурка’s cage. “Just a sec.”

The Soldier just stands rooted to his spot, his only thought being that his socks are still balled up in Murdock’s hallway closet, right next to the rolls of quarters.

He gets his boots back on and slides the False Edge back into place. Spiderman’s sitting on the windowsill when he comes into the main room. The sky behind him is still dark.

“You okay, Barnes?” he asks, uncrossing his arms when the Soldier looks in his direction.

“Yeah.” He shrugs. “Are you?”

Spiderman makes a soft noise like a chuckle. “Took a few for the team out there, but for the most part? I’m good.”

The Soldier nods. “Good.”

“So listen.” He slides out of the window and leans back with his hands perched behind him on the sill. “Sergeant Mahoney was telling us that you’re gonna turn state’s evidence.”

“And?” the Soldier asks with his chin lifting incrementally.

“I was thinking we should go bigger, while we have the chance. Before something like tonight has the chance to happen again.”

“Bigger like how?”

“Like viral,” Spiderman says.

Nelson lifts his hand, pointing at Spiderman as he says, “Another leak.”

“These ideas are nice and all, but they’re not very original,” Wilson objects, somewhat testily, to the same corner in the ceiling he’d talked at before. “Come on now.”

“Wade,” Spiderman sighs, not irritated yet but probably getting there. “The whole point of doing what has been done before is that it worked the first time. Results,” he drones. “We won’t get more than one shot to do this right.”

“Huh what if…” Weasel holds his hands up in front of himself like he’s tangibly moving the ideas around and getting them organized. “Okay, what if instead of leaking information, we leak him? We get him saying who he is and what he’s trying to do and get it out there. Release a vlog or something.”

“Well it sounded laaaame when you said it,” Wilson sings teasingly.

“How about it, Barnes?” Nelson asks him before Spiderman can come up with a retort.

They all turn and look at him. He presses his sweating palm to his leg, hiding from no one but himself.

He turns to Weasel. “You got the equipment for that here?”

“I’ve got the laptop.”

“Let me check your wounds before we get you camera-ready,” Wilson says fussily, crossing over to him and peering at him with a wide gap between them.

“’m I on probation?” he asks, voice low and eyes downcast.

“What?” Wilson frowns at him, still not wearing his mask. The swelling in his jaw has already diminished by about half. “No?”

He takes a step closer, eyes widening when he understands why the Soldier would ask.

“You’re taller than me,” he says, like it answers everything.

The Soldier squints at him, eyebrows slowly drawing together.

Wilson sighs. “I was trying to see if you had other head wounds.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Well I don’t.”

Wilson cracks a smile at him, looking fond and sad at the same time.

“Bucky Barnes. You’re the quintessential cinnamon roll. Too good for this world.”

“I…cinnamon roll?”

Weasel barks a laugh. Nelson chortles. Spiderman shakes his head from his spot behind Wilson by the window.

“Does this hurt, tin man?”

“Cinnamon…what? No.”

Wilson grins and probes a bit more at the Soldier’s head. His touch becomes more cautious when he gets close to the graze. It stings still beneath the pressure, but it doesn’t bleed on contact, which is good. Another big square of gauze is applied to the burn on his neck. Wilson tugs briefly at the collar of the Soldier’s borrowed shirt, eyes scanning for further bruising. He tips the Soldier’s chin up with two fingers and squints before straightening out, all business.

“All righty, you’re good to go.” He flashes an ‘OK’ sign.

The Soldier blinks at him. “Cinnamon roll. You called me a cinnamon roll.”
“Karen?” Nelson says around a laugh.

The Soldier spins around. “Karen?”

“She’s on the phone.” Nelson points unnecessarily at the phone in his hand. “She’s with Matt. You want to talk to them?”

“I can wait,” he says, though it’s not what he wants.

“No it’s fine, here,” Nelson offers companionably. “Hey I’m gonna give him the phone. Hang on.”

The Soldier tries not to snatch the phone out of Nelson’s hand, but he sort of grabs it too hastily anyway, much to his chagrin. Nelson doesn’t react. He just walks a few paces away to give him privacy.

He cups the phone against his face with both hands like it’s a precious item and speaks both their names into it. “Matt? Karen?”

“Bucky,” Karen says around a relieved sigh.

“How’re you holding up?” Murdock asks.

The Soldier hesitates. “I’m standing.”

Karen laughs. “Us, too. Thanks to you.”

“I’m glad.” He stops to marvel at the truth of the simple statement, the core of him going warm where he’s felt cold since he woke up. “It’s—ah, good…to hear your voices.”

“Are you sure you’re all right, Barnes?”

“I didn’t say I was,” he answers nonchalantly, even as he hears Karen shushing Murdock.

“What are you doing over there? Sergeant Mahoney called and said he was going to bring you back before sunup.”

“We’re working an angle,” he says, purposely ambiguous. “Foggy can tell you.”

“Bucky,” Karen interjects calmly. The clear, definitive tone in her voice makes him listen. “Sam and Steve called.”

He considers that morsel of information, flashes of his dream rising up like smoke and lashing at the inside of his skull as if to escape.

The Soldier recalls Sam and Steve with their graves so close together in that other place, the wasteland; Sam and Steve who both reached out for him unlike the others when the ground began to consume them; Sam and Steve who screamed when he did.

Lucid and awake, he can recognize why theirs had been so unique to the others he had lost. They were the soldiers—those who had seen war and had learned enough of it that for them, struggle had become an instinct: Steve whom the world had devoured once before and Sam who had fallen out of the sky like Icarus.

“I want to see them.”

“We’ll let them know,” Murdock promises.
Karen says, “See you soon.”

“Here’s Foggy.”

Nelson takes the phone when prompted and fills them in on their plan, talking out the possible flaws in their reasoning while Weasel fiddles with his laptop. Wilson is standing by the window with Spiderman and the two are discussing something he can’t hear without straining his ears to eavesdrop, which he doesn’t. Weasel looks up at him after a moment, fingers still flying on the keyboard.

“Wanna come see?” he asks, fully in his element.

The Soldier shrugs and goes to sit next to him on the futon. He sits with his right arm to Weasel and leaves room between them.

“So this is Twitter,” he indicates one of the open tabs. He clicks another. “This is YouTube. And over here, we have the dreaded Instagram.”

“What do they do?”

“That one is like instant messaging on a huge scale. You post little blurbs or questions. The popular stuff trends, like these. See?”

“Another shooting?” the Soldier asks tiredly, one of the tags standing out to him. “In a church?”

Weasel sighs, too. “Yeah, that’s good, though. No, not—not the shooting. That’s awful. But, people are talking about it. That’s what it means that the tag is trending. People are using it, spreading the word.”

The Soldier hums and scans the rest of the page. Weasel hovers over the YouTube tab with the cursor and clicks it at the Soldier’s nod.

“Okay here’s where we’re gonna upload your video. People will be able to access it directly on this site. We’ll link the other accounts to it so they can share it or leave comments however they want.”

“What about Instagram?”

“That is a question. I’m not actually sure how it works, to tell the truth.”

“What? It’s the easiest thing ever,” Wilson squawks. “You just use hashtags to find stuff, same as Twitstuff.”

“Twitter,” Spiderman corrects him.

“What?” Wilson gasps. “My life is a lie.”

Spiderman looks at the ceiling, almost definitely rolling his eyes.

“How is it going to factor into what we’re doing here?” the Soldier asks.

“It’s about getting as much exposure as possible,” Spiderman explains evenly. “If we hit all three platforms, more people are likely to continue the conversation.”

“Do…do you all have accounts?”

“You mean personal ones?” Spiderman asks.
“No, like you. Does Spiderman have an Instagram?”

“Oh. Ha, no. Well, yes. I tried that for about a week. It wasn’t safe having it on my phone. A friend almost used it on my Spiderman account and. Yeah.”

“You are the worst at keeping your identity a secret, Pe—Pooh bear.”

Spiderman drops his hands to his sides and stares at Wilson who laughs nervously.

“Okay guys. Are we gonna get started on this?” Weasel asks without looking up from the laptop where he’s clicking and dragging things all over the desktop.

“Have you made all three accounts?”

“I’m not a caveman, Pooh bear,” Weasel drawls in Spiderman’s direction, eyes still on the screen. “They’re all under the same email and username with a dummy IP address that won’t trace back to me. Which is good news.”

Everyone stares at Weasel. Nelson tucks his phone in his pocket.

“Right.” Weasel rubs his hands together and peels the Deadpool sticker off the webcam in one clean stroke. He sticks it back onto the laptop an inch to the right of the camera. “You need a minute to figure out what you wanna say?”

The Soldier shakes his head. “No.”

“We can leave,” Nelson offers as Weasel’s moving out of the Soldier’s way. “Give you space.”

“If you don’t mind?” He looks around at everyone. “I’ll just record it and call you back in.”

“Gonna be on the roof,” Spiderman says, turning from the Soldier to Wilson.

“Af—af—af—after you, baby boy.”

Spiderman climbs out of the window with Wilson following a short distance after.

“We’re,” Nelson starts to say before stopping and trying again. “We’re gonna be in the hall.”

Weasel looks between Nelson and the window. He nods.

“Hall. Yeah. Look, Barnes. Just be natural. If you’re a little coltish in the video, people are more likely to believe the story you tell them.”

He looks from Weasel to Nelson and back. “Coltish.”

“Yeah just.” Weasel huffs a short sigh. “Fogster, help me out here.”

Nelson stares at Weasel and says, “I think what he’s saying is that if you act stoic and detached, people will find it harder to empathize with you.”

“So I should…cry?”

“Well,” Weasel says.


The Soldier watches them leave and settles for a moment on the futon with his shoulders pressed
back into the cushion. He squeezes his knees with both hands and takes a huge breath, sighing as he leans in and contemplates the right-click button on the laptop.

*Your name is James Buchanan Barnes.*

“My name is…” He closes his hand into a fist and sets his elbow on his knee, pressing his knuckles to his mouth. His head drops down lower his temple can rest on his knuckles. “James Buchanan Barnes: 107th Infantry Regiment.”

*Best friends since childhood.*

He grimaces down at his lap and says, “Winter Soldier.”

His metal arm catches the artificial light in the apartment when he pinches his sleeve to look at it. He looks at his reflection in the feed tracking his movements and shifts to block the view of his hand.

He swallows, gulps another big breath of air, and starts the recording. His eyes are wide on the video, making him look like a boy.

“My name is…” He clears his throat, unable to meet his eyes on the screen. “My name is Bucky Barnes. I was… блин. Fuck, I mean. Shit.”

The corner of his lip twitches and he bursts into a peal of nervous laughter. He ducks his head and rubs his forehead, raising his eyes to the webcam rather than his eyes. Dread pools low in his belly and he sighs, right hand buried in his hair. He sits up.

“I fought in the Second World War alongside Steve Rogers and the Howling Commandos. James Buchanan Barnes was my name.” He blinks at the camera, bounces his gaze between it and his eyes on the screen, and frowns. “I fell from a train near the end of the war and was presumed dead, but I wasn’t. Clearly.”

He rolls his eyes at himself and shakes his head. Maybe if they ask him to film it a second time they can write up a script for him to follow.

“I was recovered by Hydra and handed over to the Russians. During that time I was experimented on…” He inches his sleeve back and brandishes his arm in view of the webcam. It catches a dull gray on the screen. “They replaced the arm I lost in the fall with this and periodically wiped my memory. I became the Winter Soldier.

“In between missions they would put me in cryofreeze, which is…not unlike what happened to Steve Rogers, but also not *at all* like what happened to him because I didn’t *stay* frozen.

“They sent me out for different things—assassinations, training operatives for the KGB, reconnaissance…” He breathes in and out. “I can’t remember most of it. They made sure I couldn’t. Agency,” he adds with an aborted wave of his hand. “It wasn’t until very recently that I started to remember *anything.*”

He looks down and clasps his hands in between his hands to give his eyes something to focus on.

“On my last mission with Hydra, I was sent to kill Steve Rogers. They *programmed me* to follow the order, so I did. Or I tried.” His knees bounce on either side of his hands. “I failed.”

He raises his eyes to check the timer and finds that he’s already five minutes in. Weasel didn’t give him a time limit, but he figures he should try to wrap it up so that it doesn’t stretch on too long.
“I started to remember that I had…been someone else, before I was their science project—their property.” His jaw tightens and he squeezes his metal elbow through Weasel’s shirt. “I tried to go home, to Brooklyn. Operatives found me, tried to take me in. They were intercepted. A mercenary by the name of Deadpool saved my life. He and Daredevil helped get me to safety. My lawyers, Sam Wilson, Steve Rogers, Spiderman…they’ve been protecting me, but at a great cost.

“I’m making this video as insurance. There have been several attempts already by Hydra to take me back, so to prevent any further destruction on my behalf, I’m surrendering myself in a few hours. By the time this is posted, I’ll be in police custody.”

Kiss my chemically-altered ass, Hydra.

“Um…” He looks at his eyes and then into the webcam, blinking rapidly for the cold flutter of fear in his stomach. “I’m sorry. And, uh.” His eyes sting and he looks away. “Thank you, everyone, who…who took me in.” He sneaks a glance at Мурка’s cage. “All of you.”

He considers naming Karen, Matt, and Foggy because they’ve been essential to his survival, but he doesn’t want to endanger them further. The same goes for Claire and Weasel.

Probably Sam and Steve won’t be thrilled about the mention, but public association between him and Captain America and Falcon could only help him, surely. They had said they wanted to make it right, or Rogers had said so anyway.

“In case this ends up being the last anyone hears of me, I…I’m grateful that I got this chance to set the record straight. Hopefully it’ll make a difference.”

His eyes search the webcam one final time and he drops his gaze to the right-click button. He ends the recording, heaves a great sigh, and slumps forward into his hands. It’s another five minutes before he’s ready to call Nelson and Weasel in from the hallway. He passes them up for the stairs as they’re filing into the apartment and climbs back up to the roof.

Spiderman and Wilson sit side by side on the ledge. Wilson tilts his head back, unleashing a long trail of smoke, and holds a lit cigarette out for Spiderman. He waves his hand to refuse and tugs his mask back down before the Soldier can get close enough to see the bottom half of his face.

“You smoke,” the Soldier says, more surprised that Spiderman does. It’s ironic that Wilson would but not difficult to accept. “Somehow I didn’t see that coming.”

“I lost a bet,” he answers easily, turning to stare at Wilson through his mask.

Wilson titters and takes a quick puff off the cigarette. “It’s been a long time coming, baby boy.”

“What bet?” the Soldier asks.

Spiderman shrugs grandly. “He said Captain America would recognize him when we showed up to help, and he did.” He tips his head with a flourish of his hand.

The Soldier looks between them. “So the wager.”

“I said I’d mend his next ten Spidey suits if I was wrong.” Wilson chuckles. “He promised to have a smoke with me if I was right.” He looks over his shoulder and waves the cigarette in the Soldier’s direction. “Want some?”

He starts to reach for it and stops, wrinkling his nose. “What is it?”
Wilson turns and looks at him, mask on but rolled up to his nose. “What do you mean, ‘what is it?’”


“I’m probably going to be drug-tested when I get to the precinct,” the Soldier drawls. “It’s probably better if I don’t.”

“He’s got a point,” Spiderman says with a wave of his hand. “You’re a bad influence.”

“I’m a bad influence?” Wilson echoes.

Spiderman shrugs. “I didn’t offer pot to Captain America’s best friend—I mean. Oh shit. I’m sorry. I didn’t…”

“It’s okay,” he says, but his body’s gone rigid and still.

“We don’t normally smoke on the job,” Wilson says without preamble, indicating the smoking butt. “But patrol’s well and done, wouldn’t you say, Spidey?”

“Hmm.”

“Give it here.”

“Huh?” Wilson looks up him and hands it over after silently conferring with Spiderman. “Careful that you don’t—”

He takes a slow drag off the burnt up cigarette, holds it when Wilson lifts his hand, and breathes out. A hum stirs in his throat and Wilson takes it back.

“Is it supposed to be like that?” he asks, crossing to sit on the ledge to Wilson’s right.

“Like what?” Wilson asks.

“Smells like a tree in my mouth,” he mutters.

Spiderman laughs, sounding more carefree than he has since they met. The Soldier swings his legs over the edge of the rooftop and looks down, reveling in his blurry, far-away fear of falling that glows inside him even now.

“Usually go for stuff with more THC than CBD because I like the high better, but I have a feeling THC would make you paranoid,” Wilson teases, pointing the cigarette at Spiderman. “Weasel keeps both on hand, though, so it’s no skin off my nose. Doesn’t quite do the trick for me, but eh.”

The Soldier kicks his feet slowly: left foot and then right, left foot then right. “What trick’s that?”

“Pain management, my metal-licious honey.” He watches Wilson finish the cigarette and stub out the very last of it on the brick between their legs. “Remember how I said I had cancer?” At the Soldier’s nod, Wilson continues. “It’s not so much a thing of the past.”

“What? You’re…sick?”

“Strictly speaking? Ish. It’s not really a…” Spiderman glances at Wilson and he stops, instead saying, “You get used to being in pain all the time.”

“Is that why your heart’s weird?”
“One reason,” Spiderman chimes in. “Of about a hundred others, probably.”

“Excuse you, Spiderbutt. My weird heart and I have saved your skin as many times if not more.”

Spiderman deadpans, “It stops and starts like a scratched CD, Wade. Probably because it stops beating at least once every other week. You get blown up or stabbed…”

“Ohgunned down,” the Soldier adds.

“Ohgunned down,” Spiderman echoes.

“What is this, an intervention?” Wilson crows.

“You should be more careful is all,” the Soldier placates him, looking around Wilson to Spiderman’s masked face. Spiderman nods. “Just because you’re invincible doesn’t mean you gotta hurt yourself.”

“We don’t like hurting bad guys, Wade. What makes you think we’d like you taking all the hits just to make our jobs easier?”

“So you’re saying I shouldn’t chop my arm off and beat my attacker with it if they’re keeping me from getting to you?” Wilson asks flippantly. “Fuck that. No, that’s stupid. You think I care about me? I grow back from splattered brain matter. I shoot myself when I get bored. I sure as shit don’t have any hold-ups about letting someone else off me if it gives you a better chance. Last I checked, neither of you can recover from a bullet to the brain, whereas I do and it’s just another Tuesday.”

“What?”

“All I’m saying is you stepped on a bomb once, willingly, and called it a diversion. I had to carry your legs back to you.”

“What? Wilson.”

Wilson looks at the Soldier, visibly startled, and throws his hands. He turns back to Spiderman.

“Maybe if you had been bitten by a radioactive starfish instead of a spider you’d have some kind of grounds for telling me how to deal with this,” Wilson says, rounding on Spiderman. “Maybe I like stepping on bombs and getting shot. Did you ever stop and consider that?”

“…Do you?”

Wilson takes a breath and turns to the Soldier. His shoulders slump.

“I just like being the protector, for once. And the occasional accident here and there…”

“Wade—”

“Can you name one job we did together,” Wilson asks slowly, planting his hands on the wall. “Just one. Where I wasn’t the one to take the barrage of bullets or the explosives or the tank with piranhas—I wish I was kidding about that one,” he says, looking back at the Soldier before turning back to Spiderman. “It’s me. That’s my lot. I’m not bothered by it. Save yourself the guilt trip and don’t worry about it.”


Wilson scoffs and shakes his head.
“She was just a kid, that’s different.”

“One job we did together: getting her back when she got taken,” Spiderman clarifies for the Soldier’s benefit. “No bullets, no bombs, no…piranhas.”

Gloomily, Wilson counters, “She did have a creepy goldfish.”

“Whose fault is it that it tried to eat your finger, Wade?”

Wilson sighs, put upon. “Fine. But that’s just one—”

“You only asked for one,” the Soldier coolly interrupts. “Own it.”

They stare at each other and behind Wilson the Soldier sees Spiderman lean back on his hands, content. He says, “The point of all of that being that I don’t like seeing you in pieces. But hey, you do you.”

“I will, thank you,” Wilson retorts with his nose turned up, though the tension has dissipated.

“How’d you guys even meet?”

To the Soldier’s left, Wilson goes very still and quiet. Spiderman clears his throat.

“Well, we ran into each other a few times doing our thing. Wade had a reputation, but so did I, for a while.” He shrugs. Wilson twitches his feet back and forth idly over the ledge. “We got to teaming up, eventually. He said he wanted to clean up, so we started working together on the regular. Hasn’t backfired yet, though there have been problems.”

“I don’t see why you’re complaining,” Wilson counters, smiling faintly. “No marriage is perfect.”

The Soldier glances in Spiderman’s direction. He just bunches his shoulders up into a tiny shrug.

“Don’t let your undead wife hear you say so.”

Wilson hums and nods. The Soldier blinks and turns his attention to the skyline. It looks like any other spot in New York except he can make out part of the river over the swooping line of the highway. The surrounding apartment complexes on either side of Weasel’s building are shorter than his, their rooftops visible from here if one stands to look.

“So. You ready, tin man?”

“Have to be, don’t I?”

“Yeah, but…are you?”

The Soldier laughs and leans his head back to stare at the brightening purple sky. His smile holds on his mouth, wide and peaceful. He says, “No.”

Wilson and Spiderman fall silent to his left. Spiderman clears his throat and announces that he’s going to check on Weasel’s development with the social media angle. He swings down nimbly over the ledge. The Soldier leans to watch him crawl easily along the brick.

“That’s pretty neat.”

Wilson chuckles and rolls his mask up over his eyes so it’s bunched up on his forehead like a wrinkled second skin. He meets the Soldier’s searching gaze head-on. As if it’s an obvious fact of
Wilson says, “You know I’d still be down to kidnap you and take you to Canada or something. D.T.K.”

“Yeah.” The Soldier nods. “I know.”

Wilson nods. “But failing that, I am still good for another hug. If you wanted one, that is. Hug. I am good for those always.”

The Soldier rolls his eyes, a smirk tugging at one corner of his mouth that shivers into a full smile. He inches left and Wilson waits for him without moving. When they’re side by side he lifts his arm and drapes it around the Soldier’s shoulders. His trepidation from earlier seeps back into his bones and he shivers. Wilson squeezes his shoulder.

“It’ll all work out, Buck.”

“When?” he asks in a small voice, keeping his expression neutral when Wilson looks at him.

Wilson looks unhappy at the question. “I don’t know.”

“Bullshit,” he mumbles, looking between Wilson’s eyes like the answer will flash in one of them if he can just catch it.

“N—I…Barnes, you can’t. It doesn’t.” Wilson goes cross-eyed for a split second and smacks his forehead with the hand not holding onto the Soldier’s arm. Under his breath he mutters, “—gonna tingle for about thirty seconds and then he’s gonna be on his own again. Autoimmune inhibitor…”

“Wilson?”

“Huh?” His eyes go unfocused and then he blinks, full clarity returning like a shot. “Did I black out? That happens sometimes. I only had like half that doobie. What the heck.”

The Soldier sighs. He doesn’t know what he expected. “Forget about it.”

“Wait, wait, wait, I have an idea. We can do that thing that happened on Game of Thrones—not that thing, perv! Jeez. Have some respect.” He perks up and says, directing his suggestion at the Soldier now, “Ask me three questions.”

“Uh.”

“No, this’ll be fun, come on! Ask.” Wilson takes his arm back and swivels around to face the Soldier with one knee bent in front of him and the other hanging over the edge of the roof.

The Soldier frowns apprehensively but also turns to face Wilson with his legs draped over each side of the low wall supporting them. He taps his foot on the roof and swings the other in a slow, winding pendulum.

He grimaces a bit, feeling silly. “Will the trial end in my favor?”

“The jury will rule one way and the judge the other,” Wilson answers in a loud voice.

“What the hell does that even—? Okay, whatever. Um…” He scratches a spot on his chin. “Will I be…” He stops himself, not wanting to get into the concept of freedom if Wilson’s going to give him non-answers.

“Will they let me keep the arm?”
“The arm at the end won’t be yours but it’ll be more yours than the one you have now.”

Wilson smiles innocently at the Soldier’s hard look. It’s like talking to a magic 8-ball.

“Will I have friends, after?”

Wilson hums and stares at a spot over the Soldier’s shoulder.

“If you’re taking time to come up with a cryptic response, Wilson, so help me…”

“The short answer is yes.”

The Soldier furrows his eyebrows. “What does that mean?”

“It means you have friends now, you big lug,” Wilson tells him, exasperated. “That’s not gonna change because you do a little time. We’ve all been to prison at one point or another. It’s just character development.”

The Soldier turns to gaze out at the city blushing pale blue with the sunrise. Lights fizzle out and fade from view deeper in the city. Wilson sighs and shakes his head like he’s trying to get water out of his ears. He hears him muttering, “The last time I dole out my apparent fortune-telling abilities, sheesh, God Mode, much?”

The roof access door behind them opens. Nelson walks through with Mahoney behind him.

“Time?” he asks, looking at Nelson and then at Mahoney.

Mahoney nods. Nelson pockets his hands.

“I’ll be down in a minute.”

They turn and go, leaving the door cracked behind them. The Soldier stands. Wilson follows him, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck.

“Don’t worry too much about what happens next, Barnes. You’re tough. You can handle anything.”

“Like you?” he asks, kicking at the concrete with his foot. He lifts his knee and removes the False Edge from his boot to hand it to Wilson hilt-first. “Give that back to Weasel for me?”

“You’re not gonna say bye?”

“I shouldn’t.” He shrugs, avoiding Wilson’s eyes. Forcing neutrality he adds, “If it’s not really goodbye, I don’t have to, right?”

Wilson opens his mouth and stops when his phone chimes. He hums inquisitively and slips the device from a pocket the Soldier would swear shouldn’t be big enough to contain it. Wilson chuckles and shows him the bright phone screen that makes his grin harder to see in the relative darkness.

“You’re trending, tin man.”

He reads the tags people have been using to talk about him: #FREEBUCKY, #JBB2K15, #STUCKYISREAL, and #JAMESISHOME.

“What’s a Stucky?”

“A Stucky? No, no, the Stucky. It’s…it’s how people talk about your relationship with Captain
America. Steve and Bucky makes Stucky, see? Like uh, Cherik, you know? Charles and Erik. Breakin’ hearts one ship name at a time,” Wilson sighs wistfully.

“It’s a…friendship thing?”

“Yeah!” Wilson answers after the briefest hesitation.

“So you and Spiderman have one.”

Wilson giggles like he’s madly pleased with himself and says, “Ours is Spideypool.”

“So mine and Matt’s would be…” He frowns. “Murducky?”

Wilson throws his head back to laugh. “Bwahahaha!” He dabs the corner of his eye with one finger.

“Sure, tin man.”

The Soldier scrolls down a ways on the Twitter feed and gets an eyeful of people’s thoughts on the matter. Some are positive and encouraging; some are damning; some call him an impersonator.

“We should have had Rogers here,” he murmurs, turning to walk for the door. “Endorsement from America’s sweetheart.”

Wilson snorts and pulls the door open for him to pass through. “That’s gonna be you these next few weeks, don’t you worry. We’re gonna work on keeping this up, especially now that it’s in its beginning stages. You got us, you got Cap—which essentially means you’ll get the rest of the Avengers, too—and your lawyers are also superheroes, so. It’s in the bag, man. Don’t stress.”

They walk down the stairs to the ground floor. Before they go through the door, Wilson clears his throat to get the Soldier’s attention.

“One for the road?” he asks, holding his arms out.

He steps in and holds on tight for as long as Wilson does. “I’ll see you, Wade.”

“Hang onto who you are, okay?”

“Sure. Hey, make sure Weasel gets the cat spayed if she’s not already.”

“You got it, Sarge.”

Wilson walks with him into the lobby, through a side exit, and out to Mahoney’s squad car. He gets into the back with Nelson and Mahoney in the front. The vehicle pulls out onto the street and before they turn a corner he can see Wilson sitting on the concrete steps where he left him.

“You smell like a college dorm room,” Nelson remarks, giving the Soldier a smile through the iron-and-glass partition.

“A remnant of one of the nicer things to happen to me in the last twelve hours.”

Nelson’s smile falters. The Soldier looks away. “Sorry.”

“That’s all right. I shared a dorm room with Matt for four years.”

The Soldier raises an eyebrow at him. “You went to school together.”

“That’s how we met, yeah. I’ve known Brett longer than I’ve known Matt, though, so. The amount
of time you know someone isn’t really an indicator of how good of friends you’ll be.”

“That’s sweet, Foggy,” Mahoney drones.

Nelson just laughs. The Soldier sinks back into his seat and lets their banter fill the car the rest of the drive back to Hell’s Kitchen. He looks out the window and watches the city roll by. People fill the streets to sweep up trash and broken glass. Mahoney takes them onto the Henry Hudson Parkway. The Soldier leans his temple against the window and closes his eyes against the view of the river to his right.

When the car stops he expects to be outside the 27th precinct, but he opens his eyes to Murdock’s apartment building instead. He recognizes it even though Mahoney took them around the back.

“I’m giving you twenty minutes, Nelson. And then we gotta go.”

“Thank you, Brett. Bucky, let’s go.”

He follows Nelson mechanically up the back stairwell and through the hall. Nelson opens the door to Matt’s apartment. They file inside one after the other.

“Are you all right?” Karen asks, meeting them in the hallway and bringing Nelson into a tight hug.

“We’re good.” Nelson holds onto her arms. She looks between them. “Where’s Matt?”

“He’s in there.”

On cue, Murdock says, “I’m in here.”

Karen steps aside to allow Nelson to pass and sighs, turning her focus on the Soldier. She smiles sweetly and says, “Hi.”

“Hi.” His hands twitch. He holds his arms closer to his body and steps to the left, sure that she can’t want to hug him. “Did you have any problems last night?”

“No. Just a lot of noise. Nobody tried to get in. I couldn’t get a hold of Matt until early this morning, but that’s Matt.” She shrugs, clearly used to his disappearing act by now. “Sam and Steve just got here. Do you wanna go see them?”

“Matt first,” he says, for whatever it really matters.

She offers him her arm. He considers not taking it for only a moment before sliding his arm through the loop of her elbow.

“Do you feel okay?”

“Why?”

“You look…distant, I guess is the word.”

He sighs and brushes his hair out of his eyes. “It’s been a long night.”

Karen accepts that answer as enough and walks with him out into the main room of Murdock’s apartment. He sees Sam first, standing at parade rest the way Weasel said the Soldier had been. Steve is seated to his left on Murdock’s couch with his chin in his hands. Murdock calls his name when he steps around the corner and he gravitates toward him without losing Karen as his satellite.
“Whoa, hey,” Murdock breathes, sounding alarmed at his approach. “Barnes?”

“I’m fine.”

Lie.

Murdock frowns and says, “You sound really not fine.”

The Soldier lifts his hands to his forehead and Karen releases his arm.

“Barnes, talk to me,” Murdock murmurs.

“Did you see it? N—you know what I mean. The video.”

Murdock nods slowly. “Karen watched it. She let me listen when she got here.” He nods again. “It’s good, Barnes.”

“I…didn’t know if I should have mentioned you, Karen, Foggy.” The Soldier shakes his head and turns around to look at Sam and Rogers. “Sorry about that, by the way.”

“I know what I signed on for,” Sam answers without a shred of regret to be heard in his tone.

The Soldier slides his gaze to Rogers’ where it holds for a tense five-count before he breaks it to stride over in front of him. He stutters to a halt with about a foot between them, momentum lost, and jerkily takes a seat next to him on the couch. Half a cushion separates the Soldier’s knee from Rogers’ hip.

They’d fought, after all. It’s not like physical nearness frightens him in general. He can’t hurt Rogers as he is, unarmored. There are two other people standing close by with the ability to stop him if they needed to.

“You said before that you wanted to make this right,” the Soldier says, mouth dry and throat raw.

“That hasn’t changed. I’m with you.”

The Soldier opens his mouth. His breath catches somewhere between his lungs and his windpipe. He looks down, eyes burning.

“I don’t…have the right…to…”

“Bucky,” Rogers says, turning so that they’re facing each other. In addition to their usual glisten, the whites of Rogers’ eyes look red. He croaks, “You can say it. You can ask. Whatever it is.”

He’d already said he was sorry. Rogers forgave him.

Even if he means it now and even if he always means it, it’s not what he plans to leave him with before they part again. He makes himself look Steve in the eye.

“I ran from you. I ran and you followed me, and…I don’t know what I ever did that you…you would forgive me, so easily. As if I hadn’t tried…as if—” He takes a ragged breath to steady himself. The line of Steve’s mouth is thin, pulled down at the corners in a deep frown that makes his face look… “God, we’re old.”

Laughter bubbles out of Steve and he covers his eyes with one hand. He keeps laughing, delirious and miserable and terrified. And it’s only for a second, if that, but the Soldier sees how his lips press tightly together like he’s fighting something less agreeable than a laugh.
Steve slides his hand off his face and sneak’s a dab at the outside corner of his eye with that retreating hand. He looks moderately collected when he catches the Soldier’s eyes again. War must have taught them this, the Soldier muses inwardly; war, or life together in an era that was not the free-thinking, free-spirited time of today. Life and loss had crafted a real soldier out of Rogers. The same things had made a husk out of his friend.

Perhaps the two of them together could be the Winter Soldier, with Barnes contributing an endless dark of cold and Rogers bringing a radiant sun—the heat and fervor of a different war, a different time. This war, now.

The Soldier softens whatever startled expression he thinks he must be making and settles his hands in his lap. Rogers watches him and says, “You get older, but you don’t have to get old.”

“No I mean that we skipped the getting older part and skipped right into ‘old’ territory.”

Rogers cracks a smile, though, and the Soldier’s pleased enough with himself that he doesn’t worry about whether this is a good idea, to bring their paths together like this before they’re driven apart again. Not that they’re anywhere close to being on the same path. The Soldier has no delusions about that.

“Were you going to say something else?” Rogers asks him, sounding calm and innocent, at peace with something deep and powerful within himself. “I thought you looked like you were going to ask me a question.”

“More for a favor,” the Soldier hedges, immediately uncomfortable. “Did you watch the video?”

Rogers merely nods.

“Would you…” He sighs, mortified. “Would you support me, publicly? I know you have a reputation to uphold—”

“Yes.”

The Soldier’s gaze flicks back up to Rogers’ face. “Just like that?”

“Bucky,” Rogers says, sounding supremely flummoxed by the Soldier’s incredulity. “Of course I will.”

“I thought you’d be worried about, I dunno, PR?”

“No.” Rogers sighs and clasps his hands together in his lap. “It got bad for us after the Battle of New York. It got bad for us when Pierce tried to burn Fury, and me. This is…Bucky, this is nothing. I mean, it’s everything. I’m not backing down from this.”

“He already shared, re-tweeted, and posted about it like fifty times,” Sam says from his spot in between Karen and Murdock. “So did I.”

“Tony Stark, Bruce Banner, and Pepper Potts, too,” Karen adds, checking her phone and visibly swiping down several times. “Maria Hill. Sharon Carter. Phil Coulson and Clint Barton.” She turns to Matt and asks in a stage whisper, “What’s Claire’s last name?”

“Temple,” Matt answers dutifully.

“Claire Temple,” Karen repeats, winking at the Soldier over her phone.
The Soldier rolls his eyes, but his face is warm, warm. Rogers makes a soft sputtering sound through his muffled grin and he flushes bright pink beneath the Soldier’s glare.

“How are we on time, Foggy?” he asks, turning to lock eyes with Nelson.

“Ten minutes. Fifteen before he starts with the horn, I’d bet.”

He nods and returns his focus to Rogers, who is both serene and forlorn.

“Tell me a story for the road?” he murmurs, fascinated and heartbroken at how the simple question disarms Rogers like a string of code in a computer. “Anything, doesn’t matter.”

Rogers takes about five seconds to recover and then beams as something occurs to him. The Soldier blinks and Rogers’ smile softens but doesn’t fall away. He leans in like he’s fixing to tell a secret, giving the illusion of closeness without an actual change in proximity.

“Back when we lived in Brooklyn,” he says, a mischievous little glint flashing through his eyes. The Soldier listens to his voice evolve with the barest hints of a Brooklyn accent creeping into the words. “We lived in this tiny apartment. And we had to work a bunch of random jobs we didn’t like just to make rent and the place nearly froze in the winter. You’ve seen what I looked like then, before the war and the serum.”

The Soldier nods, not sure if he was supposed to but doing it anyway because the answer is yes, he has seen the photographs.

“Well I got this job doin’ cartoons for a local paper one spring, and it was the first paying job I ever had as an artist, so we were both really excited, right?” Steve chuckles. “But I’d had rheumatic fever that November all the way through March, so every once in a while I’d get these spasms in my hands and feet or I’d smile without meaning to.”

Bucky raises his eyebrows at that. It’s already difficult to imagine Steve as a scrawny, sickly kid half his current size, but legitimately stricken with fever? Not able to control his movements so late in the illness?

“So how’d you make the cartoons, for the job?”

“It was your idea, actually,” Steve tells him, laughing softly at whatever memories he has of that story. “See, you had the bright idea of bundling me up in a bunch of old coats and blankets so that it’d be harder for me to move. But it didn’t work.”

“Your arm was bound up too tight.”

“Yeah, so then you tried holding my wrist, but I needed my whole arm to draw. So we sat there for three hours past midnight with you attached to my arm so I could draw a cartoon about ladies gettin’ dolled up for a ball.”

The Soldier gives a little smile at that, at how simple and ridiculous and uncanny it is hearing Steve tell it like it happened yesterday.

“Rheumatic fever. It’s a miracle you survived,” the Soldier mutters, inspiring another quiet laugh from Steve.

From Rogers, he chides himself, but what’s the use in forcing it?

“In my defense, I would have gotten it finished on time. It just would have taken the rest of the
“night.”

“And the morning,” the Soldier surmises.

Steve shrugs. “Probably. It’d been acting up worse than usual that week. I’d even dropped the milk carrier trying to bring it into the apartment that morning.”

“What?”

“Yeah, we used to get these glass milk bottles delivered every few days. You paid off the guy who brought ‘em so he’d stop by our place more often than usual. Some idea you had about calcium making my bones stronger, I don’t know. I went out to get ‘em and you tried to carry it back, but I had it so I waved you off; let you take one of the bottles for yourself.”

He had this dream. He had this dream his first night in this apartment.

“And I dropped the one I took when I heard you,” he says, sitting up.

Steve’s eyebrows draw down and he sits up, too.

“You…?”

“That one, just that—that part,” he says, fumbling for coherency and not getting there, though Steve seems to understand him anyway. “Just the milk bottle.”

Steve grins and a car horn sounds from outside. His expression shuts, smile dwindling to something more casual, and he sighs. The Soldier pulls away, also needing to withdraw lest this next part hurt him more than it should be able to.

“I’ll be seeing you, Steve.” He holds out his hand.

Rogers—and that’s who he becomes in the Soldier’s frantic moment of panicked self-doubt—holds his hand out, easy and free and warm. Gracious. His unwavering grip is still the embodiment of all those things the Soldier hopes to assume someday: bravery, honor, and integrity.

“Wait,” Karen says, alerting him to the fact that she, Murdock, Nelson, and Sam have been standing there the entire time. “You should take a picture together.”

“While we still can?” the Soldier asks ruefully.

“Sam?” Steve calls to his friend.

“Oh, nah. You should have one of just you guys. You’re the media darling anyway.”

Steve gives Sam a flat look. The Soldier fidgets where he is. Mahoney honks the horn outside.

“He’s gonna wake the neighbors at this rate, Foggy,” he hears Murdock say.

“I’m on it,” Nelson sighs. “I’ll be in the car, Barnes.”

Karen approaches them with her phone held out in front of her.

“Oh. Maybe you oughta use mine,” Steve says, producing his from a pocket.

She says, “You’re the captain.”
Sam snorts from his place at Murdock’s left and Steve shakes his head. The Soldier notices, belatedly, that the lights are on in the apartment.

“Ready?”

“Should we, um,” Steve mumbles, flailing slightly with his hands. “Pose? Or…”

“Do what feels natural,” the Soldier tells him with a shrug, echoing Nelson’s advice to him from before. “Be yourself.”

Steve stares at him, features soft with a worried pinch to his brow like he’s bewildered or nervous. His phone makes a noise like that of a camera shutter. Steve looks at Karen like he just caught her tying his shoelaces together.

Sheepishly, she says, “That one’s actually really good.”

“Use it then,” the Soldier replies, blatantly ignoring Steve’s look of mild disappointment. He clears his throat. “I gotta get going.”

“Probably for the best,” Murdock says, pushing off the wall. “We’ll walk out with you.”

“Okay.”

He leaves the burner phone on the coffee table and they all go together. Murdock holds onto the Soldier’s left arm. Karen takes his right. Sam walks out ahead of them and Steve walks out behind them, meaning the Soldier can look over his shoulder and catch Steve’s eyes a few times before they get outside. He’s not sure what any of it means or what’ll happen to him after today.

By Mahoney’s car, the Soldier grabs Murdock’s shoulder and pulls him into an impromptu hug. He should have asked, probably, but he’s skittish enough that he might have chickened out if he’d hesitated.

Murdock hugs him back, in any case. He doesn’t mention it, just like he doesn’t verbally mention a lot of things, but the curiosity is there, and the comfort.

Karen looks away and covers her mouth with one hand, not seeming to even be aware that he can see her over Murdock’s shoulder. He says her name and her gaze jumps up to his, blue eyes wide and shiny.

“You’ll be fine, Bucky,” Murdock whispers.

“Yeah you say it often enough for me to think I will be.”

Murdock pulls back so that the Soldier can see his smile. “That’s why I say it so often.”

He lets go of Murdock and turns to Karen, says her name again. She licks her lips where she looks like she’ll speak, and then she doesn’t speak, not until she’s got her arms around him and her chin hooked over his right shoulder, pressing down firmly.

“We’ll visit. We’ll bring you books, all the books you want.”

He tries to laugh. It doesn’t come out right. She swipes her hand over an errant tear that escapes from her eye when he pulls away. Her smile at him is brilliant and like iron.

Sam nods when they lock eyes. Steve buries his hands deep in his pockets like he doesn’t want to even give him the chance to consider hugging him. He supposes it’s safer that way as he won’t have
to choose and Steve won’t have to struggle to accept his rejection, or his acceptance.

“I like the ‘Stucky is real’ hashtag on Twitter,” he tells Steve, smiling a little when Steve blushes from the tips of his ears to his hairline.

“Wh-what?”

The Soldier shrugs. “You oughta use it.”

He sees Sam trying to keep a straight face as he’s getting back into Mahoney’s car. Nelson passes him his phone so he can use it on the drive to the precinct with Twitter already queued up on the screen. They drive away down the back alley behind the apartment building and he hears Sam laughing loud and unrestrained right through the rolled up windows.

The Soldier pulls his seatbelt across his chest and clicks it into place upon seeing Nelson do the same and navigates through the #FREEBUCKY tag. About ten seconds in, he starts searching out the people Karen mentioned.

He looks up Tony Stark’s twitter profile, sees Maria Hill’s quote from one of Stark’s tweets, and reads through the veritable wall of posts Bruce Banner has published about the Soldier’s video. Banner’s last twenty tweets link to articles and leaked files about the Winter Soldier and Bucky Barnes. It’s academic.

A quick search also shows him a few retweets and quotes on Claire’s profile. She uses the #JAMESISHOME and #JBB2K15 tags liberally. He thinks she must be at the hospital doing her rounds to have seen the posts and to have responded so early.

“We say twenty minutes and you keep me waiting forty. Unbelievable, Nelson.”

“Oh give me a break, Brett. If it makes you feel any better, I’ll stop giving your mom cigars for another few months.”

Mahoney sighs, put out.

“Sorry we took so long,” the Soldier offers.

Mahoney looks at him in the rearview mirror and shakes his head. “Well you had to say goodbye. I get it.”

“What?” Nelson asks, pretending to be offended but not very convincingly. “Oh he gets a free pass?”

“He had to say goodbye. You’re a recurring pain in my neck.”

The Soldier listens distantly and searches Natasha Romanov and Nick Fury on Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. There are dozens of copies of the same video clip on YouTube that he doesn’t open. He doesn’t want to draw attention to himself by playing a video and disrupting the conversation going on in the front seat.

Romanov is dressed in a suit sitting in what looks to be a courtroom, surrounded by microphones in one thumbnail. She’s sat at a press conference, maybe. The video is dated to a few years ago. He can see her red hair and her stoic expression in a few more.

As for Fury, there’s nothing. He finds a few things on Pierce, runs into a lot of buzz regarding his resurfacing, and hits a dead end without unearthing anything new.
Curious and not to be deterred, he looks up Steve’s Twitter and finds the picture Karen snapped of them not ten minutes ago. It’s captioned, ‘Catching up with an old friend.’ It’s like she said. It’s a good picture.

Steve looks real and not at all like he’s been paid to sit for the shot. The Soldier looks relatively relaxed, conveying a truth in that he hadn’t been threatened with punishment should he have refused to be there, with Steve, catching up.

Old friends.

The photo already has thousands of interactions tallied. Pepper Potts is one of the few to whom Steve has replied. Her comment has a whole train of responses from other names he recognizes, and he gets caught up reading through them, growing increasingly entertained the further into it he gets.

Pepper Potts @thesuperiorwoman – June 23
You look like a terrified groom @stevegrogers #STUCKYSISREAL

Steve Rogers @stevegrogers – June 23
@thesuperiorwoman Pepper omg

Tony Stark @theironman – June 23
@stevegrogers I KNEW IT! #STUCKYSISREAL ;)

Pepper Potts @thesuperiorwoman – June 23
@theironman I’m changing my password Tony

Bruce Banner @drbbann – June 23
U can trY bUt You’LL nEVER cAtC h me @thesuperiorwoman #noneofyouaresafe

Bruce Banner @drbbann – June 23
@stevegrogers Sorry Cap. That’s nice about your friend though. You look happy

Sam Wilson @falconpunch – June 23
@stevegrogers You do look kinda like you’re about to leave him at the altar tho dude
The car pulls to a stop and disappointment settles in his chest. He’d just started to relax into their weird speech patterns. Nelson unbuckles his seatbelt and the Soldier adds a comment to the tweet he’s currently on.
@falconpunch @theironman It's true #SUPERSOLDIERSLIKEPIZZA and you can’t wear sneakers to a wedding @stevegrogers even I know that –Bucky

He takes off his seatbelt and hands Nelson the phone before unbuckling his seatbelt and getting out of the car. Mahoney leads them into the station. It’s only just getting to be light out.

“I don’t want you to be alarmed, okay?” Mahoney tells him, slowing down so they can walk side by side. “You’re not being charged. We won’t be processing you. You’re just going to take a cell until we talk with the higher-ups.”

It isn’t terrible being inside the station. He’d half-expected to panic, to cut and run at the first sign of imprisonment. Nelson’s at his side, though, and it’s easier to be still and brave with someone on his side who can back him even when they’re not in the same room. Mahoney takes him to a cell with a bed that’s on its own block. The only other confined spaces they have, he tells them, are the open cells in front that fit multiple people and the interrogation rooms.

“Is this where Karen stayed?” he asks Nelson.

“Yeah it is,” Nelson sighs.

Mahoney looks between them. “We don’t have dirty cops with us, not since Fisk was put away.”

The Soldier looks at both of them and walks into the cell. Mahoney closes the door slowly but it still clangs heavily.

“For now I don’t think it matters that you’ve got all your stuff—”

“Sergeant,” a cop interrupts Mahoney mid-sentence. The Soldier recognizes him from the office when it got trashed. “We’ve got the governor on the phone asking about this guy.”

“What? Already?”

“You should get out here.” He looks at Nelson and the Soldier as if just realizing that they can see and hear him. “Excuse me.”

Mahoney follows the officer out and Nelson blanches. He gets his phone out and calls Murdock.

“We prepared for this, right?” the Soldier asks, breathless with fear that drops in his stomach.


“What’s happening?”

Nelson fiddles with the phone and Murdock’s voice rings out on speaker: “—protective custody that will actually protect you. You’re our primary witness, Barnes. We can’t risk losing you. Too many people would have access to you in a public jail.”

“How long do we have, Matt?” Nelson asks, holding the Soldier’s gaze that, he can feel, has turned icy and inconsolable.

“Maybe five minutes. Judge Ayers called after you left. They’re sending a special extraction team and moving him to a secure facility.”
“Give me your phone,” the Soldier says, grabbing onto the bars and then reaching through them.

Nelson doesn’t even hesitate, and while that would ordinarily be cause for alarm and existential dread, he’s already dealing with an excess of both of those.

“Can I see Twitter without ending the call?” he asks, wary of touching the screen.

“Here.”

Nelson steps closer and presses a few buttons, illuminating the call and then taking them to a different screen. It’s unnerving how complete the picture becomes with iron bars between them. The barrier implies a now-unrecognizable spectrum of danger at rest within him. He had forgotten when fighting for a united cause with them that he could belong anywhere but right at their sides.

“What else did Ayers say, Matt?” Nelson asks as the Soldier looks for the tweet he posted on the picture of him and Steve.

“He said he got a call from Congress. Well, a few dozen calls from Congress. It’s a mixed bag right now. Some of them want to work with us and some of them don’t want anything to do with it. They won’t have that luxury for long,” Murdock says, sounding menacing enough that the Soldier looks up at Nelson in mild shock.

“You’re scaring our client, Matt.”

“Think of how scared our opponents will be then,” Karen chimes in sweetly but with a measure of that fierce loyalty and determination Murdock had spoken with.

Foggy Nelson @fnelsn730 – June 23

Moving to a ‘secure facility’. Pour out some milk for me @stevegrogers #STUCKYISREAL – Bucky

His hands shake and he types out another one. He realizes Karen and Murdock are still discussing details with Nelson. The blood rushing in his ears settles.

Foggy Nelson @fnelsn730 – June 23

@falconpunch make sure @stevegrogers wears his helmet –Bucky

The door to the main hall opens and he hears footsteps: a lot of them coming straight for him. He scans the responses to his tweets on Nelson’s account for Sam or Steve and sees:

Tony Stark @theironman – June 23

@fnelsn730 “and you can’t wear sneakers to a wedding @stevegrogers even I know that” this
He slips the phone back to Nelson and steps away from the bars. Mahoney stands a few paces out from the center, but the person leading the group of uniformed officers is a man he’s never seen before with green eyes and a mustache.

“Secure the prisoner,” he says.

“Barnes isn’t a prisoner,” Mahoney corrects him.

The Soldier can’t even see where Nelson disappeared to.

“Doesn’t make any difference to me. Hands through the slot.” He holds his hands through with his wrists close together, unhidden and visible in the bluish light. “There’s a lot of contention over the property rights of that arm in the press, here and the world over,” the man says conversationally. “We’ll probably have to confiscate it when we relocate.”

He knew as much, but to hear it causes an uncomfortable curl of shame to grow in his belly.

“What? You can’t deprive him of his arm,” Nelson speaks from Mahoney’s side where he’s shoved through to make room for himself. “He has a right to a prosthetic.”

“A prosthetic,” the man agrees. “Not this one. Open the door.”

Mahoney unlocks the cage and the door swings open. Two men on either side of their commander walk the Soldier out of the cell. They march him past Nelson and Mahoney, out of the precinct, through an unprecedented sea of photographers and news reporters, and load him into a black van. He doesn’t see Nelson anywhere, but Mahoney slides into the seat next to him and he calms down just a fraction.

“The warden at this prison we’re taking you to is a good man,” he assures the Soldier after they’ve driven for a few minutes in leaden silence. “They’re going to keep you in solitary confinement, to start.”

“Oh.”

“And,” Mahoney sighs, not sugar coating or beating around the bush about a single thing, “they will have to confiscate the arm. I’ve seen the specs on that thing and there’s no way it’ll be allowed in a prison. Talk to your lawyers. See what they can clear with the prison. We’ll get you a temporary replacement in the meantime.”

He’s unloaded from the van, led into a steel and concrete building that looks eerily familiar, and taken in for fingerprints. They also take a DNA swab out of his cheek. Mahoney tells him they do this because there are questions about his authenticity as James Buchanan Barnes.

They take his clothes, his boots, and conduct a body search that’s over quickly. His prison-issued clothes are starchy, but they fit.

In a different room with poor acoustics and walls bleached white, they make him sit on an operating table. Mahoney comes in to oversee in clear defiance of the doctor’s recommendation that he wait outside. They run a handheld imaging tool over his arm and bring in an engineer to dissemble it, which results in a sharp jolt of pain deep in his shoulder that he wrenches away from. The engineer, easily spooked, activates the EMP they’d placed on his arm as a precaution.
He’s getting so goddamn sick of those things that he thinks he’ll throttle the next person who approaches him with one.

“What good is it going to do the people fighting over custody of that arm if you return it all busted up?” Mahoney reprimands the engineer who stutters a shaky apology and backs away with his hands held up in defense. “Leave it for a competent surgeon.” And then quietly, not meant to be heard, he mutters, “For God’s sake.”

The doctor allows it and in act of generosity, probably because the Soldier is trembling like a leaf, he prescribes that Mahoney should be the one to escort him to his cell. Mahoney doesn’t say anything. He walks right up to the Soldier and offers his hand to help him down from the table.

He’s put back into cuffs, but they’re Mahoney’s own from his belt, which means he has the key and they don’t need the guards to accompany them. The prison, loud all over, is muffled in solitary. There’s a long row cells on either side of the hall, seven each. He can see through their windows. Many of their occupants are still asleep.

“You got a Twitter profile, Sergeant?”

“Why?” Mahoney asks without answering the question.

“I need to ask Tony Stark a favor,” he mumbles, lifting one of his chained hands for Mahoney to unlock his cuffs.

His metal arm hasn’t stabilized yet and the restraints made it impossible to shake out the locked limb. Mahoney bends to unlock that manacle, too, and steps back to give him room to knock it back into place. He looks up at a camera while the Soldier preoccupies himself with recalibration and the cell door at the very end of the hall opens.

“Let’s go, Barnes.”

“Will you pass along the message?” he asks, stepping across the threshold to his new prison.

The door closes behind him and he turns reluctantly to see Mahoney with his eyes downcast. He swallows hard around pathetic embarrassment and starts to walk toward the cot.

Mahoney taps on the glass gently and holds his phone up for the Soldier to see the screen. The first tweet in the group says it was posted twenty minutes ago. Nelson must have tweeted it when they were still at the 27th in Hell’s Kitchen, which would explain why he disappeared briefly if he had busied himself with his phone while the soldiers stepped in.

Foggy Nelson @fnelsn730 – June 23

I feel like they can only take the arm if they also take the responsibility of making the Winter Soldier in the first place #FREEBUCKY

Brett Mahoney @sgtbmoney – June 23

@theironman I’ve got a friend here with a metal arm, says he needs a new one. And a good surgeon/engineer #FREEBUCKY
Tony Stark @theironman – June 23

@sgtbmoney can I bring my friends @drbbann @thesuperiorwoman

Brett Mahoney @sgtbmoney – June 23

@theironman @drbbann @thesuperiorwoman He can’t wait to meet you

The Soldier sighs, heavy and tired but relieved. Mahoney points behind him at the cot with its new mattress and pressed sheets. He mouths, “Sleep.”

He stays at the door until the Soldier reaches the bed and turns to leave when he sits down. The sun will be up and illuminating the room through the bare window in less than an hour, but he can’t deny that he’s exhausted enough to at least try getting some rest. He takes off the clunky shoes they gave him to replace his boots and pulls his feet up onto the cot, resting his head against the wall.

There is a huge possibility that he’ll be woken shortly, so he doesn’t let himself get more comfortable than the wall at his back affords. He closes his eyes and thinks back on the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, remembering pink, yellow, and white magnolias, a woman named Aaliyah strolling along with her girlfriend, the artist, a father calling after an André and scooping the child up into his arms, bees, and bluebells.

He opens his eyes in the dream he had before of a broken milk bottle. His hands drop it, glass shatters, and milk explodes from it. Immediately he raises his hands up like fists, pumping hard as he runs toward the unseen and the forgotten.

Someone catches him in the midst of that void and cleans the smudges from his eyes. Wilson grins at him and folds up the red square of cloth that’s stained black in the middle as if with tar. Steve is sitting next to him, holding onto his malfunctioning metal arm to keep it still.

Beneath that hand isn’t a cartoon of dames getting ready for a ball but a sheet of Braille. Matt pokes him in the ribs from his right side when that hand wanders over the page, curious.

“No cheating,” he says with a tiny secretive smile.

“What are you, the Braille Police?” Nelson says as he pulls up a chair.

Karen sits in it before Nelson can. “Isn’t he, kind of?”

Nelson sets his hands on the back of her chair and heaves a longsuffering sigh, though he’s smiling.

His metal arm seizes up on the table, sparking still from the EMP burst. It’s visibly crippled in the wrist and barely follows the signals coming to it from his brain. Steve doesn’t let go. The threads of electricity dancing over the exposed and dented metal plates don’t shock him.

“Come on, you’re not even trying,” he teases.

The Soldier moves his fingers over the page again and reads aloud, “‘By working slowly and systematically from one wisp of scent to the next, the hound was able to unravel the line.’”
Steve beams, Matt smiles, and Wilson hollers a gleeful expletive. Karen and Foggy just grin at him. Under the table he sees Мурка winding through his legs, still missing an eye but without the protective collar or any obvious remnants of stitches. The raw patch beneath her missing eye is still bald, but it looks old now, healed.

Sam comes in noisily through the door with a tower of narrow, square boxes balanced in one hand. He looks around guiltily until he catches the Soldier’s eyes.

“You tweeted me, man. What was I supposed to do?”

He finds some solace in the fact that prison hasn’t changed this peace, yet—that it hasn’t stolen it from him. His metal arm spasms beneath Steve’s careful watch while he continues to read from The Fox and the Hound. Murdock chats idly with Sam and Wilson. Karen and Foggy talk in hushed tones across from them.

Мурка jumps up into his lap and claws aimlessly at his shirt. Her purring becomes the trigger for this scene in his mind. It becomes his safeguard. As long as he can find his way back to it, this place inside him can remain untarnished no matter what life does to him next.

He hopes with everything he has that it’s the truth.

Chapter End Notes

Charlotte Jones in the comics
http://static.comicvine.com/uploads/original/0/5774/1964955-charlotte_jones.jpg

Angela Hill as Charlotte Jones
http://a1.fssta.com/content/dam/fsdigital/fscom/shows/tuf/TheUltimateFighter20/Images/09/03/hill.vadapt.620.high.0.jpg

“You can’t help getting older, but you don’t have to get old.” – George Burns

Ну и что мне с тобой делать? – What am I doing to do with you?
Мурка не собака. – Murrrrka is not a dog.
Нельзя. – Not allowed.

The Fox and the Hound by Daniel P. Mannix
Live in Each Season

Chapter Summary

Introducing in the Red Corrrrrrrrrrrrrr: Pepper Potts and the Science Bros Husbands! Also some memories because we like memories, right? Some of them?

Chapter Notes

Still unbeta'd because I'm a horrible person. ALSO, ha. There's some fake science-y shit goin' on in this chapter. A lot of it is probably BS. Also the medicine. The medicine is bad and I am in the process of fixing it. Be gentle with me. I was a goddamn liberal arts major, okay?

youtriedstar.jpeg

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Noise filtering into his cell wakes him. A compartment in the door snicks open from the outside. One of the prison guards that put him into his handcuffs earlier slides a tray of food through. It holds on a flimsily mounted tripod attached to the collapsible shelf. He sits up on the edge of the bed, toeing his prison-issued shoes out of his way to stand up.

The Soldier eyes the tray-contraption as he groggily approaches the door. He could probably snap off the spokes supporting the tray and wield them like knives, but security would know immediately that he’d damaged prison property. They’d punish him for it in all likelihood.

Punishment within this cell is an annoying prospect. The grave inevitability of it grates on his nerves. He could be running, even now. He could have gone to Europe or Mexico or India or anywhere like Rogers seemed to think he would. Instead he’s here in this cage with a tray of wilted pancakes and a spork with which to eat them.

“You’ve got visitors in an hour, Barnes. I suggest you eat up,” the guard announces in a loud voice. He’s still staring at the Soldier with an amused expression on his face. His name tag reads ‘OMAN’.

“My lawyers?” he asks around an unbecoming yawn.

Sounding immeasurably cocky and superior-minded, the guard tells him, “Iron Man and his Incredible Hulk.”

The Soldier blinks sleepily and takes the tray. He doesn’t ask for more details. It’s surprising that they’d come so soon, but he supposes Steve’s known about him for longer than just last night. With his connections to the Avengers, Nick Fury, and former members of S.H.I.E.L.D., he probably informed his associates of the Winter Soldier at their first encounter in D.C.

Steve, bleeding heart that he clearly is, probably even called him Bucky when he told them. He couldn’t see the Soldier’s face and contemplate the possibility of him being anyone but his best friend
in a state of crisis, but still his best friend.

The Soldier ruminates on that thought and eats the lukewarm pancakes at the writing desk in the corner of his cell.

Even Matt dislikes calling him by the moniker bestowed by history and time. He could probably dissuade them from their discomfort by confessing how he refers to himself most of the time, but he never has.

*The Soldier* isn’t a name. It’s a profession and a state of being—a word that is he who was and who he became. He was a soldier with Steve, he was a soldier for Hydra, and it’s only now, sitting in prison, that he worries he might be losing his sense of self. The empty tray goes through the hatch to outside when he places it on the drooping tripod.

He considers while standing alone and quiet at the unmanned, closed door that perhaps in the absence of ‘soldier’, his sense of self may only now be emerging.

The small window in his cell is too high for him to see out. Someone bangs on his door when he tries to pull himself up on the fraction of a windowsill. He passes the time watching the shadows inch to the right with the passage of the sun. A cloud must pass over it because at one point the shadows all cut out. He must be going crazy already to be intrigued at such a common, miniscule phenomenon. Karen said they’d bring books and he hopes she meant it.

His door buzzes open without warning at a break in his shadow-watching, which means he’s in the middle of pissing with his back the door as it swings open.

“Barnes, visitors.”

He touches his shoulder with his chin when he turns to look behind himself at his unannounced guests. There’s Oman looking pathetically triumphant, a bearded man catching the Soldier’s eyes unflinchingly, and a blonde woman pointedly not looking at him. He can see that the side of her neck and her cheek in-profile are bright pink.

The Soldier opens his mouth, still mid-flow, to say something snappy.

Bearded Man beats him to the punch: “Don’t stop on our account.”

“Oh thanks,” he mumbles in reply. He finishes up, flushes the toilet, and checks that his clothes are in order. Before turning to face the door, he washes his hands in the sink. “I didn’t realize we communed in solitary, Oman.”

“Prisoners don’t. Warden says you’re not, yet.”

“Oman, was it?” Bearded Man interrupts in a clear, authoritative tone. He pats Oman’s arm like he’s a pal, but not. “I think we’ve got it, buddy. Can we come in, Sarge?”

The Soldier blanks, actively doesn’t stammer because Oman does enough of that for them both, and nods his head yes. Wilson’s the only person who calls him ‘Sarge’ and the Soldier can’t help thinking that he won’t be by to visit in here.

“I’m Tony Stark,” Bearded Man says, waving to himself as he crosses into the room. He holds his hand out for the woman who takes it as she follows him inside. “This is Virginia Potts, but you can call her Pepper. Or Potts, if you’re one of those.”

“What should we call you?” Pepper asks, looking directly at the Soldier with traces of pink lingering
“Barnes.” He looks at Stark. “Or Bucky, if you’re one of those.”

Stark smirks, pleased at this answer. He looks over his shoulder at Oman who’s still fidgeting in the doorway. The Soldier gestures to the chair at the writing desk when Pepper catches his eyes.

“Do you want to sit?” he asks her.

“No, thank you, not just now.”

Stark swoops in to say, “We’re waiting on some things to be delivered to the infirmary. Dr. Banner’s there now, supervising. Pepper wanted to meet you.”

She smiles freely at the Soldier, not bothered by the comment. All she has to add is, “Tony did, too. Don’t let him fool you.”

“Oh,” the Soldier murmurs. Her name solidifies in his mind with the memory of context dawning on him. “You’re ‘the Superior Woman’. You said Steve looked like a terrified groom on Twitter.”

Pepper doesn’t blush, but she does turn a stern glance on Stark who’s doing a lousy job of hiding his grin. He waves his hand like it’s all water under the bridge and outright smiles at the Soldier when he squints at him.

“You were the one who said he couldn’t wear sneaks to a wedding,” Stark tells him with more than an ounce of humor in his voice.

“You can’t,” he deadpans right back. “It’s bad form.”

Pepper chuckles. Stark also huffs a laugh, sounding surprised at himself for making the sound. He gestures at the cell with a wayward hand.

“No writing materials yet?”

“I’m not sure how all that works. Didn’t think it’d be an issue.”

“What? That’s ridiculous.” Stark frowns. “I don’t mean you’re ridiculous. The prison machine is ridiculous.” He casts around and incidentally locks eyes with Oman who’s still standing awkwardly in the doorway. “What are the policies regarding inmates in solitary confinement keeping stationery in their cells?”

Pepper sneaks a conspiratorial look at the Soldier while Oman stutters out a reply. The Soldier doesn’t listen.

She’s dressed nicely, which is something Stark cannot boast of his denim jeans, faded t-shirt, and black blazer, which at least looks ironed. The Soldier can’t judge, what with his own attire currently consisting of starched tan garments. At least Stark looks comfortable and like he dressed himself, which he can also say of Pepper. He wonders if she’s met Karen. She reminds him of her.

He sits on the foot of his cot, not wanting to take the chair at the desk while his guests stand.

“When I come back later with Mr. Barnes’ attorneys, we’re correcting this atrocious lack of personal furnishing. You with me on this, Oman? Say yes.”

“Uh, yes. Yes?”
“Good man.”

Oman’s radio chirps and he lifts it off his belt.

“The grounds are secure for patient intake, Ronald. Confirm eyes on the inmate?”

“Ronald,” Stark notes in Pepper’s direction, also flicking his eyebrows up at the Soldier who blinks.

“I have eyes on the inmate in question,” Oman answers gruffly, twisting away from the door briefly to add, “I’ve asked you to refer to me by last name on the radio.”

“Sorry, Ronald. Won’t happen again.”

Stark puts his hands on his hips and steps out of the cell to confer with Oman. The Soldier hears a few words on both sides of the exchange, mainly technical inquiries and Stark’s concerns on the Soldier’s behalf about available medical supplies. Pepper paces further into the cell and stops about a foot away from him. Her features are soft, though unsmiling.

She asks him, “Has anyone explained the procedure to you?”

“I heard odds and ends.” He shrugs. “I know what’s involved.”

Pepper nods. “Tony’s been working on a prototype for a permanent replacement ever since he got word of you being back.”

The Soldier hums, curious. He has no preference for which of his many questions to ask first, so he asks nothing.

“We’ll be working with a temporary today,” Stark says, whisking back into the cell with a flourish. “In six months or so we’ll set you up with the permanent and make adjustments on a bi-weekly basis for as many sessions as needed to get it perfect. And until we get that permanent prosthesis on you, we’ll make adjustments on the temporary to make sure it’s perfect.”

“That sounds like a lot of work for you.”

“Did you miss the part where you would have to be there, physically present, in the room with me?” Stark asks, eyebrows doing things on his face. He elaborates, “With me, in a too-shiny hospital ward that smells like expired iodine.”

“Don’t oversell it, Tony,” Pepper chides.

“It reeks of iodine vapor in there,” Stark insists. “No way it should be that fragrant.”

“Oman, escort our visitors to the infirmary,” a voice from the hallway snaps, jerking everyone’s attention to the door. “Barnes, on your feet.”

He gets his shoes on first, not wanting to cause a scene, even as Stark looks fit to do it for him. Pepper stops him with a hand on his shoulder and they exit the cell one after the other. The guard on the Soldier, name tag reading Cuomo, handcuffs him behind his back once he’s on his feet and shackles his ankles together.

“Is that necessary?” Pepper demands from the doorway, waiting expectantly for a reply.

Cuomo straightens out, actually flushes, and says, apologetically, “It’s standard procedure, ma’am. If the inmates in gen pop see him out of restraints and getting special treatment, they might hold it against him. We don’t know yet whether he’s staying in solitary or if he’s going with them.”
Pepper looks at Stark with a touch of guilt in her expression. The Soldier hears her tell him, “Maybe we need to be more careful about sticking to protocol, as long as he’s at the mercy of the system.”

“My lady speaks sense,” Stark answers in a muted voice that the Soldier’s not meant to hear.

“It’s strategy,” Pepper revises. “Not sense.”

“Okay, Barnes. Wait, do those feel too tight? You got circulation, right? Can never tell with the ankles. Don’t want you turning blue on me.”

“They’re fine.”

“All right, let’s walk. You lead, I follow.”

He shuffles along with Cuomo right there at his back. Pepper and Stark follow Oman several feet ahead of them. Cuomo doesn’t attempt to converse with him, nor does he respond to his radio when it chirps a few times. He’s concerned, apparently, that the Soldier might get away from him somehow. The fear certainly isn’t unwarranted, but it’s funny, too. He can’t say he’d get very far out of this place with its armored guards and his distinctly inmate-regulation clothing.

It must be said that as they walk on, he sees upwards of five ways to get out of his cuffs and abscond with a weapon unscathed. He has thirteen tucked up into his brain for later by the time they arrive in the bleached room from the previous night.

Matt might give him a judgmental little head tilt for his due diligence, but he can’t help that he’s meticulous. And anyway, he has an idea of what Wilson would say, which would probably be something along the lines of, But how many more can you think of where you pose as a guard and drive out of here in a Maserati? That is, if anyone here could afford a Maserati. Hey, dream big, kid.

Upon being asked to sit on the paper-padded recliner, he notices the faint but pungent aroma hanging in the air. He’s inclined to take Stark’s word that the smell is iodine. A nurse asks him to remove his shirt and doesn’t wait for a response before rummaging through the workstation to her left.

“Barnes,” Stark calls him.

He sets his folded shirt down behind him on the crinkled paper trail and looks up. A man at Stark’s side approaches with his hands in his pockets. He’s wearing khakis and a bright yellow polo. Stark is slightly taller than him.

“Bruce Banner,” he introduces himself in a soft voice that sounds to be more in danger of withering than his physical form does. “You’re Bucky Barnes.”

“Doctor,” he answers with a tip of his head, naming Banner because Banner named him.

“Oh, I’m—” Banner falters. “I’m sorry. It’s just really good to meet you and to see you safe.”

The Soldier looks away, not having an answer prepared and doing nothing to make one up.

“Are you quite finished frightening my patient?” Stark asks snippily, making a joke at Banner’s expense.

The Soldier bristles, not liking it, but Banner smiles like Stark’s dissipating the tension was a kindness. He doesn’t look at the Soldier or at Stark but at Pepper.

Good-naturedly, Banner murmurs, “I don’t know, I think we should have left him in the car.”
The Soldier does crack a small smile at that—at these three who are clearly friends outside of present circumstances. He doesn’t have person-to-person responsibilities pegged yet, but he’s at least 90% certain Pepper’s duties while here are predominantly concerned with keeping the boys on track. She covers her mouth with one hand and coughs to conceal her laugh.

“All right, all right,” Stark says, clearly in good spirits now that the occupants in the room with him are at ease. “We’re not strictly on the clock here, but I would like to get you back to your cell in time for dinner. No need for you to go hungry because of us.”

“Will it take long?” he asks, indicating his metal arm by bunching up that shoulder and turning the elbow out.

“Extracting the limb itself won’t take more than a few minutes. With the proper anesthetic you won’t even feel it come out,” Banner answers, stepping toward an opened case on another table. He lifts the temporary prosthetic out and carries it with two hands to the Soldier. “The main thing we’ve been working on is getting the ball to lock into the socket without coming loose since we’re going the route of a myoelectric prosthesis for the temporary.”

“What we do,” Stark cuts in smoothly, more an augmentation than an interruption, “is we swivel this baby,” he points to the rounded end of the upper arm, “into your shoulder right where supraspinatus tendons are located. For the permanent one we’ll fiddle a bit with a cuff electrode to bind your radial and median nerves together—that’ll make movement and even some of the finer sensations easier to control and detect in your metal fingers.”

“I’d be able to feel with them?” he asks, clearly throwing them for a loop.

“The cuff electrode’s a few centimeters in length. By bundling the radial and median nerves, we can trick your brain into thinking the metal in your fingers picks up on sensory information like skin would,” Banner explains with a small smile. “That’s a bit more elegant than what we can achieve without a full day in surgery.

“Today we’re gonna remove the socket lining currently attached to the subclavius and pectoralis major. Then we’ll refit you with a PVC polymer sleeve that’ll stretch to cover the rotator cuff. Now this is why you’re going to be getting local anesthesia, okay? The removal of the limb, in our best trial runs, amounts to pressure and tugging sensations with little to no discomfort in the surrounding fleshy areas. It’s the metal joint that’s going to take doing and we’ve run through it enough times to have it like clockwork.”

“He means to say, ‘Don’t worry, Barnes. We’ve practiced on robots.’ No, really, we have.”

“We also practiced on Tony,” Pepper adds helpfully from her watchful position by the nurse’s station. She and the prison medic—he supposes he should use that term until he hears her title—are going over documents together. From where he is he can only make out the bottom halves of color graphs. “He even super glued the arm from the Mark 17 onto his shoulder to make sure it wouldn’t tug too much at the skin.”

“And that’s why he smells like nail polish remover,” Banner clarifies with a small smile for Stark.

“The point being that we’re thorough,” Stark states in a clear voice. He looks at the Soldier, serious where he had been smirking. “We’re thorough. We’re gonna take care of it.”

The Soldier starts to nod, but he’s distracted by the faint glow he can see pressing up beneath the center of Stark’s shirt. Stark reaches up with his hand to tap at the light and the Soldier’s eyebrows pull down at the hollow flink, flink, flink of muffled…glass? Metal?
“Eh, you’re not the only one here packin’ hardware.” Stark winks and drops his hand without giving further details. “Suffice to say you’re in good hands, champ.”

The Soldier stares hard at the mysterious glow a few seconds more, blinks at the implications, and sits up, turning his gaze onto Banner. His expression opens up like he’s prepared to answer a question regarding the prosthesis or the anesthetic they’ll use. The Soldier almost doesn’t ask what’s really on his mind because of that helpful, neutral face.

“Does that make you the ‘Incredible Hulk’?”

Banner’s expression twitches, but the Soldier doesn’t apologize. The flicker over Banner’s face isn’t one bred of anger but of confusion interspersed with curiosity.

“Why would you say that?”

“Oman said ‘Iron Man and his Incredible Hulk’ were coming in.”

“And he didn’t even mention Pepper?” Stark says, clearly irritated but playing it off like a joke. “That sexist creep.”

“In his defense, it’s possible he thought I’d stay here while you two went ahead,” Pepper offers.

Stark repeats his previous declaration: “That sexist creep.”

Banner just sighs and sets the prosthetic arm he’s been holding down on an operating table some feet right of the reclined chair the Soldier’s seated on. He catches the Soldier’s eye and says, “Don’t worry, Barnes, I promise not to go green on you.”

His sincerity is convincing enough that the Soldier doesn’t bother asking what he means by ‘green’. He trusts Banner not to do it if he says he won’t, whatever it is.

“Dr. Ramirez,” Banner says.

The woman going over papers with Pepper snaps her head up. Banner nods. She walks over.

“I think we’re ready to get started on preliminary removal. Where’s best for us to set up shop?”

“I’d like to get his vitals and create a chart for him, which I can do here. He might be better off lying down for extraction and replacement. It’ll be easier to restrain him that way, which,” she adds quickly, anticipating Stark’s protests, “I would advise purely as a safety precaution. There are no psychiatric files on hand for Mr. Barnes, but I suspect we’re dealing with at least PTSD, and without a list of known triggers, you can’t know if any single component to a relatively simple procedure will set him off. Restraints, gentlemen, Ms. Potts.”

Pepper nods at Stark. Stark looks at him.

“She’s right,” the Soldier says, unashamed. The only shame would lie in recklessness that leads to one or more of them getting hurt because of him. He’d broken Wilson’s jaw only last night and had been so afraid that he may have hurt Мурка, too. It’s better that they’re careful now while it’s still their call to make. “I might not have a choice if something happens and I go away, but I have a choice now.”

Stark’s mouth twitches like he’d smile if he wasn’t holding back. Banner drops his chin toward his chest and does smile, which makes the Soldier wonder why Stark doesn’t.
Pepper steps around the workstation, getting Dr. Ramirez’s attention without the use of words. She hands her a blood pressure cuff, takes the capped syringes Ramirez removes from the deep pockets in her lab coat, and walks around behind the Soldier. Several machines on one set of wheels appear around the side of his chair with Pepper steering them from behind. To his right, Stark and Banner disinfect a flat table with steel guardrails on the long edges. Banner lowers one guardrail and wheels a heart rate monitor to the other side.

“I’m going to take your blood pressure, Mr. Barnes.” She works a pair of blue, sheer gloves onto her hands. “You’re going to feel some squeezing, but that’s expected. Can you indicate to me that that’s okay?”

“Yeah. Go ahead.”

She folds the long flap of the cuff over his upper arm and secures it with Velcro. The tightening appears to come from the round part she squeezes with her hand. Combined with the whistling air, the cuff clamping around his arm is a very strange experience. His instincts are to twist away from the pressure, to rip it apart at the source, and to get away from it, but they’re dulled down to whispers more than they are mechanical screeches and groans.

He can see now that they talked to him first so he wouldn’t be intimidated by being in this place again. His first time in this room he’d been hurt. They wanted to show him they wouldn’t let it happen a second time.

Ramirez takes a blood sample to type him, scribbles down, presumably, an order for that blood type to be brought in, and listens to his heart with a stethoscope. He takes in a deep breath when prompted, lets it go when instructed, and tries to imagine the shape of the oxygen whisking through his lungs where she’s listening for it via his back. The cold piece jumps from point-to-point and then is taken away. She tugs the rubber-tipped ends out of her ears and drapes the length of the instrument around the back of her neck.

“Well, your lungs are in excellent condition. You also have bradycardia—an abnormally slow heart rate,” she informs him, making more notes in her ledger. “Bradycardia could mean your heart isn’t pumping enough blood to the rest of your body, but it could also mean you’re in shape, which I would actually say is more likely than the alternative. I made a note of it in your file as something to keep track of just in case.” She sets the pad of paper down and looks at him, holding her hand out in front of her face. “Follow my finger with your eyes for me, okay?”

He does, tracking the trajectory of that digit. She brings it to the end of his nose where he goes cross-eyed to stare at it and he can’t help a quiet laugh at how silly it feels holding still like that. Ramirez drops that hand into her pocket, produces a flashlight, warns him what’s going to happen before it does, and then shines the light across his eyes a few times. She nods, drops her flashlight back into her pocket, and carefully peels away the bandage still covering the side of his neck.

The Soldier hisses through his teeth. Overnight his burn has gone sticky, clinging to the cotton dressing. Ramirez tosses the old dressing, roots around in the workstation to her left for bandages, and washes the burn with soapy water she brings in a small basin. He fidgets restless and wary of the gelatinous ointment she scoops out of a circular container with a cotton swab.

She dabs at his electrical burns, and at first all he feels is little pricks of cold where the swab lands. Ramirez sets those supplies down on a metal tray beside his chair and spreads the solution into his burn with a round cut of gauze. His eyes flutter closed.

Ramirez fixes him with a new bandage while the ointment is still smeared into his skin and removes her gloves. He opens his eyes, but the instant pain relief has him sleepy.
“I’ll have words about the state of that shoulder once we get there, but you’re in good health, considering. I might even say excellent.” She tosses her gloves into a trash bin and rubs sanitizer between her hands. “Well, you came in with a TBI—probably something minor given your lucidity. Your pupils react normally to light, which is good. Have you noticed any difficulties with swallowing or tinnitus?”

For about half a second he’s not sure what TBI and tinnitus are, but as he’s preparing to ask, he realizes he doesn’t need her to tell him. Without really being able to verbalize it because he can’t fully access the memory for it, the knowledge of those terms filters up to his conscious mind like particles drifting in water, steadily rising to the top.

_Traumatic Brain Injury. Ringing in the ears._

“No, I’m all right. Just got hit in the head last night.”

“Heya, Doc?” Stark waves at them when they both turn to look. “We’re ready over here.”

“And so are we,” she says, checking the Soldier for agreement.

He nods and slides off the chair, leaving his shirt behind. Stark and Banner clear the way for him to lie down on the table. Ramirez secures his right arm to the guardrail and fastens the straps around his legs.

“How, you cuff this one, too?” he asks, wiggling his metal fingers in the vicinity of Stark’s face. “Please tell me your exit strategy’s something a little more sophisticated than an EMP.”

“We’re not barbarians, jeez. We didn’t bring EMPs,” Stark tells him. “But oh, if you insist. Dr. Ramirez, this one, too, if you don’t mind?”

“Better safe than sorry,” Banner chimes in from his spot on a stool to the Soldier’s right. “See?” He asks when the Soldier turns to look at him. “Still not green.”

“You keep saying that and I have no idea what you mean.”

“Dude,” Stark says, getting the Soldier’s attention. “Really?”

Ramirez raises the guardrail and latches him to it by the wrist. She turns to Pepper and asks over Stark’s head, “What’s the dosage you had him prepped for?”

“Thee hundred milligrams of the lidocaine hydrochloride,” Pepper answers without checking. “He was weighed when they had him processed.”

“Is that with or without epinephrine?” Banner asks.


Banner looks at Stark. “I don’t know, the lower dose? Is that gonna be enough?”

“Epinephrine will counteract the peak effect we need for him to stay anesthetized. Ramirez?”

“Three hundred milligrams,” she confirms. “Though based on the numbers you sent me this morning from his last known CBC, I think you’re aiming too low with commercial drugs.”

Stark gestures for her to continue. “Please, doctor, share with the class.”

“Propofol—a proper sedative to lower blood pressure and keep his metabolism from burning through
the anesthesia moments after injection. If pain at the injection site is your concern, we could always buffer the lidocaine with sodium bicarbonate. The alkali will smooth over infiltration and quicken the onset of the anesthesia by changing the pH of our original solution.”

The Soldier says, “No,” and on the heart monitor Pepper’s just hooked him up to, his bradycardia sounds faster than a normal heartbeat.

Ramirez presses buttons on the machine, thinking it’s a glitch with the machine. Banner clears his throat and his eyes are closed when the Soldier looks at him.

“Sodium, doc.”

“Oh,” Ramirez replies after a stalled moment, looking crestfallen. “Oh I’m sorry.”

Ever the one for eloquence, Stark says, “Shit. Okay, scrap that. No alkali for you, Barnes. Don’t sweat it. I like the propofol, though. That’s neat. We’ll do that. Write us up a prescription for it, Ramirez? Just so we’re by the book where hypnotic drugs are concerned.”

Eventually, the heart monitor settles into a much slower rhythm. Ramirez excuses herself to take a phone call and he hears her say as she’s ducking out of the room, “—if you switch him now, it’s gonna tingle for about thirty seconds and then he’s gonna be on his own again. Autoimmune inhibitor studies show that this is the case…”

“All right, Barnes,” Stark says, distracting him from where he’s staring at the door Ramirez went through. Stark fiddles something out of his jacket pocket and points at him with the phone. “Keep it Safe for Work, all right?”

“What?”

“Don’t…oh, never mind. Are you a solitaire or a mahjong guy?”

The Soldier squints at the screen, propping it up against his thigh and holding his neck up to see. He says, “Um.”

Stark explains what both games are, thinking that that’s what the Soldier is primarily confused about. Admittedly, that is part of it. He’s starting to lean more toward mahjong, but it might just be that Stark has a harder time succinctly describing Solitaire.

“Stark,” Ramirez scolds him, walking briskly into the room.

“What?” He asks innocently of the cell phone he put in the Soldier’s right hand. “I went through the metal detector like everyone else. It’s not my fault my arc reactor and my phone happened to be in close enough proximity that they didn’t register as two separate devices. If anything, it’s probably a sign that this place could use a security upgrade. You think they’re hiring?”

Ramirez continues to stare at him. Stark raises his eyebrows.

“Oh, come on. He’s not even here as a real prisoner. You can’t tell me anyone cares about protocol in here.”

Pepper raises one hand in a clear ‘don’t ask me’ gesture when Ramirez turns to her. The Soldier just blinks, not believing that she honestly expects an answer out of him. Banner opens and closes his mouth like a fish out of water.

Eventually he manages to say, sounding very agreeable as he does, “After the botched removal they
had in here last night, couldn’t you cut the guy a break?”

Ramirez sighs. In what is clearly her Strict Doctor Voice, she tells the Soldier, “Fine, but no phone calls.”

“Can I use Twitter?” he asks her, dead serious and for some reason making Stark smile.

That’s how Banner ends up teaching him how to avoid ‘checking in’ from the prison while online. He’s showing him Stark’s profile and helping him find Karen’s Twitter via Foggy’s when Dr. Ramirez announces the first injection. Banner double checks to make sure the Soldier’s got the Twitter situation under control before joining Stark and Ramirez on his left side. Ramirez crosses back to the heart monitor to keep track of his vitals.

Tony Stark @theironman – June 23

@karenigma1985 have you and @thesuperiorwoman met? She reminds me of you #ClassyLadies

“Ow,” he mumbles at the first injection even though they warn him multiple times that it’s coming.

Banner administers a few more around the joint of his arm and the Soldier swears.

“Jesus, how many more?”

“You shouldn’t feel them after this one,” Banner reassures him. “At least, we’re about seventy percent certain that you shouldn’t.”

The Soldier looks at Stark’s Twitter feed and hums, staunchly ignoring the acute stabbing sensation in his side. Even beneath the flurry of pins and needles he can detect the needle seeking, holding, and retreating.

“’m trending still,” he tells whoever’s listening.

“Which tags?” Pepper asks from the head of the operating table.

“‘Free Bucky’, ‘JBB2K15’, and ‘Stucky is real’,” he reports, biting a grimace around the next injection that he’s supposed to be too numb to feel. “There’s also a lot of people using ‘super soldiers like pizza’.”

“A battle cry I am more than willing to facilitate when we get you out of this mess,” Stark says in an offhand comment.

“Sam’ll be thrilled,” the Soldier teases, locating Sam’s profile from memory.

Tony Stark @theironman – June 23

I solemnly pledge as many pizzas as @falconpunch wants bc #SUPERSOLDIERSLIKEPIZZA and #JBB2K15 will feed no fewer than 3 when we #FREEBUCKY
The Soldier tools around a while looking for more people he knows. He finds Wilson, locates Weasel through Wilson, and even finds the seemingly untended Spiderman profile. For all his searching he can’t find Matt, which strikes him as odd. His initial thought when he hadn’t seen Matt getting involved with Sam, Steve, and the Avengers on Twitter was that they were working the case from a legal standpoint. That explanation still carries for Karen, if she doesn’t respond to his tweets, but Matt is simply not findable.

Tony Stark @theironman – June 23

@karenigma1985 does the stuffy lawyer with glasses and good hair not have a Twitter account? We have things to discuss. Tell him to get one.

“And that’s it for those,” Banner sighs. “Good.”

“Huh?” The Soldier twists to look that way and is astonished to feel deadweight hanging off his shoulder. His skin thrums right around the column of his neck, potentially where the lidocaine’s influence stops. “Oh. Nice.”


“All right, get the goggles,” Banner quietly commands.

Stark dives into the task while Banner disposes of the two needles he used. Ramirez reads off a number to Pepper and Pepper confirms whatever that number is supposed to mean. The Soldier checks the notifications for any responses to his previous tweets.

Sam Wilson @falconpunch – June 23

No fewer than three huh? I’ll take that deal. #SUPERSOLDIERSLIKEPIZZA #JBB2K15

Karen Page @karenigma1985 – June 23

@theironman I can’t say I’ve ever met @thesuperiorwoman but she sounds nice. #SUPERSOLDIERSLIKEPIZZA and so do #ClassyLadies

Sam Wilson @falconpunch – June 23

@thesuperiorwoman @karenigma1985 @msmhill and @nattrushman are the classiest. #JBB2K15 will also feed #ClassyLadies #SUPERSOLDIERSLIKEPIZZA

The Soldier smiles at Sam’s enthusiasm and fixates on the name he doesn’t recognize. ‘Natalie
“Okay, Sarge, incoming pressure right up here,” Stark tells him.

“Who’s Natalie Rushman?” he asks right back, watching Stark tinker with an exposed panel that bisects the red star.

“Natasha Romanov,” Stark answers, not looking up from the Soldier’s arm. He swivels the narrow tool in a careful oblong and the arm hisses.

A rough little gasp works its way out of the Soldier’s mouth. The metal joint embedded in his shoulder ejects the limb and the Soldier can’t do anything but stare at it, startled at the uncanny sight.

Stark gets both hands on the upper arm and locks eyes with him to ask, “Ready?”

“Yes,” he says after a strained moment, trying to brace himself but not really knowing how. He settles on holding his breath, afraid and hurting in a distant sort of way that has nothing at all to do with his skin. The heart monitor betrays his fear, without the finer nuances of specificity. He clutches Stark’s phone in his right hand, curved plastic digging into his palm. “Yeah, yeah, go.”

Banner takes hold of the section beneath the elbow, Stark pulls, and the arm slides right out with no more than a stuttered click. Stark supports the heft of it while Banner unlocks the manacle.

The Soldier sighs with his whole body and goes slack on the table. He makes a noise that he doesn’t mean to and listens to his heart race on the monitor. Ramirez offers to administer an anxiolytic in case of an anxiety attack, but Stark waves her off.

“Barnes, you with me?”

The Soldier blinks and takes a breath. With a jerky nod he whispers, “Yes.”

“Do we need to give you a minute?”

He shakes his head no and verbalizes it. “No.”

“Did we hurt you?” Banner asks, looking legitimately worried about the answer.

“Mm-mm,” the Soldier hums, shaking his head again. His face is sweating, hair all stuck to his face and against his neck. In a small voice he clarifies, “You didn’t. I’m just relieved.”

Stark’s eyes look wide and vulnerable when the Soldier finally braves looking up at him. The Soldier tries for a smile. Judging by the tiny reflections of himself he can make out in those eyes, it passes pretty well for genuine. It’s a good thing because his heart feels fit to burst and if he couldn’t smile in this instant, he might be sobbing instead for how soothing his relief is. It washes over him in waves, like waves bowling him over.

“We need to get started on this next part, fellas,” Banner reminds them in that gentling tone of his.

The Soldier nods at him and then at Stark, so much calmer than he had been. He even cracks a wider smile than before, light and easy in his course. “You’d best keep on,” he urges, daring to wink.

“Gotta beat the lidocaine.”

Banner makes a sound like a scoff, but he’s grinning over the Soldier at either Pepper or Dr. Ramirez when he looks.

“The man speaks sense,” Stark muses cheerfully, moving away with the arm.
“Strategy, not sense,” the Soldier murmurs to himself, getting a good look at the spot where his arm hasn’t been for seventy years.

Pepper steps around to his shoulder. “What did you say?”

“Your words,” he replies honestly, tilting his head back to look up at her. “You remind me of my friend Karen.”

“Is Karen intelligent and good at everything?” Stark asks, handing a pair of forceps and precision wire cutters off to Banner, keeping the clamp for himself.

The Soldier drops his gaze from Pepper’s welcoming face to an unfocused spot on the ceiling and says, “Yeah.”

“She sounds nice,” Banner offers as they get started.

“She is,” he replies, not missing a beat but looking at Stark’s phone instead of at Banner’s face. Everything to the left of his spinal cord is absent of sensation, but looking while they detach the socket from his skin can’t be a good idea. Balmy for his newfound state of relaxation, he lazily mumbles, “I’ve been tweeting the two of you together. Just a heads up.”

“I think this calls for a ship name,” Stark says with an obsequious air about him.

There’s a wet smacking sound to his left followed by metallic tinkling. He keeps himself occupied with Twitter and stumbles across Natalie Rushman’s profile once more.

“Romanov is an Avenger, right?” he asks, scrolling down the feed.

“Sure is,” Banner tells him. “To be honest, she’s the one keeping us in line more often than not—her and Fury.”

The ‘Natalie Rushman’ profile doesn’t see a lot of activity, but there are photos posted from various cities all across Europe dating back weeks to a month ago. Sam’s tweet appears on the top of the feed when he refreshes it.

Natalie Rushman @natrushman – June 23

‘@thesuperiorwoman @karenigma1985 @msmhill and @natrushman are the classiest.’
@falconpunch damn right we are. #JBB2K15 #ClassyLadies

He stalls with his thumb over the box to create a new tweet. To his left he hears Banner snipping cords with the precision wire cutters. He risks a glance over and sure enough there are a few neatly cut wires twisting out from beneath the metal plate adhered to his shoulder. Beneath the metal his skin is all gnarled with deep pink scars that have never healed beyond their present state.

Tony Stark @theironman – June 23

@karenigma1985 @thesuperiorwoman @natrushman #ClassyLadies will #FREEBUCKY and take over the world #JBB2K15
The Soldier peruses Natalia Alianovna’s profile a few seconds more, scours the photos of Certosa di Firenze, and marvels at himself when he automatically retrieves the English counterpart Charterhouse of Florence. She isn’t in any of the pictures from Florence, but he doesn’t doubt she was actually there to snap them herself. He returns to Stark’s notifications page and laughs at Matt’s response.

Matt Murdock @mmurdocks – June 23

@theironman You flatter me, I think. If you wanted to talk about #JBB2K15 I’m very available. I hope you don’t mind a messy office.

Steve Rogers @stevegrogers – June 23

@theironman @mmurdocks @karenigma1985 @fnelsn730 if we combine our resources with the #Avengers we can #FREEBUCKY together. #JAMESISHOME

Tony Stark @theironman – June 23

@mmurdocks shouldn’t be a problem. Speaking of, reading&writing materials in our boy’s cell. It’s a travesty. He asked if you’d send Braille

Tony Stark @theironman – June 23

@stevegrogers did you pour out milk like our mutual friend asked? He also requested pen pals #STUCKYISREAL

He counts his blessings that Stark had already been enthusiastic about using the ‘Stucky is real’ tag liberally in his own tweets about the Soldier. A few more glances at his shoulder show him half the plate has been removed in full with the other half hanging on by a few steel-girded sutures. Banner works through them diligently without ever taking his eyes away from his work.

Stark takes over once the plate has been fully detached. Banner holds rolls his chair over left so that Stark can roll his right. He peels back the loosened plate and meets with resistance, sunken as it is into the grooves it’s made in his skin over time. Although he begins to see that it’s magnetized to something when Stark has to secure one rounded edge of the plate with a clamp and pry the metal disc off with his fingers.

Banner holds out a translucent container wide enough to fit the plate. They stare at the marred, angry flesh left in its place. Around them the room has fallen into an awed hush. His skin, thankfully, is closed where the plate had been covering it.

The heart monitor beeps evenly, slowly.
Stark takes a breath and says, “You wanna get a look at this, Doc? For the records?”

Dr. Ramirez circles the table and peers down at his arm without leaning in too close. She says, “Keloid scarring around target area. Mild skin irritation. I can prescribe Methylprednisolone to make the swelling go down. The new prosthesis shouldn’t interfere.”

“Sounds good,” Stark says, reaching for the forceps soaking in a clear solution on Banner’s metal tray. He probes briefly at the exposed skin and carefully unweaves the sutures still buried in the Soldier’s skin. The six he finds get dropped into a small Petri dish held in his other hand. Not appearing to breathe, he says, “Dr. Banner, the PVC polymer if you would?”

“On it.”

“Bruce,” Pepper calls after him as he goes. “The ethylene oxide, too.”

“Done and done.”

“Most PVC is made flexible by this stuff called DEHP. It’s a pretty common plasticizer used in all your standard medical equipment—IV bags and tubing, that kind of thing. Between you and me, it’s not totally kosher as far as toxicity levels go, but,” Stark adds, accepting the sheer, gossamer-like material, “there are very few problems concerning plasticized PVC and direct skin contact, even with prolonged exposure. You’ll be off it by Christmastime anyway, so I’m not worried. Sound good?”

“Sure,” the Soldier answers, eyeing the sleeve suspiciously. “How is that going to support a whole arm?”

“Well.” Stark stretches the PVC polymer more for his own benefit. “According to the schematics we found on your arm and as you’ve probably inferred by the experience we just shared, one of your bones on the inside’s been swapped for a metal piece.”

“By our estimations, the coracoid process,” Banner adds, pointing to a spot on himself in between his shoulder and clavicle. “But from the look of it, I’d say we’re dealing with several modifications instead of just the one.”

“It didn’t say in the files?” he asks.

“Only so much turned up in the leak,” Pepper tells him. “The general schematics and workings of your arm are available, but as for the number of times it took to get it right or the adjustments that were made and why, we just don’t know.”

“Oh,” he says, disappointed and not quite hiding that he is. “Wait.”

Stark lifts his hands out of the way when the Soldier tries to sit up and actually succeeds—not being restrained on the left side clearly poses some problems.

“All right, Barnes?”

“Sorry.” He eases back down, grateful to not be assisted down. “Are they asking for those metal parts back, too?”

Banner’s eyebrows shoot up toward his hairline. He looks at Stark and says, “No, right?”

“Not today, in any case,” Stark replies, sounding solid and unshakable for his stubbornness. “We’ll work that into our plan for the permanent prosthesis if it comes to that, but for now, the arm and the plate should appease them.”
“They can’t really expect you to perform that kind of surgery on short notice,” Ramirez says from her post by the heart monitor. “You don’t even have a unit assembled, for Christ’s sake.”

The Soldier looks from Stark and Banner to Pepper and Ramirez. He has to press his head into the table to see them where they’re standing behind them.

“Any chance you two might take a few steps that way so I can see you?”

Ramirez walks clearly into his sightline. He contorts his neck slightly to find Pepper and winces, falling abruptly flat.

“Damn it.”

“Our patient is bleeding, Dr. Ramirez,” Stark coolly observes.

He has to turn his head to one side so that she can patch up his graze while Stark and Banner work with the PVC polymer. When she finishes up, the PVC polymer’s been stretched generously over his shoulder with a lot of overlap on all sides.

“We’ll shape it at the end,” Banner promises. “That way we can make sure you have as much coverage as possible.”

“The PVC polymer’s to reduce chafing,” the Soldier observes, still unable to pick up on finer sensations but seeing that it looks softer than metal. “Your prosthesis is magnetic, too.”

Stark smiles like he’s pleased at the Soldier’s guesses. He says, “Two for two.”

The Soldier smirks, similarly satisfied with himself.

“What’s the plan for the permanent replacement? More magnets?” he asks, directing the question at Banner while Stark concentrates on the new plate.

“Well, they are effective,” Banner replies, thoughtful and present. “The diagrams hinted at the existence of a magnetic field across the interior and exterior boundaries of the metal arm. Our first thought was that the arm itself was magnetized, but judging by the wires we cut to lift the plate, I think that’s where the field was.”

“Which is to say that you need to recreate it in order to magnetize the metal in this prosthesis to its new joint,” Ramirez cuts in, clearly steering Banner back on track.

“There’s a few ways to get a charge going,” Stark tells her while Banner fits the plate. “Attraction and repulsion, as it were.”

The Soldier’s less interested in the scientific properties of magnetism, but he does watch Banner work. It’s a good thing, too, or he’d miss the sight of the plate latching onto him with such a strong force that it screeches across the table, dragging Banner and pushing the Soldier a few inches to the right.

“Твою мать,” he breathes.

“That was a bit…much,” Banner says, straightening out with Pepper’s help. “Do we want that kind of pressure?”

“Can you feel anything yet, Mr. Barnes?” Pepper asks him.

“No, but I felt that.”
“Okay, play with it a bit,” Stark answers, clearly reluctant. “We don’t want it crushing him. The anesthetic’s gotta be close to wearing off.”

“There’s pins and needles, a bit,” the Soldier confirms after a moment. “But I can’t really tell what’s going on.”

Stark nods. “Magnetic pitfalls notwithstanding, the rest of this shouldn’t hurt.”

“Oh, good.”

He goes back to Twitter, grunts unhappily every time the plate drives into his side, and grumbles, “What’s your ship name so I can defame you to the Internet community?”

“Science Bros,” Banner answers.

At the same time Stark says, “Science Husbands.”

They look at each other and the Soldier looks at them.

Stark says, “Aw,” and manages to sound querulous within the span of that single utterance.

“I’m using Science Bros, unless you’d like to revise your previous statement,” the Soldier says, not looking at Banner but at the phone as he opens a new tweet.

Banner sighs. “As long as ‘Stucky is real’ is still trending, we might as well go with ‘husbands’.”

The Soldier stops with his thumb hovering over the screen. “What?”

Stark titters—that is the actual sound he makes—and says, “Did you not know that was the implication?”

“I thought it was a friendship thing,” the Soldier replies, not really bothered but more curious. It certainly explains Steve’s reaction when he suggested he keep the tag going strong. “Though I guess romantic connotations do make sense. Huh.”

“You’re really calm about this,” Banner notes, sounding impressed.

The Soldier looks at the plate when it clicks into place without assaulting him. He shrugs with his other shoulder. “’m kind of a blank slate in case you haven’t noticed. I build new opinions every day.”

“Nah it’s all kicking around up there somewhere,” Stark muses, sounding cheerful and optimistic.

Banner stands from his chair to retrieve the temporary prosthesis. Stark takes up his spot on the stool and examines Banner’s handiwork. He appears to scan it through critically for errors before nodding once, quietly happy with the final product.

“It’s coming back,” the Soldier says, pointing to his shoulder with his chin. “Feels fast.”

“You do have a healing factor to contend with,” Stark allows. “Getting enough anesthesia in you that it works for a small area? That’s doable. Keeping it up is another story. Once it starts to fade it’s gonna feel like we hardly gave you any when really, what we gave you could fell a horse.”

“Fell as in knocking it down or fell as in killing it?” he asks.

“Depends on the size of the horse,” Ramirez says solemnly from his right. “And what it was doing at
the time.” After a beat she says, “Was that too literal?”

“No,” the Soldier hastens to reply. “No, that’s what I expected.”

“Hey, we brought the glove, too, right?” Stark stands when Banner’s response is to shrug. He strides off in Banner’s general direction muttering, “I could’ve sworn we packed it with the PVC polymer sleeves. Damn it.”

The Soldier ducks back into Twitter. Ramirez and Pepper talk toxicology to his right.

Steve Rogers @stevegrogers – June 23

@theironman tell him I poured a glass and @falconpunch is making sure I wear my helmet #STUCKYISREAL

Bucky squints at the attached picture, clicks to enlarge, and smiles, slow and wide, at the sight: Steve with one arm out to hold the camera, wearing plainclothes but for his Captain America helmet, and Sam sitting to his right. Before them is a tall glass of milk, just like Steve said in his tweet. He and Sam also have a glass of milk each. Steve clinks his to the stationery glass and Sam takes a sip from his while throwing a thumbs-up with his free hand.

It’s a few seconds until he sees that Steve’s chinstrap is buckled. He doesn’t know why that amuses him, but it does. ‘The iron man’ favorites and retweets the captioned photo.

Natalie Rushman @natrushman – June 23

@theironman @stevegrogers @falconpunch I sincerely hope this becomes the next internet sensation #STUCKYISREAL #JAMESISHOME #MilkTribute

“Okay, Barnes. Incoming,” Stark warns when Banner brings the prosthetic arm.

He sets the phone down carefully beside his leg on the table, wary of magnetism and pitfalls, and drops his head back to rest his neck. The new arm, which he hasn’t seen much of yet, looks nothing like its predecessor. For one thing, it’s sleeker. The metal lining on the outside is corded in a few places almost like muscles on a human arm.

“The design follows blueprints for the latest Iron Man suit I’m working on, so what you’ve got here is million dollar tech the rest of the world hasn’t seen yet,” Stark gushes, halted with the arm poised right at the joint. “Granted, it’s pebbles compared to the adamantium-infused vibranium alloy I want to use for the pylon on the permanent replacement, and that doesn’t touch how I’d like to power it, but…”


The Soldier smirks, musing, “You tell all this to Steve? I’m sure he’d love to hear it.”
“Insofar as he’s been our closest thing to a proxy since D.C., yes,” Stark tells him, smiling a little. “although now that you have an impressive team of lawyers on your side, I’m sure we’ll get into the very riveting business of assigning actual authority here in a short while.”

“Don’t sound so excited, Tony,” Banner mumbles, gaze fixed pointedly on the prosthesis.

Stark harrumphs and slots the arm into the juncture allowed by the plate. It catches onto a part inside that he can’t see or feel and then locks. He closes his eyes and shudders through an abrupt cramp that hits him square in the chest before wrenching his shoulder.

*Cutting, downward tearing, skin on fire. Terror.*

A scream tears out of him. Light explodes in his corneas. He makes a fist and pulls to free his wrist from its leather binding, but his ankles are trapped, he’s trapped, he’s trapped. Someone ventures too close, trying to hold him down and he grabs them by the back of the neck, throwing them with all his might.

He clutches at the remaining stump of his arm to quell its profuse bleeding but can’t. Hands shove him down onto the table—straps over his chest and forehead and neck—can’t breathe…

He hums, letting the sound roll around in his mouth. Stark is on his feet left of the table with Banner and Pepper close by. Ramirez shines a light across his eyes. He turns away from it.

“Are you all right, Mr. Barnes?” she asks, clicking the light off.

*Peachy,* he tries to say. It doesn’t come out. He nods shakily and turns to Stark, mouth agape. Stark, in turn, stoops down.

*There’s something there. I need you to do that again.*

His teeth chatter. Words don’t come out. Stark shakes his head, looking at a loss. He tries to make a fist with his new prosthetic hand and studies the twists and slopes in the metal when the arm doesn’t respond. There are tears in his eyes but he blinks them away. Ramirez presses a cold compress to his forehead and to the side of his neck that’s not bandaged up. He lets the cold leech into his skin until it’s enough to clear his mind.

“Again,” he sighs.

“What—why?” Pepper asks, sounding startled. “You looked like you were in pain.”

“How in pain. Remembering.”

Stark looks from Pepper to Ramirez and then to Banner. His frown looks deepest from the side.

The Soldier rasps, “Please.”

For a terrible moment he thinks Stark won’t give him this and worse, that he’d be right not to. Stark’s shoulders fall into a slump. He asks Banner for a screwdriver.

Banner hesitates. “Tony…”

“I can take it,” the Soldier snaps, not sure that it’s true. “Even if I can’t, it’s not up to you. It’s not like we can avoid it later.”

That comment gets them to change their tune. Banner looks conflicted and Stark looks determined. He sits and brings the stool right up to the side of the table so he can look the Soldier in the eye.
“I’m gonna respect your choice here, okay? And if it turns out bad, then I’ll still respect it. Can you say the same?”

Not looking to insult Stark’s judgment, he does stop to consider what might happen. He nods and looks at his doctors and at Pepper.

“I figure it’ll either be more intense the second time around or it just won’t work.” He curls his right hand into the fist that his new arm refuses to make. “Thing is, I can’t tell you which would really be worse.”

And he can’t. He really can’t.

Pepper looks stricken at the confession. Ramirez’s pen stalls over her notes, but her expression is tense, not pitying. Banner doesn’t look happy about this turn of events but he still surrenders the screwdriver when Tony asks for it a second time. A well-hidden panel pops out high up on the outer arm at Stark’s command. He fiddles with it until the socket ejects from its metal- and polymer-lined joint. He and Banner cautiously ease it back in and alternate between staring at the arm, then him, then back.

Nothing.

The Soldier lets his head thump back onto the table, angry tears welling in his eyes. Go fucking figure, even if a small part of him is relieved.

“It’s probably for the best, Mr. Barnes,” Pepper consoles him. Her voice is soft and sympathetic.

“We’re gonna synch the suspension system now, Barnes,” Banner announces evenly. “That’ll power the arm’s electric pathways and allow you to control it.”

Enough sensation in his arm has come back online for him to feel the nudge from the plate. The prosthetic arm emits a faint whirring sound and he can make out the shape of protrusions raising, roving, and probing at his skin through the PVC polymer. He cranes his neck to try and see if anything in the external frame mirrors what’s happening beneath the surface.

“Is that supposed to…”

“—show you a mystery…” he croaks into the quiet.

_Around him people are moving and speaking, unseen. Their words are not for him and he doesn’t think he’s meant to understand them, yet he can. They’re speaking German, mostly, but he does hear one person ask half a question in Russian before clumsily continuing in German._

“We shall not sleep, but…shall not sleep but be changed in a moment, in the…twinkling of an eye, the last trumpet s-sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we sh…sh…”

_The words taper off into a groan that ends in a whimper. Searing pain shocks sporadically in his side and racks his body. It’s like the moment that precedes a hyperextended joint just before the pain crests, and then it’s the moment the pain explodes, strung out and stretched taut over a vibrating wire._

_His body is the wire, and even held down he shakes so hard he thinks his bones might actually fly apart. When it stops his body goes cold._

_We shall be changed._
For the corruptible must clothe themselves with incorruption and the mortal with immortality.

“Please. Please…”

It starts again.

Tears flow freely from his eyes. The slow beeping of the heart monitor is the first thing he hears. After that, the rest of the room slithers into focus. He’s aware, distantly, of hands trembling and fumbling with the arm limply attached to his shoulder. There’s a lengthy pause before a different set of hands takes over. Stark’s face is pale when he turns the work over to Banner. Banner’s hands don’t shake like Stark’s had.

The Soldier tries to react but can’t. Time passes while standing still, much like it must for an insect entombed in amber. The scenery evolves. Sometimes he’s in an American prison.

Other times he is in the Albemarle Barracks in Northumberland where the tall grass sways against the glossy black muzzle of his sniper rifle; he is strolling about Dealey Plaza, too warm in the sunshine with his gloves and green army jacket; he is running through the darkened streets of Sveavägen with screams at his back and two gunshots ringing in his ears; he is hiking snow-covered hills in Tobolsk; he is standing in the middle of a busy metropolitan street, waiting.

He is in an American prison. Karen is reading to him in the sick bay.

A waterfall decorates the cover of the book in her hands. Nearly obscured fully by her fingers, a man climbs the edge of a precipice. He makes out the name ‘Lovecraft’.

“‘The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far.’”

She pauses in her fluid recitation to look up from the text at him. Her eyes look tired.

Leaning forward slightly she whispers, “Bucky?”

He tries to answer her. Nothing comes out. He focuses on her hair that falls over one shoulder, the deep burgundy jacket slung over the back of her chair, and the reddish hues animating the book’s cover art. Dangerous disquiet clangs in his mind the more he struggles to be ready. Slow, consuming exhaustion blankets his perception the less he’s able to fix himself.

Karen flicks her gaze away from his eyes and pings it off various points in the room. He can see that they’re shiny and that the whites of them are a bit red. She finally returns to the book without another word, sighing in time with the hush that comes over him.

“‘The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age…””

Nelson visits later in the night—the Soldier assumes it’s nighttime based on the reason Nelson gives for Matt’s not being there in his place. Apparently he’s still keeping vigil as Daredevil after sundown. Nelson’s careful not to phrase it in any obvious way, but the Soldier’s not an idiot. Even if he is catatonic, he still has some presence of mind at his disposal.

“Needs his beauty sleep, you know? Helps him keep up his ‘good hair’. He would have come first, but Karen wanted to see you.”
He brandishes the cover of the book he brought: Jane Austen’s *Emma*. The Soldier can’t say if he’s ever read it before, but he thinks it must be one of the important ones. Nelson looks shy about his book choice, and maybe because he would expect the Soldier to ask if he could, he explains.

“Between Lovecraft and Mannix, I figured you’ve got enough in the way of existential terror and dread to stimulate your imagination. Austen’s great. I’m not sure you’re really into romantic comedies, which this is, but…uh, anyway, I’ll just get right into it, and you can listen. Yeah.”

It starts out slow, but the Soldier pays attention. If he could, he would laugh right from his belly at the very opening line, which Nelson delivers cheerfully: “‘Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings in existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.’”

The Soldier enjoys it immensely and plans on telling Nelson as soon as he’s able. He’s not sure he’s interested in reading the book himself just yet as he can’t get a read on the actual plot, but it’s good fun to listen to for their purposes now.

Their visit rounds out on that same note. It’s comfortable and there’s only one pause near the end when Nelson’s emotions get the best of him. The Soldier would tell him he’s fine if he could. He’s fairly certain a hard slap across the face would do to snap him out of it. It’s a testament to the life he lives now that he’s sure they know it, too.

“Oh, I wanted to tell you, before I go.” Nelson flips through the book to a seemingly random, dog-eared page near the back. “I copied down some Tweets I thought you’d like. Monica Cisneros at Moneros42 said, ‘The hash tag: Milk Tribute is so cute. I wonder if Steve G. Rogers or Falcon Punch thought of it.’ And this one’s good, look. Jess Bower at sickemjess said, ‘I bet it was Cap’s idea. He’s a nerd deep down. Hash tag: Stucky is real.’”

Nelson chuckles and reads off a few more before getting to the ones written by people he actually knows. He glosses over some witty, funny things Steve, Sam, Matt, and Karen tweets before getting to his own personal highlight: a photo Wilson posted of Deadpool, Daredevil, and Spiderman, using the hash tags ‘Milk Tribute’ and ‘RedTeam4Bucky’.

“I have no idea who even took the picture. Maybe it was Weasel. It went up right before I left the office, so I don’t think they’d started patrol yet. They were on a roof somewhere and Wilson had a full gallon of milk over his head.” Nelson holds his own arms straight up to demonstrate, wielding the book to simulate the gallon of milk. “Spiderman and Daredevil were off to the side looking like they’d been trying to get him back on track for a while. It was pretty funny. This Milk Tribute thing is really taking off. Maybe I can bring pictures to show you when I come back tomorrow—the greatest hits or something.”

After Nelson has gone, the Soldier is left alone with a period of darkness. During this time, he walks through the beginnings of worlds suggested to him by Mannix, Lovecraft, and Austen where a fox taunts a hound on a lush countryside with white fog stretching itself out over everything. At the farthest edges of that world he can see himself back in Tobolsk crunching through snow or in Sveavägen once more.

He never gets much farther into the memories than a mere glimpse here or there. It isn’t quite as disheartening as he anticipated. Cycling through them is almost calming. None of his brief lapses into the past catch him in the throes of violence. He is always just before or just after. It’s not always obvious from the context of the dream alone.

Sveavägen is easy to outline what with the shots ringing still in ears at the start. He’d killed someone
or someone had tried to kill him. The former option is far more plausible.

Dealey Plaza’s memory plots him before the violence. He was there for an assassination probably, judging by the heavy case in his hand. The people mulling about are calm and don’t suspect him. They have no idea he’s about to shatter a world.

The memory from the street is another obvious one. He’d been waiting for Fury, though he’s only sure of that because it was in a report made public in the leak. It was one of the orders Pierce signed himself. The few seconds reclaimed in the flashback are strangely peaceful.

Northumberland and Tobolsk are more ambiguous in terms of context. He can’t tell if he’s putting the rifle away or if he’s assembling it; climbing toward a target or toward an evacuation unit.

The memories are like snapshots. He can’t explore them beyond just examining what’s right in front of him in razor sharp detail. The images he sees are nothing if not detailed. Right down to the granulated bits of snow that stick to his boots and how they don’t melt for the cold temperatures of the Tyumen Oblast, his memories become more and more precise.

Those details aren’t all he’s able to access. The memories open up to him like the mouth of a yawning beast the longer he stays in them dreaming and remembering. He can’t control them.

He can’t control the train of thought he has strolling through Dealey Plaza for the fortieth time: Kill the man. There will be consequences for missing the man. Do not hit the woman. If the woman is hit and the man is not, the man must still be killed.

Or in Northumberland, Shoot five of the ten targets. If less than five are shot down, the asset will lose field privileges. If five are shot down, ten more will be released in rapid succession. If less than eight are shot down, the asset will lose field privileges. The asset will disassemble the rifle. If this step is done incorrectly, the asset will lose field privileges.

In Sveavägen, he echoes the mantra from Dealey Plaza verbatim: Kill the man. There will be consequences for missing the man. Do not hit the woman. If the woman is hit and the man is not, the man must still be killed.

Standing there in the street while cars fly past him, honking their horns, he hears himself humming notes from a liturgical chant. Even reliving it, he can’t recall the name, where he heard it, or why it came back to him. He doesn’t even hear the traffic around him. All there is is that warm music in his chest. It fills the space in his mouth and vibrates on his tongue like a sweet melted candy.

For Tobolsk he has no command in mind, and no music either. His thoughts hinge on a single truculent complaint: Погода опять отстой, ну почему снова снег, я ненавижу дурацкий снег, везет как утопленнику.

Evidently, he hates snow. Couldn’t say why, but there it is.

Matt comes to see him in the morning. There’s a scrape on his cheek that’s too deep to pass for a shaving accident, but he doesn’t say anything about it. He just sits where Karen and Nelson had and runs idle fingers over the edge of the tiny book he brought with him. It must be strangest of all for him to encounter Bucky as he is.

He’s sitting too still for Matt to be able to listen for him or play off his movements. No doubt he’s probably straining his ears for a heartbeat at the very least.

“Foggy said he told you about the ‘Red Team’ and their milk tribute. I was a bit surprised myself, but Wilson really is fond of Captain America, and you. It’s no wonder he’d get his pals to join in.”
“You’ll get more publicity that way. People know Spiderman and Daredevil more than they know him. I expect his part in getting you to safety will change all that before long, especially since you mentioned him by name.”

Matt runs his hand along the cover of a worn book printed exclusively in Braille. It’s too far away to make out the exact shapes of the character clusters and Matt doesn’t bring it closer for him to feel them himself. Maybe there’s a ‘No Touching’ rule in place or maybe the Soldier’s inability to consent to being touched is what prevents Matt from offering.

“I was going to bring *The Fox and the Hound* and read that to you, but I thought you might like to get through that on your own. I’m working on getting a full copy printed so you can read it when you’re sent back to Solitary. Judge Ayers has been making phone calls on our behalf to get you moved someplace less…Alcatraz. In the meantime the warden here plans on keeping you in Solitary. We can discuss whether that’s what you’d prefer when…” Matt clears his throat. “When you’re ready.”

He runs his hand over the cover of the book again and takes off his glasses. They fit right into a breast pocket in his jacket. His face always looks so open and new without them.

“Foggy bought me this book when we graduated. I think he thought he was being cute, but there’s a lot of good stuff in it.” His voice takes on that edge of self-consciousness that always sounds so unlike the Matt that Bucky’s come to know. “I guess you couldn’t tell me if you didn’t like it, or if you did. Anyway, it’s Dr. Seuss. He wrote children’s books. This one’s ‘Oh, the Places You’ll Go!’ It seemed appropriate at the time.”

*Let’s hear it then, Matt.*

“‘Congratulations! Today is your day. You’re off to Great Places! You’re off and away! You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You’re on your own. And you know what you know. And you are the guy who’ll decide where to go.’”

Matt continues on with the silly text and Bucky surprises himself by hanging on every word. Nelson had gifted it to Matt after all. Matt had read it and had decided to bring it to him now. It deserves his attention, children’s book or no.

“‘And then things start to happen, don’t worry. Don’t stew. Just go right along. You’ll start happening, too. Oh! The places you’ll go!’”

He would be outright lying if he said it wasn’t deeply fascinating hearing this story told in Matt’s voice. An earlier version of himself who didn’t know Murdock might not have been interested in the performance and he doesn’t always like to say he ‘knows’ Murdock even now, but he can’t deny that the gesture is nice. Matt could easily have picked some elevated piece of literature and read it to him in his crisp, smooth voice. He could have read one of Thurgood Marshall’s speeches.

Instead he chose a simple text and trusted his good intentions and the good intentions of the author to be enough. Whether or not Matt ever boasts of ‘knowing’ him, he trusts Bucky to trust him.

“‘I’m sorry to say so but, sadly, it’s true that Bang-ups and Hang-ups can happen to you. You can get all hung up in a prickly perch. And your gang will fly on. You’ll be left in a Lurch. You’ll come down from the Lurch with an unpleasant bump. And the chances are, then, that you’ll be in a Slump.’” Matt inhales to read the next bit and stops short of speaking. His fingers run back and forth...
over the next line. He gives a little sigh. "'And when you’re in a Slump, you’re not in for much fun. Un-slumping yourself is not easily done.'"

He looks a little slumped himself, though it’s pretty clear that the text trips him up at that part because of their reason for being in the sick bay. Bucky would say something to reassure him if he could—something cheesy, probably.

*I feel like myself today, whatever that really means.*

The irony of it is that it’s true. He’s more trapped now than he’s been since he came back to New York. It’s not even that his heart feels whole now where it didn’t before. Pieces of him are still gaping and empty. Large chunks of his life, even in spite of the ones that came back to him, are still gone, untraceable in the great void of his mind.

He, himself, is still empty. Never mind that his body won’t follow the impulses fired down from his brain—that he can’t twitch a finger to mean ‘yes’ or wrinkle his nose to mean ‘no’ or crack a smile when Matt misspeaks.

But he does feel like himself. In what began as a startling moment of clarity and dragged out into one long epiphany, he came to settle into it.

More than anything he wants to tell Matt. He wants Matt to tell Nelson and Karen and for them to tell Wilson, Sam, and Steve and for them to tell Stark, Banner, and Pepper. Although there’s so much he has ready to say, he can only listen.

So he listens.

"'Somehow you’ll escape all that waiting and staying. You’ll find the bright places where Boom Bands are playing. With banner flip-flapping, once more you’ll ride high! Ready for anything under the sky. Ready because you’re that kind of a guy!'

Matt pauses to chuckle. "I hope you’re picking up on these exclamation points. It’s been a while since I read something aloud that had exclamation points in it. Giving the performance of my life here.”

He *desperately* wishes he could at least smirk.

The story goes on, and it’s surprising how much more there is to it: places and activities and circumstances—all the various twists and turns life doles out turn up. Matt reads through them all, aided throughout by nonsensical words. Surprisingly, or maybe unsurprisingly, they really grow on Bucky as soon as he gets used to them.

"'I’m afraid that sometimes you’ll play lonely games, too. Games you can’t win ‘cause you’ll play against you. All alone! Whether you like it or not, alone will be something you’ll be quite a lot. And when you’re alone there’s a very good chance you’ll meet things that scare you right out of your pants. There are some, down the road between hither and yon, that can scare you so much you won’t want to go on."

Matt’s voice stays so muted and gentle, and if Bucky had a choice, he thinks he would be, too—gentle and cautious and attentive. He sounds like he’s talking to Bucky rather than reading to him.

"'But you will go, though the weather be foul. On you will go, though your enemies prowl. Onward up many a frightening creek, though your arms may get sore and your sneakers may leak. On and on you will hike and I know you’ll hike far and face up to your problems, whatever they are.'"
While the story draws to a close, he wonders if Matt has ever thought about having kids or raising a family. Kids would probably love listening to him read.

It’s then that he fully stops to realize what they’ve all been doing for him for as long as chance brought him into their lives. They’ve been taking care of him, nurturing him into someone who could stand on his own two feet even when he couldn’t fathom getting up again. Everything they’ve done for him they’ve done with no thought of trying to cram him into the mold he left behind as the historical ‘Bucky Barnes’. They’ve helped him without comparing what he used to be with what he was not too long ago.

“‘And will you succeed? Yes! You will, indeed! Ninety-eight and three quarters percent guaranteed.’” Matt moves his hand over the bottom of the page and closes the book. He smiles and says, “‘Kid, you’ll move mountains.’”

_Murdock, you smooth, smooth bastard._

_I wonder if we could get ‘Murducky is real’ to trend._

Matt honestly wouldn’t even blink if he tried to get it to take off. He’s dead certain about that, somehow.

“Hopefully that wasn’t dreadful. I enjoyed it, but that’s nostalgia for you.”

Bucky plans to ask more about that nostalgia when he can. For the moment, Matt has other plans.

“Stark contacted me yesterday after the surgery. I guess it had just happened. He sounded pretty rattled, but he wanted to talk about books and writing materials. Mainly he said he’d contribute any titles you wanted. He was adamant about that.

“Karen said she was going to go to the bookstore today, so she’ll bring you a few choices to tide you over until you decide on any you want us to get for you. In the meantime, you can start thinking of people you’d like me to get addresses for if you want to write to anyone. Foggy said he’d read me your letters if you decided to write. It’s up to you.”

With that wealth of information delivered, Matt relaxes where he’s seated.

“Oh and I brought it up with Stark and he said the permanent prosthesis will make two-handed reading possible. So you have that to look forward to. You’ll be reading faster than me in no time.”

Matt gives a small accidental smile and ducks his head.

“I only brought the one book, so…I guess I could tell you a story of my own.” He rubs his hands together, thinking. “Remember how I told you about my grandmother?”

_God-fearing Catholic, wasn’t she?_

“My dad used to box. It was his livelihood. And my grandmother—his mother—always used to say, ‘Be careful of the Murdock boys. They got the devil in ’em.’ I started to tell you this before, when we were leaving the warehouse with Sam and Steve.

“But I learned watching him and watching him fight that there’s a clear difference between the violence that needs a host and the violence that its host needs. It’s like…there’s a constant power struggle between you and the fight. You’re either in control or you’re not.

“My dad, sometimes I could see it when it went out of him. It was like a shadow that had been
outside of him would just sink right into his skin and take over. The rest of him’d go dark and you couldn’t see him there when you looked into his eyes, even on the TV.”

Matt toys with the pages of the Dr. Seuss book with a morose look on his face. It’s another one of those expressions that makes him look like a boy. And he is just that: a boy thinking about his father and a time when he had been alive.

“But the reason I brought it up to you before is that I wanted you to know that you can have dark corners. You can have deep, horrible places inside or places that you’ve been. It’s not a stain on your character to have been dragged beaten and bloodied through the valley. You survived the only way you knew how.

“Your situational violence doesn’t make you a violent person. I’ve walked with you, Barnes, and dare I say it, I hang off your arm like one hell of a trophy wife.” He gives a wider smile. One of his shoulders lifts in a small shrug. “I know how hard you try to be gentle. I know you want to give us as few reasons as possible to be suspicious of you, given how little you trust yourself.

“Foggy told me about the nightmare you had at Weasel’s. He told me how you woke up from it, that you were afraid you might have done something you couldn’t have helped doing.”

Like breaking Wilson’s jaw.

“I can’t begin to understand where you are right now, Bucky. If I lived forever, I couldn’t understand.”

Matt leans forward so that he can prop his elbows up on his knees. He laces his fingers together between his knees and swallows hard. Bucky loses sight of his face for a few seconds when Matt drops his chin forward and stays bowed like that for a good ten seconds or so. He looks like he might be praying until he straightens out again, composure recaptured.

“I’m sorry.” He exhales a shaky laugh. “I’ve been thinking a lot about how I roped you into this strategy and…how bleak it must look from your perspective right about now. Karen yelled at me earlier; said I wasn’t giving you enough credit for making your own decisions, and she’s right. It isn’t fair of me not to let you have your agency when that’s what we’ve been working for all this time. You could have left any time you wanted. I’m not surprised that you didn’t. I’m honored.

“We’re in this together. However many times we get knocked down after today, I can promise you we’ll always get back up.”

Matt stands as if to emphasize the point and neatly extracts his glasses from his breast pocket. He slides them back onto his face and takes up his cane where he’d propped it up against his chair.

“I’ll be by tomorrow. Steve said he’d try to come sometime this evening, and if you’re wondering why I said he’d try, he’s dealing with a lot of heat from the press right now. People everywhere want to talk to him, ask him invasive questions about your friendship, and grill him about whether you’re really you, that kind of thing. We’re still discussing whether we should go public right there with him as one cohesive group working in your corner. There’s still a lot of time to talk it over.”

After Matt leaves, the Soldier sees Dr. Ramirez intermittently throughout the day. She comes in unassisted, wearing a visitor’s badge he hadn’t noticed before and carrying only one item that didn’t fit in her coat pockets. It turns out it’s a heating pad. She tells him what her intentions with it are before applying it to his lower back, something that—wow yes—feels wonderful.

While she works quickly and quietly around him, she tells him anecdotes from her day at the hospital
where she actually works. More of the soothing goop from yesterday goes onto the burn on his neck, and it still feels good, if slightly dulled. He finds out she has a young daughter currently in the hospital being treated for something called JIA. It doesn’t sound life-threatening, but he gets the sense that treating it is far better than not.

She stays with him a while more, repositioning the heating pad to rest on his shoulders for a few minutes before moving it to the center of his back. He can’t remember having moved at all since the surgery, and he barely remembers being moved into the sick bay. Someone must have sat him up at some point, maybe to take him to the bathroom or…

Yeah, he definitely lost time somewhere along the way. All he can hope for is that he didn’t lash out at anyone. He can’t tell if he’s currently being restrained.

Ramirez wraps him in a blanket before she goes. It helps. He hadn’t realized it, but he’d gotten quite cold sitting there all those hours, doing nothing to generate body heat. Night slides by and day shrinks away. People move around him.

His hours bleed together, meshing relief with discomfort with frustration. He loses the awareness he had going into it. The sharp accuracy to his memories slips from his grasp.

He slips, like an animal in a tar pit.

Steve is there, and then he’s not. Matt reads to him. Karen waves to him every time she takes the chair opposite him. After a time, his sight idles on the ceiling instead of at the far wall. His dreams are roiling clouds that crackle with thunder and spark with lightning. He wakes to grass and wind and sunshine, voices only a distant whisper in the leaves.

A chamber rises up around him. The walls are cold, steaming bronze. He raises a metal hand to the single source of light, a glass window. The ice spreads like a virus and stops the blood in his veins. It’s a grave sunken into the earth trying to swallow him whole.

Grab my hand.

He makes a fist. His heart skips a beat on the monitor.

“Wow it really works. That’s nifty.”

The Soldier blinks and moves his tongue around in his mouth. At his bedside sits a poorly disguised Wade Wilson, sporting a poofy, ridiculous wig and a tracksuit. He doesn’t appear to have noticed that the Soldier’s studying him intently, preoccupied as he is with staring at the arm Stark, Pepper, and Banner left him with however long ago.

“What are you yammering about, Wilson?”

“Whoa, hey! Hey!” Wilson grins at him and bounces slightly in his chair. It’s the same one Karen, Matt, Steve, and Nelson have taken turns sitting in. “How’s tricks, tin man!?”

“Lousy,” he grumbles, throat gone to gravel and broken glass for how parched he is.

“Dude, you sound thirsty. I mean…” Wilson sighs and looks up at the ceiling with his hands up in defeat. “He sounds thirsty? Really? Not that I don’t appreciate getting all the quality lines, but honestly.”

The Soldier smiles. He thought he’d have to go a lot longer without hearing another one of Wilson’s long-winded conversations with himself. Wilson stammers catching sight of the probably dopey look
on the Soldier’s face.

“I’ll get you some water. That’s a sensible thing to do—maturity,” he enunciates in the direction of the roof once more. “Take notes.”

He drinks about half of the small cup Wilson brings him. It’s just enough to soften the rough dryness in his throat. He tries to sit up and makes a face, noting the various IV tubes coming out of different parts of his body.

“Well.”

“Oh. Yeeeeaah, that.” Wilson sets the cup of water down by the bed. “Looks terrifying, but you totally needed them. Your doctor came by earlier and explained what they all do, and trust me, tin man. They were necessary.”

“That doesn’t make the catheter feel any better.”

“You can feel the catheter right now?”

“I can feel the catheter right now.”

Wilson stares at him without blinking. The Soldier stares back and does blink.

“Huh. Soooo, this is awkward. You want I should call a nurse over?”

He shrugs. “They’ll send me back to my cell.”

“Yeah, but you’ll get to walk around and do jumping jacks and use the John by yourself. Those are very good things.”

“They’ll make you leave.”

Wilson drops his hands into his lap. The ugly gray tracksuit is big on him and makes him look tiny. He tries to relax and wave his hand like the Soldier’s statement doesn’t affect him, but his face is easy to read without the mask.

“I had another ten minutes, if you can stand to keep the catheter in.”

“Might as well.”

The Soldier loosens the metal fist he’s been holding and examines it. He thinks he was meant to be shown its limits and capabilities before he checked out.

“What’d you bring?” he asks, pointing with his chin at the book in Wilson’s lap.

Wilson laughs, looking embarrassed. “It’s Leaves of Grass. I didn’t have anything at my place that wasn’t just a gun manual. Spidey shooed me out of his apartment with this. There’s a whole subtextual thing happening there, but trying to untwist it hurts my brain. Wanna see?”

God, he wishes it were Braille. He’s worried he may be losing his touch with it after so much time away from it. Wilson offers the book and the Soldier takes it, the manacle at his wrist rattling where it’s attached to the guardrail. He opens to a random page with certain words and lines circled or shakily underlined in pencil.

“He said he had to read it for a class and that’s why it’s all written on. I think he’s just a weirdo.”
“Who need be afraid of the merge? / Undrape...you who are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded, / I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no, / And am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless...and can never be shaken away.”

Right next to the last line, in Spiderman’s legible handwriting, is the word *Boom*.

“This is bizarre.” The Soldier flips through a few more pages with a tiny bemused smile on his face and contemplates the old man on the cover with the scraggly white beard. “1855, huh?”

“Yep. I guess he’s a big deal in college English classes. I dunno. Personally I think Peter’s cramped little notes are the best part.”

The Soldier raises an eyebrow. “Peter?”

Wilson blinks. “What?”

“You said Peter, I think,” the Soldier muses, scanning the copyright information on one of the front pages.

“I absolutely did not say ‘Peter’. You know I don’t think I’ve ever met a Peter in all my life, ever. And let’s face it, Spidey looks more like a Donald than he does a Peter. Of all the unrealistic notions—as if I would ever reveal his secret identity in casual conversation. It *is* a secret after all. The most secretive of secrets.”

The page under the Soldier’s thumb springs free while Wilson carries on with his babble.

“And another thing—”

“Peter Parker?”

“I...you—which?”

The Soldier holds up the book with the flexible front cover pulled back. There in that same clear handwritten print it reads, *Property of Peter Parker*.

“Oh, Petey,” Wilson coos, the corner of his mouth quivering. “This is why I love you.”

And then he laughs, long and loud. The Soldier shakes his head and closes the book before covering his eyes with his right hand. People really are amazing, and he missed Wilson’s laugh.

There’s no one else in the sick bay, but Wilson still draws the attention of a staff member who pages Dr. Ramirez immediately. Wilson is allowed to stay until she arrives to examine him. They spend that time teasing Spiderman via his notes that range from *What the what* to *+Voyeurism??* to the Soldier’s personal favorite, *Oh, snap*.

“Look! This one just says, *WALT.*”

The Soldier snickers at Wilson’s distressed inflection on that single word and outright laughs when Wilson reads the note that says, *Preach, papa*.

They’re still chuckling, Wilson clutching his sides at one margin that just says, *Hot*, when Dr. Ramirez walks in, looking pleasantly shocked to see them both. Wilson motions to take the book back when the Soldier catches sight of a hastily scribbled note that just reads, *Amputation*.

He hands off the thin paperback book and memorizes the author and title so he can tell Karen.
“Mr. Barnes, welcome back.”

“Thanks.” He rubs an idle palm over his chin and then pushes his knuckles more deliberately across stubble. “Oh. How long was I out?”

“Eight days,” Dr. Ramirez reports easily, already checking all the things she no doubt checked earlier today.

“Hmm.”

“I’ve already contacted Mr. Murdock and Ms. Potts. They’ve been informed of your current condition. Your lawyers want to see you in the morning to touch base.”

“Pepper and the Science Husbands?”

Wilson snorts at his left. Dr. Ramirez gives them both an amused side glance.

“Apparently you’ll be good for another few weeks, unless you have problems with the prosthesis as it is. Ms. Potts assured me they would make a trip for minor adjustments. They want you to be comfortable.”

“Guess I’ll take some time with it then, see how I feel.”

“Just let me know if there are any problems. Mister…”

“Wilson,” he says, hopping right out of his chair when Dr. Ramirez looks at him.

“Mr. Wilson, I’m going to need you to clear the room so I can get Mr. Barnes ready to go back to his cell.”

“Operation: Remove the Pee Tube, got it, doc. I’ll see you when I see you, tin man. The new arm’s sleek, by the way. I like it.”

Wilson winks and honest-to-God frolics out of the room. The Soldier just rolls his eyes at the familiar antics and lets Ramirez go to work. She has to help him stand, which takes a few minutes for him to be able to do it unassisted.

“Did Stark bring you in special?” he asks her while his legs come back beneath him.

“He did.” She nods. “I was on retainer with S.H.I.E.L.D. when you got to D.C. I was part of a select group of surgeons that called T.O.D. on Fury after you took your shot at him. Since S.H.I.E.L.D. dissolved, I’ve had an ongoing arrangement with Stark Industries.”

“Oh.”

“I’ve been read in, Barnes. Ms. Potts didn’t pick my name out of a hat.”

“She would never be so careless,” he murmurs, bending his knees.

“No, she wouldn’t. And Stark, well. He understands what’s at stake here.”

“What’s at stake here?”

Ramirez looks at him, expression perplexed and then worried. She averts her eyes.

“What?” he asks, starting to get nervous. “What now?”
“You should talk to your lawyers. They’ll tell you why he jumped to your aid like he did.”

Cuomo comes into the room to put him back into restraints. He gets him into cuffs first and then the ankle shackles.

“It wasn’t because of Steve?”

“He must have been part of what made him come around. I shouldn’t say anything else.”

The Soldier frowns, a sick, uncertain feeling churning in his gut. Cuomo starts to march him out of the room, perfectly indifferent to everything outside of his duties.

“I hope Mari gets better soon,” he tells Ramirez, watching her face go soft at the edges.

She hadn’t expected him to remember that she told him. It’s probably the most reasonable expectation she could have had, seeing as he can’t recall much of what transpired while he was in the sick bay.

“Christmas came early, Barnes,” Cuomo tells him when his cell door opens.

A modest stack of books awaits him in the small room, along with a pad of lined paper and a handful of strange writing implements. He tests them in his hands once Cuomo turns him loose and inspects their odd pliability. They bend like rubber and are encased in plastic ends on both sides. A stout little tip protrudes from the end where, he checks, the ink comes from.

He writes the word, *Boom*, surprised—and dismayed at his surprise—to see what his handwriting looks like. It doesn’t pinch and slant the way Spiderman’s had. It’s rigid and tight. Curves in the letters loop boldly, almost like he briefly lost control of the pen.

The pens set carefully off to one side, he peruses the books next. He pauses to contemplate each one when he notices that four of the five aren’t printed in English.

Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* is printed in Italian. Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Мастер и Маргарита* is in Russian. The complete, bound copy of Daniel P. Mannix’s *The Fox and the Hound* is in Braille. Pablo Neruda’s *Canto General* is in Spanish. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is the sole English text.

Karen had a busy day at the bookstore, assuming she bought him these. It’s possible Stark had a hand in securing some of them. If nothing else, he could have gotten ahold of Mannix in Braille on such short notice. He’s not sure how readily available Braille products are in the average bookstore, going off what he’s seen of the actual physical books Matt owns—one lonely Dr. Seuss book, a graduation gift from Foggy.

He sits at the desk and scans the first lines of *Decameron*, squinting hard at the Italian when it refuses to be read. The Spanish and the Russian are readily retrieved. Going back through the first chapter of *The Fox and the Hound* jogs his memory for how Braille works. *Frankenstein* is no mystery to him in the slightest.

Naturally, he begins with the Italian. Naturally.

He spends a good twenty minutes trying to silently make sense of the words. Reading aloud, albeit quietly, helps immensely. The words slip easily off his tongue, plentiful accent marks and all, but their meaning remains elusive. He wonders if he could form a sentence if someone were to ask him a question in Italian. Practice would clear the cobwebs from his ability with the language. He hopes the mental block in place isn’t made of anything firmer than cobwebs.
Outside the window, the sky goes dark. He eats his dinner with *Frankenstein* propped open and leant up against the wall behind the desk. When the lights go out, he stays up another few hours reading Mannix and falls asleep with the heavy, precious book in his lap.

He wakes in the position he lost consciousness in—curled up against the wall with his head listing to one side. The book slides off his leg as he stretches his arms high up overhead. A slip of paper inches out that he hadn’t found in his initial encounter with it. It looks like a bookmark at first glance, but as he didn’t place it there, he holds the book open at that page and examines it.

It’s blank and a pale gray color. There’s some scrawled writing near the bottom.

*Welcome back, Sarge.*

Matt comes to visit less than an hour later. Cuomo has to take the Soldier out to an area with phones to meet up with them. Karen and Matt share a phone between them, Karen holding it near the receiver and both of them craning to hear the earpiece that transmits the sound of his voice to them.

“You look like you just rolled out of bed,” Karen teases him, looking delighted and delightful with a healthy amount of pink tinting her cheeks.

He wishes he could hug her—hug both of them.

“Are you sleeping in the *beds*, Barnes?” Matt also teases him.

Yeah. He’d like to hug both of them.

“I was sitting up both times, but yes.”

Karen smiles at him, beaming and flushed and happy to see him. She says, “That still sounds more comfortable than Matt’s kitchen floor.”

“I don’t know, he keeps it pretty clean.”

Matt scoffs. “Thank you.”

“Oh, thanks for the books. I can read them all except the Italian. I think I’ll get it, though.”

“You *have* to speak Italian,” Karen intones. “You were practically James Bond for that mission in Sicily. They even taught you to dance. Language skills would have been a must.”

“Karen is invested in your language skills,” Matt says, smiling faintly.

“I like enthusiasm,” the Soldier muses back, bolder for the glass between them. “It’s a good look on you.”

Matt raises his eyebrows and halfway turns in Karen’s direction. She blushes and shakes her head at them both. The Soldier smirks with his gaze fixed on his shiny new hand.

“So where are we at with Ayers and the case? What’s going on?”

“Well, Ayers is campaigning to bump your trial to a closer date,” Matt tells him, slipping easily into a professional demeanor. “The media coverage on this case is through the roof. Everyone’s eyes are on you right now, and the general consensus is that you deserve justice before they do.”

“Is that *meant* to sound menacing as hell?” the Soldier asks.
“No,” Karen tells him with a little laugh. “I’m sure not everyone is on our side, but everyone is never going to think the same way about anything. What people can agree on is that it makes more sense to establish your lack of an affiliation with Hydra before bringing you in as a main witness against them.”

He hums and aimlessly flutters his metal fingers. “Ayers is Mahoney’s uncle?”

“Yes.” Matt nods. “Foggy knows him better than I do, as you can imagine.”

“Yeah.” He taps his fingers on the table and thinks about the voice he heard in his dream. His fingers curl into a tentative, curious fist. “Hey listen. I need to tell you both something.”

Karen and Matt remain silent, waiting for him to speak his piece. He looks up at them both and switches his focus to the glass in between them.

“I know you’ve been really optimistic about how this is all gonna end, and I know you believe in me, relentlessly. I’m ready now to give this all that I have. I wasn’t, but… I never thought we could win.” He dares to look up at them, locking eyes with Karen and gently tapping the glass with one metal finger to indicate that he’s looking at Matt, too. “And I used to believe that I’d be okay if this didn’t work—that it didn’t matter if I got cleared or not.

“It’s not true.” He drags a tense short line on the glass with one bent metal knuckle and listens for the screech of pressure and friction. “I don’t know what the hell I’m gonna do with myself when all this is over and done with. Honestly, I’m sort of intimidated by the sheer… wealth of possibilities.

“I wanna atone, I wanna help people, but I also want to read books and sleep in beds and pet cats. I want to dance with you—Murdock,” he adds for unneeded clarity. “And maybe you, too, Karen.”

Matt chuckles and Karen smiles.

“It’s just that I feel like I can have a future after this, even if I don’t know what it is yet. You guys gave me hope.” He raps his knuckle on the glass and sets that hand in his lap, flustered. “Вот и всё. Ah—I mean, that’s all.”

A displeased little scowl twists his mouth, prepared for one or both of them to smile and fawn over his feelings. They don’t, though.

Karen steers them back onto more pressing matters. She mentions Rebecca Barnes Proctor.

_Rebecca._

“What about her?” he asks.

“Her lawyer contacted us,” Matt informs him. “She wants to see you.”

“I…”

_I’m not someone she would recognize._

_That’s bullshit._

“Okay.”

Karen perks up. “Yeah? You don’t want to wait until after the trial?”

“Doesn’t seem fair making her wait longer than she already has.” He does the math in his head. “Are
we sure she can handle it? Don’t wanna give her a heart attack. Don’t give me that look. I’m serious.”

“She’s made it this far, Bucky,” Karen chastises him. “Maybe you can write letters, to start. We have at least a few months before any new developments happen with the case. It’ll be good for you to get a sense of each other before diving right in.”

“Sure. I could do that.”

“Anybody else you want to write?” Matt asks, reminding him of his earlier offer to compile a list of addresses.

“You guys and Wilson. Sam and Steve if they don’t mind. I guess that’s it.”

“I bet Claire would write you, if you asked.”

“Nah, she’s got a lot on her plate as it is and I barely know her anyway.”

Matt nods. “Something to think about. The offer stands in case you change your mind.”

The Soldier hums, an idea occurring to him. “I don’t know if you could swing it, but I’d like to get in touch with Natasha Romanov. We got some kinda history.”

Matt’s face does something weird. One edge of his mouth screws up slightly, slightly.

“Unless…” the Soldier murmurs, haltingly, “it would be problem, for you.”

“It’s not. I’m—we also have history, Natasha and I. Don’t worry about it. I’ll talk to Stark and Rogers,” Matt counters. “See if they know how to find her.”

Karen doesn’t look surprised by this development. If he hadn’t told them sooner, Matt probably read her and Nelson in at the office while going over incident reports and the like. He’s not sure it’s really his business, but he’s sort of stupidly flattered and embarrassed to be entrusted with it all the same.

“I think we mean different things when we say ‘history’.” The Soldier’s neck warms right up to his jawline. “Although I guess I wouldn’t really know, would I?”

Matt looks entertained, damn him, and asks, “What about books? Did you think of any?”

“Leaves of Grass,” he tells Karen, sitting up and looking at both of them. “Other than that, I think I’ll be good for a while with the ones I’ve got. Did any of them come from Stark?”

“The Fox and the Hound did. It was the only one Karen had trouble finding. Why?”

“Um.” He chews on his cheek, wondering if he’ll want to hear the answer to his question. “Is there a reason he’s…doing everything that he is? I mean, other than as a favor to Steve.”

Karen’s face complexion goes ashen. Matt presses his lips together.

The Soldier braces himself, muttering, “Oh, no.”

“Hydra,” Matt says, drawing out the word to emphasize its importance, “killed his parents.”

He starts to shake his head and then stops. His blood runs cold.

Tony Stark who smiled when they met, Tony Stark who looked to be constantly stopping himself
from laughing at the Soldier’s comments, Tony Stark who walked unafraid right into his cell with Pepper, Tony Stark who had built this new arm for him, Tony Stark who didn’t want to hurt him even when the Soldier asked him to.

“What were their names?” he whispers, voice quavering around the question.

“Howard and Maria,” Karen tells him.

He can’t remember, but he did it. It’s his fault and it always will be. He covers his mouth with his right hand and switches the phone to his left side.

“Bucky,” Karen says. She doesn’t follow it up with anything. There’s nothing she can say.

“Do you think…” He blinks the hot pinpricks of moisture from his eyes. “Would he write me?”

“We can bring it up with him, see how he feels about it,” Matt offers, sounding sympathetic with the Soldier’s intentions. “If he doesn’t, Bucky…”

“I know.” The Soldier closes his eyes. “I know.”

Cuomo takes him back to his cell, to his books. He takes up the Mannix and pulls the bookmark from its place. He scans it with his eyes over several times, flipping it to check the other side and also flipping through the rest of the book for any other hidden messages. The bookmark is all there is.

Welcome back, Sarge.

He sits at the writing desk, crosses out the single word he wrote there before, and hammers out a few testing sentences. Conserving paper and ink will be a necessity, so he tries not to be wasteful in how he uses them. At the bottom of that same page he writes:

Stark,
Thank you. I can’t repay a single thing you’ve done for me. Your kindness is incredible and I don’t understand it. Murdock told me what I did. I felt sick that I couldn’t remember. I’m sorry.

The words stare up at him accusingly. He sets the pen down and rests his forehead on his knuckles, cool metal pressing into his skin. It would be wise to wait to hear back from Matt before writing a full-blown letter to Stark, so he leaves what he has alone.

He slides the pad of paper off to the side and sorts the books into two stacks. Frankenstein, Macmep u Mapzapuma, and Decameron go into one pile. Canto General and The Fox and the Hound cover the makings of his letter to Stark.

Lunch is a quiet affair. He reads a few chapters from Shelley, does pushups until his arms are sore, and does twice as many when his soreness wears off after five minutes. The Decameron is comprehensible in terms of content, but he has less luck with word for word translations than he would like. He gets through four pages before he puts it away.

The metal arm doesn’t pick up on Braille any better than the previous one did, but he isn’t disappointed. Stark sounded plenty confident in his ability to make it a reality for the permanent replacement. The Soldier’s stunned to think that Stark would promise him so much, knowing what he’d done to his parents. It’s hard to believe any of them jumped at the chance to help him in the first
place, but Stark made even less sense on his own.

A few days later Karen sends him a list of names and addresses. Rebecca Barnes Proctor is on it. Stark isn’t. He’s halfway through Rebecca’s letter that same day when Cuomo comes to collect him for a visitation.

Stark watches him from the other side of the glass and picks up the phone when he does.

“Barnes. You look different. Not sure the beard’s a good idea, but to each his own.”

“I started to write you a letter,” he says, a bit pathetically.

“Did you? I never really liked letters. Thought we’d be better off clearing the air in person.”

The Soldier swallows. “Stark…”

“Don’t apologize. Really, don’t.” Stark sighs and presses the phone against his temple briefly before bringing it back to his ear. “I talked it over with Pepper and Bruce. Cap, too. I must’ve looked over the files on the kill order a hundred times. The thing is…blaming you for it would be like blaming a calculator for saying two plus two is four.”

Well that hurts. He’s not wrong, but it hurts.

“And see,” Stark huffs, a long-suffering look of resignation on his face to match the tenderness in his eyes. He shakes his head, rueful. “I like you. I didn’t want to—fact, I actively tried not to, but Pepper said you deserved a chance and of course she was right. But do you wanna know the funny thing about all this?”

The Soldier furrows his eyebrows, not trusting the question. Stark shrugs.

“My dad…” Stark gives a little laugh and licks his lips. “When Cap went down into the Atlantic, he looked for him. And he…he never gave up on him.” He pauses to swallow, eyes downcast. “And here I am, chatting with his and my mother’s assassin, refusing to give up on him. I guess we do all become our parents, don’t we?”

“I don’t know.”

Stark’s eyes lock onto his, shiny and red-rimmed brown meeting with stinging blue. He smiles, looking like he means it.

“Hydra’s gonna answer for what they did to us,” Stark tells him.

The Soldier flexes his metal hand and says, “Yeah, they are.”

And Stark beams at him with a mischievous gleam twinkling in his dark eyes. “That’s the spirit.”

Chapter End Notes

Твою мать – (fuck) your mother; can be an expression of surprise

The Call of Cthulhu by H.P. Lovecraft

1 Corinthians 15:51-57
*Hopefully the gratuitous quoting from books wasn't too annoying. I tried to get stuff that correlated with the story.*

**In case anyone wondered, those notes from Peter's copy of *Leaves of Grass* are my actual notes from my actual copy that I used for an actual college English course I took. I am a serious member of academia.*
Chapter Summary

Bucky writes letters, Benjamin Alder for the Prosecution drags everybody's ass in court, and Bucky Bear meets...Bucky Bear.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Not long after the Soldier sits down to talk with Stark over mutual regrets involving his time under Hydra’s command, Matt tells Karen about Daredevil. It’s none of the Soldier’s business and he’s not in a position to ask, but he gathers that it goes over better than Matt expected it would. They’re in a private room set apart for lawyer-client meetings when Matt lets it drop that he and Karen talked things over.

“Just as a precaution, in case it outs at trial.”

Nelson looks uncomfortable at the prospect, sat right there to Matt’s right and across from the Soldier. His expression hints at how the talk with Karen went—that, or how he predicts it will go down in court if the Soldier has to confess his lawyer’s secret identity under oath.

“In case the Prosecution asks me who Daredevil is,” the Soldier translates. “In case the Prosecution asks me how Claire knew where to find me or how I knew where to find the two of you.”

“In case Alder decides to find out how involved you are in that world.”

The Soldier raises his eyebrows at the name. Apparently they have a clearly defined opponent now, outside of Hydra. Nelson catches his expression.

“Benjamin Alder for the Prosecution,” he redirects for clarification. “He’d be a better lawyer if he wasn’t so bullheaded.”

Bemused, the Soldier says, “Adaptability’s usually a good thing.”

“Being able to see when you’re wrong is an acquired skill.”

“Like empathy,” Nelson tacks on.

“So if he does ask and I do have to answer truthfully, then…is there any certain way you want me to do that?”

“Just go through the events in the order that they occurred.”

Matt nods. “Don’t answer anything that Alder hasn’t asked. Stay as close to yes and no responses as possible.”

It’s doable. He’ll have to remind himself once he’s on the stand, surely. They’re bound to be in for trouble once the heat starts coming and the Soldier can’t do anything to escape. The irony that he’d prefer a fistfight than a legal stand-off does not escape him.
The chains on the Soldier’s cuffs rattle against the table with every twitch of his hands. He leafs through the case they’ve built in his defense. Nelson’s chicken scratch harder to make out than the neatly raised Braille of Matt’s typed bullet points. Every few pages, Nelson’s handwriting transitions over to Karen’s.

Matt’s made little dots with black marker beside the points he feels are most important for the Soldier to read. It’s a nice touch—thoughtful. He moves his hand over one of the marked passages and pulls a face.

“**You secured Fury’s testimony?**”

“It took some doing,” Matt tells him in a voice that suggests it really didn’t take doing at all. “Steve and Tony tracked him down. We want him to go on-record saying that S.H.I.E.L.D. as an acolyte to Hydra nearly signed off on mass genocide.”

“The idea there being that a shadowy government organization managed to get its hooks into operatives with respectable service records and use them like puppets. Don’t get us started on what they did to you.” Nelson raises his eyebrows. “See?”

“You’re a lawyer. You’ll spin it,” the Soldier mumbles, unconvinced.

He’s not banking on any parallels between him and unsullied members of S.H.I.E.L.D. having any weight at court. The similarities between what happened to him and what happened to Wilson are much more potent in his mind and unfortunately, more telling of what a jury would think. That is to say that they’d condemn him before raising him up as a survivor.

“You have the added benefit of being the longest held prisoner of war in the history of…ever,” Nelson tacks on to the end of their tentative silence. “The minute we get the jury to see that, you’re home free, pal.”

“Home.”

“It’s wherever you want it to be,” Matt cuts in, not allowing any time for the Soldier to start to go blurry around the edges. “New York, D.C., a monastery in Jordan, anywhere. The world’s your oyster.”

New York is the most palatable option. He doesn’t have to search too deeply inside himself for an explanation. Everyone he’s come to care about, everyone who’s grown on him, resides in Harlem and Manhattan. He has no idea what he’d do afterward. Fighting feels like the only honest use of his skills—protecting others or teaching them to protect themselves for when he can’t be there to swoop in and save the day. It’s a feasible plan, even if the idea of him saving the day is a ridiculous prospect at best.

The Soldier would rather not talk about all that. On his best days, he’s optimistic about what his life will be like in a year or two. In his gloomier moods, how he is today, he doesn’t like to think about it. He’d prefer to talk about his friends, about how things are going for them on the outside.

“Karen’s not gonna quit us now that you finally told her, is she?”

“Oh, no. Karen’s…she’s taken to it very well.”

Nelson rolls his eyes. “Karen supported Daredevil and Matt before Daredevil was even Daredevil. Now she looks at you like you’re a puppy with superpowers.”

“Matt’s not a puppy with superpowers?”
“You’re hilarious.” Matt actually says it unironically, causing Nelson to laugh.

“Gallows humor. I’ve got it in spades.”

They knuckle down and go through the more complicated points with their remaining half hour, but it doesn’t feel like enough time. It never does. The obnoxious quiet of solitary nags at him the most just after a visit with his lawyers. Anymore, they’re the only ones who even visit. Matt’s explained time and again that the prison beefed up their security measures where the Soldier’s concerned.

The situation promises to get more dire before it gets any better. He isn’t comforted by the thought.

Outside of meetings with Matt, Foggy, and Karen, his other human contact comes from the tuneup appointments with Stark and Banner or from routine medical checkups with Doc Ramirez. He actually likes getting together with Stark and Banner. None of their sessions take him to a place of catatonia how the first one had, and they joke with him anytime he’s in a sour mood.

Pepper comes along for most of their appointments when she’s not out championing the media from behind the scenes or running Stark Enterprises, which she does, apparently. It doesn’t surprise him to hear Tony tell of it, nor does Banner’s soft-spoken agreement on the matter.

She tells him one afternoon that she finally met Karen and that they liked each other instantly. The Soldier thinks she says it to cheer him up since he accidentally caught sight of his reflection in a wash basin and couldn’t stop staring at the emptiness in his eyes. He tries to be as pleasant as he can for these meetings but has learned that his face doesn’t agree with him nine times out of ten.

Stealing time with the lot of them helps him cope with his long, dreary months of silence. Maybe he ought to be grateful for the quiet since no one’s trying to fight or kill or abduct him for once. Those assurances should mean that he can rest, except he doesn’t. He stays up late hours into the early morning thinking about Pierce and Hydra and trying to remember the further memories that churn well below those easily retrieved ones.

Their meetings recently have been about sizing and fitting the permanent prosthetic. They had all been ready to deal with more horrific flashbacks, but they’ve mostly just been talking engineering and mechanics around him while the Soldier tinkers on Stark’s phone. He’s grateful that they come in as often as they said they would, Pepper and the Science Husbands.

She asks him what he’s been reading this week and he tells her he’s been slacking on the hardcore literature since Rebecca’s letters started coming in. He reads and rereads them a dozen times before he can ever think of anything to say.

Rebecca amazes him every time with the ever-changing tides of topics she has to offer him. Someone must have spoken to her about his fragile—he can say it—condition because she’s just too delicate with him not to have been read in. A few times he suspects Karen or Steve of warning her not to go in too heavy-handed with the reminiscing or the nostalgia. The possibility that Steve might have used their failed attempts at correspondence to better prepare Rebecca for his ruined mind aches right in the Soldier’s chest.

“Letters from your sister; that’s pretty neat, Barnes,” Stark tells him, soldering an exposed wire of the temporary arm. “Bet there’s more for you there than in Thoreau anyway.”

“Civil Disobedience, Tony?” Banner asks wryly from the other side of the Soldier’s leaning chair.

Stark winks, says, “Two sturdy oaks I mean.”

Banner makes a face and shakes his head like Stark just delivered a terrible punchline. He gets
notably flustered when the Soldier asks what the joke was.

“No joke,” Stark chirps, clicking the panel closed and fiddling with a lower section. “Just poetry.”

“Thoreau, you said.”

The Soldier files it away for later. He’s had an illuminating journey with the poetry books stacking up in his cell. Neruda soothes him, Whitman surprises him, and Akhmatova reassures him. They’re all quite good for different reasons. The simplest explanation he can give is that tackling fifty poems registers as far less daunting a task than reading fifty chapters.

“It’s a poem called ‘Friendship’,” Banner tells him, finding his voice.

“Ah, the Cliffs Notes version. How delightful.”

“In the interest of time, I thought it best to be specific.”

Their appointments go like that most of the time. They talk to and around him, about him or about other things. When Pepper’s there, they’re a little more focused.

If it’s just the two of them, they branch off into complicated, comically impassioned discussions about ‘anoxic-aerobic membrane bioreactors’ in contaminated water, among other things. The Soldier understands bits and pieces, mostly the jargon they throw around if not the content itself.

Other times, they’re serious and beaten down from the long, treacherous fight that can’t be resolved by punching various things and people. Banner’s less ragged than the others, typically. His method of combatting the current is intellectual more than it is physical, probably due in part to the very physical way he has of losing control. It’s an interesting mental image that Banner, Pepper, and Stark make in the Soldier’s mind. They’re a team of three, balanced according to each one’s skills and temperament.

The Soldier likes to picture Banner and Weasel in a room typing away at Pepper’s command while the rest of the world looks to Rogers, Stark, and Murdock, in that order, for answers. In that particular fantasy, he also likes to imagine Мурка sprawled out by Weasel’s feet trying to catch a loose thread on his jeans with her claws.

When he has company, things aren’t so bad. They’re even cheerful, if he doesn’t let his thoughts turn inward. Poison lies that way. Agony, guilt, and regret lie that way. He’s only busy when he’s with them, though.

When he’s alone, he works out, he reads, he writes letters to his sister, he reflects. He feels like shit.

Rogers had asked if they could write, but it hadn’t been easy. The Soldier could read Rogers’ emotions in his choice of words, in how hard he pressed the pen to paper. Separated by so much concrete and iron, Steve still has his heart in his eyes, in his mouth, and in his hands for Bucky.

For Bucky, the Soldier would think bitterly every time he read the name in Steve’s graceful, steady hand.

He had to tell Steve to stop after his third letter because too much of that longing seeped into his skin from the page. Steve never did it on purpose; he never means to do it on purpose. He’s just never ready for the effect the Soldier has on him, and it’s starting to become a mutual occurrence.

Suffice to say they haven’t corresponded for the better part of five months now. A few tragic letters had been enough to spoil it for them—leading him to conclude that Steve is likely the one who
coached Rebecca on how to talk to him in their letters since they go over a lot better.

Claire sends him a letter, oddly enough. It’s short and sweet and comes out of nowhere. The Soldier reads it several times just to make sure he isn’t hallucinating, but it’s difficult to misinterpret the opening line.

‘2-1-2
Your lawyers said you were looking for someone to write to. It’s been a long time without any real word of how you’re doing and I guess I’m curious. Accurate information is hard to come by out here. Everyone’s got an agenda and everyone’s truth is different. You probably wouldn’t tell me if you weren’t okay, but maybe you could tell me other things. That’s only if you want to.

‘Claire.’

He smiles at her scratchy writing for a good minute and a half, steadily blinking himself out of that warm feeling and into something more realistic. Matt clearly did what the Soldier asked him not to do and told her to write him so that he’d be less alone so many months down the line. Rebecca’s his most consistent partner in correspondence, but there aren’t many other contenders lining up for a shot at that title. Rogers might have had her beat if the Soldier hadn’t stopped him two months into his imprisonment.

The Soldier takes out a clean sheet of paper, wincing at the short and terse message he has on the tip of his tongue and writes:

‘Claire,
I promise I told Murdock not to bother you with the whole correspondence deal. You’re busy and you’re exceptional at what you do. Any free time you get in between shifts at the hospital shouldn’t be wasted on me. Thank you for reaching out, but it’s not necessary. I’m a burden on too many people as it stands.

‘Don’t worry about me. I’m fine. I’ve got books for days.’

The Soldier sends the letter out and reads Rebecca’s when it comes in two days later. She calls him Bucky and tells him she’ll send pictures of her family in a separate envelope. It arrives near the end of the week, packed full of family photos, most of them in color but a scant few in black and white. There’s one photocopied image of a much younger James Buchanan Barnes with a wispy, grinning girl draped around his neck from behind.

He compares her to the more recent photos of Rebecca Barnes Proctor. The set of the eyes, mischievous even in old age, is a perfect match. She’s lovely in both pictures: bold and wiry in the first, calm and confident in the second.

As for the boy smiling out at him, the Soldier can’t do much else but stare. He’d wondered, seemingly a lifetime ago, what he had been like as a kid. It hadn’t occurred to him that he’d ever hold evidence in his hand of a happy childhood. Rebecca doesn’t tell him they were happy, but she doesn’t tell him they struggled either. She keeps worlds of possibilities open in her letters as if it’s painfully obvious to her that shattering the mystery will stifle some of the wonder too soon.
Rebecca has a writer’s voice about her. Not like the Soldier’s voice when he puts a pen to paper. He sounds gruff and self-deprecating and like he’s two seconds away from ripping the page off its pad to start over.

She writes things like: ‘My daughter has our dad’s face more than you ever did. She’s disconcerted to hear me say so because she thinks it means she looks masculine, but dad always was quite a beautiful man. You were beautiful, too, but beautiful in the way mom was beautiful. I remember she always pinned her hair up just right with two pins but made it look like just the one. Drove dad crazy. But that was when we were very young, before she died. Sometimes I think I invented the memory just to feel closer to her, like we had more time than we did.’

There’s a life left unspoken in the sprawling, mournful prose she writes to him. He can never absorb all of her meaning in a first, second, or tenth read. Rebecca’s letters to him are sacred for this reason.

More and more, snippets of what she tells him sink into his heart. It’s not remembering in any controlled sense, but it’s something equally jarring and just as powerful. Sometimes he falls dreaming into a fitful sleep and wakes thinking, It was two pins. Two brown bobby pins. And her hair’d hang down to brush the back of her neck. It’d always look unintentional, like an accident.

They hadn’t had any time at all in the grand scheme of things. He dreams about their mother’s obituary, their father taking it out of the Soldier’s tiny hands and tearing it to shreds. It isn’t the first time. He had that dream without knowing what it meant in Murdock’s apartment on his kitchen floor, only this time he wakes whimpering and frightened like a child. The taste of grief sticks hard and bitter on his tongue and in the pit of his stomach.

It takes him much longer, but he dreams of their father, too. He dreams of how tall he was and of the shape of his jaw and of the sound of his voice. Rebecca couldn’t stay with him after their father died. The Soldier doesn’t dream about their separation so much as he is assaulted by a memory of it whilst flipping idly through Decameron.

She had been crying and Bucky…he wasn’t a soldier then. He was only a child, probably at an age where he would think to call himself a man, and staunchly not crying, lest he upset her. His fists held, trembling, behind his back, the same stance their father assumed when they buried their mother.

All of him shook, but he kept his face serene. Surely it would sting Rebecca less if he could look unafraid for both of them. His determination was so pure, so singular: This is what dad did at mom’s funeral.

But Rebecca cried and reached for him, and when the adults put her in the car, Bucky couldn’t pretend at stoicism any longer. His face crumpled and his heart sucked at the interior walls of his chest like a blackhole aiming to destroy him, and he wept and they took her and they were both so small.

Rebecca hadn’t told him about their aunt taking her away while Bucky stayed to attend boarding school. She hadn’t told him how she screamed when they forced her in the backseat of their uncle’s car.

That isolated incident of dread and desperation splinters into a thousand other stitches of time. He sees how he was, of a cheerful and likable disposition in his adolescent years because that’s how he had to be to get by. He sees the boy he met at school, scruffy but trying to fight him over a misunderstanding quickly dissolved with words.

He’d often thought Steve was the type of thin that might snap in a strong breeze, but that breeze came time and again. Steve survived through it every time. He survived.
Of course he did, but it isn’t a missing chapter any longer. The Soldier can see it. He can see the ramshackle flats they lived in, how they’d push the one bed as far away from the window as they could to keep the chill at bay. Steve’d catch his death if they didn’t and he’d complain about putting Bucky out if they couldn’t share the bed. That’s how it was, plain and simple; sometimes anything but plain and miles beyond simplicity.

Stucky is real after all. No fucking wonder Steve looked like he was suffocating when Bucky said it.

Friendship can explain a hell of a lot that romance can’t, but Bucky himself had been the one to quip about the Captain America getup, hadn’t he? He had. Fucking—

‘But you’re keeping the outfit, right?’

Steve’d worn it to their encounter on the Insight Helicarrier. He was counting on Bucky to remember. Hoping it still ran as deep in him as it once did.

It stings in his heart, the loss and the missed opportunities. He fell from the train and Steve went and crashed a plane into the ocean like there was no Steve if there was no Bucky. The Soldier’d resurfaced and made his way back to Steve like the reverse statement held just as true. If one came back, the other had no choice but to be right there with him.

Maybe crashing the plane had been the only way. Maybe they wouldn’t have both come back from it if Bucky had been there with him, early-stage genetic modifications notwithstanding. Maybe he could’ve stopped Steve from doing it and they could’ve found another way. They could have died together.

If Steve and Rebecca were all he remembered, he could carry on with his day like usual, try to get some reading in, or do some sit-ups. They’re not all he remembers.

He remembers his bone-deep fear when Steve came down with scarlet fucking fever; he remembers the first time he shot someone in Sicily during the war; how much it hurt when Zola shot him up with whatever the hell it was in that first, second, sixth syringe; the look on Steve’s face when the rail Bucky’d been holding onto started to give out just before he fell.

Everything after that is hazier, sharper with pain and fear and fury—how he screamed when they amputated what remained of his stump; the first dozen times Hydra’s brainwashing couldn’t muffle him completely; the recurring, unpredictable times he started to come back only for them to subdue him and put him on ice.

God, the ice. Always with the ice.

In the beginning, he did everything he could to fight it. To try and resist this most human thing that they ever put him through, simply expecting him to give into the cold. His fight got listless as the decades—decades—dragged on. He started to regard the chamber with resignation and dull confusion.

By then, he’d learned not to call out for help. They’d scrubbed Steve’s name off his tongue and burned the hope out of him, reducing him to little more than a weapon.

There’d been Black Widow. Natasha.

Capable and powerful Natasha. His pupil. A shining star in winter and the welcome reprieve of dreamless sleep after torment. He hurt her, too. Loved her—needed to love her—and forgot her.

And then shot her in the street.
It all fills in. Initially, he’s too stunned to fall into a panic, but his shock fades and he discovers he’s been crying unawares for a good long while.

Bucky spends the day curled up on his side in bed, holding his head and clenching his artificial hand into a fist to ground himself. He listens for the scrape of metal on metal and tries to imagine if it’s what Matt heard on the docks the night they met. This arm that Stark, Banner, and Pepper designed for him is much more lightweight than his previous prosthetic. It doesn’t weigh him down like he wishes it would with his head running away from him a mile a minute.

The tears flow without any end in sight. His cheeks go tacky and cold where the older tracks have dried, but hot streams of them keep coming, ruining the fragile work of time and gravity.

He could scream, but it would just draw attention that he doesn’t need. As it is, he already wakes the nightshift guard with his semi-frequent wailing in the middle of the night. Crying is private, at least. Cuomo might walk by at any minute, peek in through the window, and think him sleeping, tucked tightly into a ball facing the wall.

A sharp, tearing pain makes its home in the back of his throat. It doesn’t feel like anything could ever make it go away.

The Soldier opens his metal fingers and latches them around his elbow. He gives an experimental twist, tightening his grip until his arm fits snugly in his grip, and twists further, slower, harder. The stretch prickles at the base of his neck, taking longer to inch down his arm proper, and finally stings enough at the joint for the roar of blood in his ears to dull the clamoring of his thoughts. His forearm turns nearly to the point of snapping bone beneath skin.

A small wince and a malformed word flutter over his mouth. His cheeks itch around the wider grimace, skin gone sticky with salt. No one comes to disturb him while he hunts down his composure.

Upending the cot in indefinable, helpless rage does get him a warning on the intercom, though. Cuomo tells him to settle down and advises him against making a mess bigger than he’s wiling to clean up. It’s far too late for that sentiment to even mean anything to Bucky anymore, so he flips the desk, too. His books clatter on the floor in a heap. Rebecca’s family photos—all copies of the original articles—flutter in the air like confetti.

He paces the confines of his cell and pulls hard at his hair. A strand of it catches in his metal fingers and he claws at his shoulder a good ten minutes trying to pull the prosthetic off of him. Cuomo’s standing guard outside his cell waving off the extra bodies coming to break down his door and make Bucky stop.

Stark’s arm doesn’t come off. The skin accumulated under Bucky’s nails and the blood staining his shirt awakens a flash of dread in him. He leans back on the wall and slides down to the floor, knees falling to either side and hands splayed on his lap. One of them shakes, coated in a liberal sheen of blood. The other remains inhumanly still. Cuomo quietly directs the other guards away from his cell.

Nobody talks to him for the rest of the night. His arm stopped bleeding hours ago, but he hasn’t gotten up to wash the blood off him.

Old Warden Gambol fought hard to keep Bucky in solitary back when the decision had still been up in the air as to whether he’d stay at this prison or go to a different one. Everyone seemed to think the safest course of action would be to limit Bucky’s exposure to other people outside of controlled environments. Safer for them, was the implication.
After dawn but before breakfast, Cuomo comes back to his cell.

“I called your lawyers to let ‘em know something happened, Barnes. Figured that was the thing to do. If you don’t want to talk to them, I guess that’s your choice.”

Bucky hasn’t moved from his spot by the toppled desk. He’s hardly moved except to hurt himself. His arm aches where for the past four hours straight, he’s bent it to just shy of breaking. He relaxes his metal hand and hisses softly through his teeth at the whip-like relief that lashes out from his elbow.

“I’m fine, Pete.”

“Yeah, ‘cos you always mean that when you say it.”

“When’ll they be here?”

“Noon, if you give the word. I’ve got Nelson on the line right now. What’ll it be?”

“Give ’em the go-ahead. I’ll…clean this shit up.”

“Good man. Want your breakfast now or after?”

“Better wait till after.”

“Got it. I’ll be back in an hour.”

The blood comes away with some scrubbing in the sink. He takes his shirt off once he’s washed the worst of it away and balls up the white fabric to wet it beneath the faucet. Flecks of dried blood come away on his shirt, revealing claw-shaped scabs and ugly bruises on his shoulder and collar bone.

Bucky rings the shirt out in the sink, pulls a different one on over his head, and turns to face the rest of what he did. He gathers the photographs into a pile, stacks his books, and straightens out the sheets strewn across the floor before turning the cot upright. The desk wobbles once it’s stood against the wall, but he fixes it. Folded up scraps of salvaged envelopes levered beneath the off-kilter leg do the trick.

All his things go back to their allotted places, and the structure of his routine, of knowing where all his possessions go, stays him. Several pages of The Fox and the Hound were bent in the fall, but everything else is relatively okay.

Something Mahoney said once about objects being replaceable pings around in his head. He doesn’t chase after it. His prosthetic is proof enough of the sentiment.

Cuomo brings his breakfast half an hour later. Bucky eats in silence, hating himself.

Nelson and Murdock arrive at noon like Cuomo said they would. They convene at the phones and Bucky doesn’t wait for pleasantries. He just puts it all out there, brutally clumsy and overwhelmed.

“I remember everything.”

Gaping slightly, Nelson asks him, “Everything as in what Hydra did to you or everything as in the 1940s?”

“Both. Everything.”

“That’s…this is good news. Right, Matt? We can work with this.”
Murdock considers it, a solemn set to his eyebrows that furrow behind his glasses. “Are you all right, Barnes?”

_I want to die_, he doesn’t say because he can’t talk like that here. They’d have to tell Cuomo and Cuomo would have to put him on suicide watch.

But he can’t think of anything else to say that’s true, so he lets his gaze shift to the middle distance and lets that be his answer. It’d be unfair to Murdock, probably, if the change in his breathing weren’t an obvious clue as to his distress.

“What can we do?” Nelson sits up in sharp contrast with how still Murdock is. “Barnes, talk to us.”

He thinks about the crookedly dog-eared pages to his favorite book, how they got there for nothing more than the pain of his miserable past. The bruises peppering his arm from how hard he’d gripped it in his metal hand don’t suggest a different truth, nor do the scratches on his skin. He did it to himself, sullied his blood supply with his own horrible anger. Stark shouldn’t have given him the replacement prosthetic. Behind bars, and he’s already hurt someone, even if it is just himself.

“Ничего. You can’t do anything.”

The flat, merciless tone of his voice grates in his ears. Murdock flinches and Nelson’s throat bobs with an automatic gulp. Bucky looks away and then closes his eyes, like it’s not enough to just do one or the other. He forces his voice to soften, though it makes his throat tighten up to do it.

“I don’t mean that.”

“You need time to make sense of things,” Murdock says slowly, waiting at every word for Bucky to interrupt him. “To come to terms with it.”

He grits out one word: “Yes.”

There’s another word that clamors to the surface, pinching at his skin and howling to break out of him. He takes a short breath in and falters, but that second word, that name, burns as brightly. It burns _in_ him.

“I w—” His voice dies out and he clears his throat to try again, cheeks and ears and hand glowing a deep pink. His eyes flutter closed and he covers his face with his flesh hand as if it’ll help him hide his shame. “I want to see Steve.”

It’s selfish. If Steve Rogers knew what was good for him, he’d stay the hell away. He’d be angry. He’d be angry like Bucky is angry.

Murdock says Bucky’s name, whispers it through the phone. Bucky keeps his hand over his eyes, scrunching them closed behind his fingers like he stands any chance at stopping the tears. He doesn’t want to look at his lawyers. He doesn’t want to look at or talk to anyone but Steve, or his sister.

Rebecca lives out in Seattle now and she’s wheelchair-bound, so asking her to come and look him in the eye and hold his hand while his world shatters into a million pieces wouldn’t be practical. Steve, on the other hand. Steve is nearby—nearer, in any case, by a factor of ten. He hasn’t been around in the last six months, what with everyone being really busy on the PR front and building a case for Bucky’s sorry ass.

His doctors and his lawyers visit him consistently on a weekly basis. Banner appears at Stark’s side less and less, so sometimes it’s just the two of them or the two of them and Pepper, Dr. Ramirez, or both.
Everyone else, with the exception of state officials, has been barred from directly accessing him at the prison. Even Karen’s had a tough time of getting through security on her own these last few months. People in high places worry that he’ll escape if given the tiniest amount of assistance from outside sources, which is at least a little bit defensible but still wildly unfair. Karen’s part of his legal team, for Christ’s sake. She’s not likely to bust him out.

Steve, though. Bucky knows before Murdock says anything that asking Steve to visit him is a tall order. He’s way up there on everyone’s list of Most Likely to Spring the Winter Soldier. It’s no secret.

“We’ll speak with the warden and plead our case,” Murdock tells him, voice soft as a murmur. “If nothing else, I think Gambol can be persuaded to let Rogers as far as these phones.”

“Failing that, we can at least manage a phone call. You’ve been a model prisoner this whole time.”

“Well,” Bucky mumbles. “I may have trashed my cell earlier. I cleaned it up, but still.”

He inches his sleeve up over his shoulder to reveal his handiwork, figuring Cuomo likely mentioned it on the phone even if Nelson and Murdock are keeping quiet about it now. It’s easier to brandish it than it is to form words past the lump in his throat.

“Solitary confinement’s been known to have harmful psychological effects on prisoners,” Nelson says brightening as the defense comes to him. “Dr. Ramirez is bound to have written a slew of papers on the subject by now. If she hasn’t, now she has a reason to.”

“Really stretchin’ everyone thin on this mess.” He pats his sleeve back down.

“If it were your mess, you’d have cause to apologize for it, but it’s not, so don’t.” Murdock shakes his head before Bucky can protest. “We’re in this fight with you because freeing you is our only defense against the problem.”

“That, and hunting down Hydra bit by bit and setting them on fire. But you know, these things in their time.”

Bucky looks at Nelson, tears smeared all over his cheeks and rapidly cooling on his heated skin. Nelson’s expression doesn’t waver. His small smile stays cheerful. It must be a diversion tactic to allow Bucky to calm down without drawing attention to the unavoidable state he’s in. Trust Nelson to be the steady one now while Murdock looks visibly shaken. It’s only right. They complement and support each other in all ways.

“Plus, not all of us can strap on a pair of wings and raise hell that way. Some of us have more pragmatic superpowers at our disposal.”

“Yeah, that’s what Wilson said.”

“Oh, did he?” Nelson perks up. “Have you heard from him in a while? Spiderman’s been in the news lately, but Deadpool hasn’t. We thought he might have skipped town or something.”

If he did, Bucky couldn’t confirm or deny it. He wants to say that Wilson would’ve sent him a card if he was jumping ship, but maybe that’s not something he can definitively say about anyone. It’s strange that he left Spiderman behind if he did go. There’ve been no letters or phone calls for months, but Bucky merely chalked it up to the prison’s boosted security measures.

The intense scrutiny that’s pointed at Bucky nonstop since the Avengers properly got involved with his case couldn’t have helped either. Wilson’s already the opposite of a media darling. It just didn’t
strike Bucky as odd that he hadn’t heard from Wilson. He didn’t realize no one else had heard from him either.

He scrubs his knuckles under his eyes and sniffs a bit delicately. Matt still looks inexplicably poised for a fight. He flicks his sightline fully at him and taps the glass to let him know that he’s looking.

“What’ll the Red Team do without their mouthy mercenary?”

“Theyir jobs,” Murdock says, loosening a little around the shoulders. “And whatever it is a rogue mercenary gone AWOL does in his spare time, I can hardly guess.”

‘Of course it was always the plan to go AWOL,’ Wilson had squawked that night on the bridge.

He tries to fathom what on earth it could mean. From Murdock’s renewed ease, Bucky surmises that Wilson’s not out of the game yet. They don’t know where he is, clearly, and Wilson is a wildcard if Bucky ever saw one, but he’s on their side. It’s one of the firmer beliefs he can still cling to after everything else came rushing back in.

Nelson and Murdock leave him then with a promise to schedule a meeting later in the month so they can talk the case in private. Other than that, there’s no real way to know how it goes over with Rogers on Nelson and Murdock’s end. Bucky does the only thing he can do from his cage and writes a letter. He and Rebecca are in between responses, so he starts one to Steve instead. It’s the first time he’s reached out to him since their letters stopped earlier on.

Bucky writes, ‘Your mom’s name was Sarah. You used to wear newspapers in your shoes.’

A letter comes in from Claire while he’s still waiting for Rebecca’s response. He does two hundred pushups before his head clears enough for him to read it. It takes him two tries to process the whole of the five lines Claire wrote to him.

‘Bucky Barnes,
You aren’t a burden to any of us. You’re doing the best you can with what you have. I know the court date is getting closer, and that probably scares the hell out of you. It scares me and I’m just watching from the sidelines, so don’t even bother trying to tell me not to worry.

‘Claire.’

Bucky’s dumbfounded. He’s also warm, again, because apparently that’s the surefire effect she has on him no matter what. He’d already done his part reassuring her that she didn’t have to write if she didn’t want to, so he writes back straight away, resorting to overly polite, formal prose that is the written equivalent of a dog walking in socks. He tries.

It doesn’t rest well with him, generally, to waste the paper on his notepad, so he’s never actually torn out a piece and crumpled it up. Awkward, stilted words will have to do.

Writing to Claire takes his mind off the other million things begging for his attention. Writing to her is a definitive gesture that has consequences. Everything else troubling him can’t be solved by worrying and worrying and worrying over it. He’s in a box as it is. The futility of remembering without having the means to do anything to fix it gets under his skin.

Bucky feels like he waits forever for Steve to write him back. Rebecca’s letter comes in before
Steve’s does and there’s a tremor in his hand when he writes. He takes three pages to tell her that it’s all come back to him, that her letters jogged his memory, and that it’s amazing to remember because he can’t tell her that it’s awful.

The clarity of the past is blinding and complete and relentless. He looks at the angle of the shadows from the window and recalls a mountain pass different from where he’d fallen, the sniper rifle he’d trained briefly on Steve and then just behind him to take out an assailant, the glare from the sun not yet touching the horizon. Steve had signaled to him and Bucky had signaled back: brothers in arms, best friends, soldiers together.

Everything is like that. Small things remind him of an older world that isn’t his anymore.

He rereads Steve’s letters, tucked away in the velcro pouch Wilson sent him way back, a few weeks after his catatonic episode. There are three altogether. Three is all he could stomach.

They’re simple and elegant in that pristine, deliberate way that Steve has of being simple and elegant about most things. He hadn’t even breached sensitive subjects in his letters to Bucky. He’d given a few vague details about the #FreeBucky Campaign, some small anecdotes about what the Lawyers were doing with their few hours off the clock, and one mention of the war. The Second World War, that is.

Bucky’d lost it; hadn’t been doing a great job of keeping it together in the first place, but it wasn’t like he wanted Steve to know. He thought it would be good training for reconnecting with Rebecca whenever it got around to happening. Getting back in touch with Steve sounded like a good idea, and it was when his self-loathing didn’t give way to sickness and frailty.

The half-memories he got from talking with Steve weren’t quite deep enough to call his own. They were too much and he couldn’t subject either of them to it for longer than he had; didn’t think it would be fair to subject Rebecca to it either. Remarkably, it’s been different with her. He can’t say for sure why or how, but it might just be that he had no starting point with her. There was no prototype in his mind of what she would look like wounded because he let her down.

Bucky didn’t know what she looked like with blood on her face either. He couldn’t forget how Steve looked or how he felt, solid and vulnerable beneath him, Bucky’s fist raining down punishment he never deserved.

Steve would be right to never speak to Bucky or look at him ever again. This belief he has is one that won’t ever die out of his perspective, but a response comes anyway. The letter Steve got only had the two lines on it, so Bucky’s not all that surprised that he gets one that’s equally short in return. It’s not frantic or distraught or any of the things he feared he’d get.

Nelson or Murdock must have called him already to read him in on the leap Bucky made. It could be progress, or he could be backsliding. It all carries the same air of doom and irreversibility to him.

‘Buck,
‘Everything? You remember everything?
‘Just help me understand what that means for us.’

‘Stevie,
‘Remember how your face fell and your heart dropped when the mask came off in the street? That’s
He writes to Rebecca, he writes to Claire, to Karen, and to Steve. Ramirez pops in every now and again when Stark, Banner, and Pepper are running specs on his arm just to make sure the swelling at the joint stays down. He’s never still bruised when they come to see him, not after the first time he’d come to see them after wrenching a purple handprint into his flesh.

Stark talks him through the steps of removing the arm from the socket at that visit. He goes over the process as neatly and professionally as a patient could like, and he doesn’t mention the horrible wine-colored impressions left in the meat of his arm or staining his ribs.

No one says anything about how dark the bruises are. Dr. Banner’s there for that appointment, so he takes the opportunity to teach Bucky breathing exercises while Stark tweaks with a control panel on the bionic arm’s bicep.

“When it gets to that point and you can hear your heart in your ears, you can time your breathing to it. Have you ever tried that?”

“No.”

“Can you hear your heart now?”

Bucky listens first with his ears and then with his skin and his fingertips. The little pulse there helps him find the one in his wrist, his neck, his temple. He counts along with them until he can settle into the headier drumbeat of his heart.

“Breathe in from your stomach and then your chest,” Banner says, watching Bucky closely enough that he sees his opening to speak. “Breathe in for five heartbeats.”

He counts. Stark zaps something in the metal arm that he doesn’t see or feel.

“Now hold for seven.” Banner nods his head, counting along with what he might imagine to be Bucky’s heartbeat. “Let it out for nine.”

“Feel more zen there, Barnes?”

“I’ll try it out and get back to you,” he mumbles in Banner’s direction, embarrassed but grateful anyway for the help. “Got any more tricks up your sleeve?”

The breathing trick is nice and all, but it doesn’t have the immediate effect that hurting himself does. More often than not, he resists just for the sake of keeping it from becoming a habit. It’s not a conversation he wants to have with anyone, but Banner eventually stops showing up to their appointments altogether and Stark’s not likely to bring it up on his own.

His skin itches with how badly he wants to see Steve, but niggling doubt in the back of his mind tells him it will go wrong somehow. Steve will find him wanting. He’ll think Bucky isn’t good enough as he is, broken and healing too slowly to be of any use to anyone, not even Bucky anymore.

These doubts clearly come from his brain and not his heart, though, because Steve would never, could never be so cruel. Even if he should be, even if the Soldier deserves nothing more than his hatred, Steve doesn’t see the Soldier when he looks at him. He never has, barring the times he’d been
masked, disguised, and held under, controlled. It makes it harder, somehow, that Steve has always only ever been able to see him as a human being caught in a trap.

Karen comes to see him on a Friday right at lunchtime. It’s her first time coming to see him alone, and he’s actually impressed she managed it.

She tells him she was stuck in security for two hours, yet the look on her face is incongruously happy. They sit at the phones and she smiles with her whole face. It’s difficult to believe that he’s done horrible, irredeemable things in his life for how she acts in his company, relaxed and relieved just to have eyes on him. No one could radiate such profound positivity at simply seeing him if they thought he was inherently bad.

Unless.

“We’re not in a cult, are we?”

“What?” She laughs at him, which isn’t reassuring. “Bucky, no. What are you talking about?”

“I just…never mind. You look happy. Something change out there?”

“Gambol agreed to a visitation. He agreed that we need to fine-tune your testimony now that your story’s likely to have expanded beyond what we’ve compiled already.”

“Did he say if…?”

She takes mercy on him and doesn’t make him say it. “He’s going to let Steve be here for it, for however many sessions it takes.”

Bucky sighs and deflates a bit in his seat, feeling silly but unashamed of it because it’s only Karen and she saw him like this in the church when they lit the candles. She’d said his name then and she says his name now.

“How does it feel?”

“Reckless, impossible…like I need it.”

Him, he doesn’t amend. Neither does she, though he can see that she knows.

“Я такой идиот,” he mumbles of himself. “I feel stupid.”

“Why?”

“Because I…he was there right in front of me this whole time, and I didn’t even snap.”

“You couldn’t. You needed time to get to where he was. That’s okay; it’s natural to take space when you need it. Steve knows that, too.”

That she thinks that’s the problem he’s having shuts him right up. He can’t speak, can’t say what’s really destroying him and tearing him up inside. Karen’s expression flickers and she watches him, alerting to whatever emotion it is that’s showing on his face. She doesn’t ask with words either, but her eyes implore him for an answer, if he can give it. There’d be no push for more if he couldn’t, and maybe that’s why he can.

“I hurt him so bad, Karen. I hurt him and I couldn’t stop.”

Bless her that she doesn’t tell him he’s wrong. Bless her that she doesn’t tell him he’s right.
“We’re here today because you did stop, Bucky. Hurting him isn’t all you’ve done. You’ve saved his life, too. Do you even know how many times?”

It’s in the low hundreds. A good chunk of them happened before the war swept them away, before the serum. He hasn’t kept count.

The serious set to her mouth softens and she looks away briefly. He thinks to apologize for needing so much consoling from her all the time, but she changes the subject. Karen possesses this subtle alacrity in inconsequential social interactions and in complicated ones, too. Between the two of them, he swears she makes more sense as James Bond than he does.

“All you’ve done.”

“When you did stop?”

“Have you thought about what you’re going to say to him?”

When he’s run through the various scenarios in his mind, he hasn’t conceived of words. Mostly there are actions, demanding and impractical and conflicting heavily with what he should actually expect Steve to take from him.

“I don’t know what I can say. What do you say to someone—” Your best friend. “After the apologies?”

“The truth.” She shrugs, tilting her head to one side. “Just tell him the truth.”

Before he can reconsider, he asks, “That work with you and Matt?”

“It did.” A wrinkle knits between her eyebrows. She gentles her voice. “Well, it did, but our situation’s not really comparable to yours.”

Bucky replays what Nelson said about Karen’s support of Daredevil, her support of Matt. His heart sinks.

“Matt let me forgive him.”

“What?”

“When Matt apologized, I forgave him. He forgave himself, too. And Matt’s Catholic, Bucky.”

He stares at her. The general sunny air about her might not be contagious, per se, but it’s hard to stay unmoved. Karen’s stubborn like that. He can see that Foggy and Matt would love that about her, would be every bit as motivated to get results as Bucky is just by looking at her. There are dark facets to Karen Page that Bucky’s not been read in on, but it’s some comfort to know that those scars exist.

Karen’s a survivor like Bucky is. She can’t be placed upon a pedestal. She won’t try to put him on one either.

“You’re sayin’ I gotta forgive myself.”

“I’m saying that Matt and I are not you and Steve. One size doesn’t fit all for this kind of thing. It wouldn’t really be worth fighting for if it did.”

“What kinda thing is it?” Bucky asks because he can’t not and because he likes to hear Karen talk matters of the heart.

She doesn’t compromise; she doesn’t skimp on anything.

“A love thing,” she says, easy as pie and light as air. “A caring-about-someone-because-they’re-
Bucky doesn’t argue. He doesn’t look away when his face starts to get too warm either. Karen hides a smile and grants him an out if he wants it. She segues tactfully into finer details surrounding the meeting times Gambol’s allowing them to take. Bucky listens and asks questions about logistics, careful not to sound too interested in security details lest someone overhear him and think he’s up to no good. She lists off all the basic measures in a rapid-fire list that just impresses the hell out of him.

“So you met Pepper, huh?” he says once all the official stuff’s been aired out.

“Yeah, she’s nice. She has a lot of really promising ideas for the media angle once we go to trial. Foggy and Matt are going to be running point on the case, so I should be able to balance both sides: Pepper’s advertising campaign and the secretarial stuff I do at the office.”

Bucky’s a little bit in love with Karen. He’s pretty sure he doesn’t say so out loud, but it’s a near thing.

The trial looms closer with every dragging day. He reads over Rebecca’s and Steve’s letters often, smirking every once in a while at Claire’s short and sweet messages.

Honestly he really does try to read. *Decameron* is right at the top of his list for books that he means to finish before they go properly to court. He cracks it open and sits at his desk and tries not to fall into the trap of daydreaming and yearning, yearning and daydreaming.

Yearning hurts less than the alternative anyway. The haunting that the rest of his memories supply him with is just as pervasive whenever he sits down to read.

At night, he has plenty of opportunities to test out Banner’s breathing exercises. With more practice, they become increasingly effective against the worst of his panic attacks. Sometimes it’s still just easier to hurt himself before he takes out his pain on the furniture. Even then, he remembers the quickest way to divest himself of his most dangerous weapon in order to minimize the harm he’d otherwise savage himself with.

The day of his meeting with Matt, Foggy, Karen, and Steve, Cuomo brings breakfast to his cell and talks while Bucky eats. It’s a kind gesture that Cuomo usually doesn’t extend, but he must anticipate Bucky’s nerves in regards to the meeting. He talks about his mother, how she just adopted a retired service dog and named him Joe. Apparently Joe’s a seasoned old mutt, but Cuomo does a terrible job of acting like the dog doesn’t impress him.

“You like animals, Barnes?”

Bucky talks animals in between bites of his hash browns, but he doesn’t mention Мурка. He doesn’t ever want to endanger her, and part of keeping her safe is keeping her a secret. As far as he knows, Weasel could have given her away by now. No one’s thought to keep him updated.

Cuomo and six other guards escort Bucky out of his cell and into another block for the meeting. It’s not a section of the prison that’s normally used for lawyerly visits. The fact that it’s underground serves to underline the point.

No one’s in the room when they frogmarch Bucky into it and chain him to the table. It’s bigger than the one in the room his other meetings with Nelson and Murdock had been conducted in. His chains are thicker, heavier, and only lift about four inches off the table before the feed cuts off. If he lifts one and presses the other flat against the link in the table, he can reach as high as his chin.

The guards file out until it’s just Cuomo and Bucky. Cuomo doesn’t say anything. He’s got a good
sense for knowing when to talk and when to leave things to silence, unlike Oman, who hasn’t worked Bucky’s block in a good long while. The air around them is tense and nervous, only abbreviated with the rattling of Bucky’s chains. He has the vague thought that Steve won’t like to see him bound so severely, even if it is for everyone’s safety, Bucky’s included.

He sweats beneath the unyielding halogen lights, worrying and breathing like Banner taught him to. There are other centering tricks he’s learned from Banner that help him not to go to pieces where he sits, but the breathing thing is the biggest one. It’s easiest to remember and he can definitely track the too-fast beating of his heart, slowing down after a fashion. Cuomo’s keeping a close eye on him in case he spirals out of control, but he lets Bucky take a minute to work through it himself, which he does.

A knock comes on the door. All that breathing goes out the window and his heart’s pounding again.

Cuomo turns the handle, greets the guard standing there, and steps out into the hall. Foggy walks in first with Karen trailing behind him. Matt follows after her with her elbow in his hand. Karen guides Matt toward a chair and sits beside him while Foggy stands to her right.

Bucky looks at each of them, clocking their expressions: Matt’s tranquil confidence, Karen’s steadfast allegiance, and Foggy’s unapologetic optimism. He looks at the door and Steve walks in.

He lingers by the closed door, staring at Bucky and seeming not to know what to do with his hands or where to stand. Bucky’s hands clench uselessly on the table, drawing Steve’s attention and sure enough, he frowns. A little line forms between his eyebrows and he starts to speak but stops, looking again to Bucky’s face like he’s still afraid of being turned out, like Bucky might change his mind or tell him it was all a lie what he said in his letter.

But Bucky can’t get all of his words out fast enough and the only one itching to get out of him is Steve’s name, so he says it, struggling not to trip over it for his quickened breathing or for how his ribs are going to shatter open if his heart doesn’t quit throwing itself into them.

He says, “Steve. Steve.”

And he feels like it’s not enough, but it must be a start because there Steve is, eyes shining as he says, “Buck.”

It is a love thing, caring about someone because they’re important to you. Bucky’s not stupid. He can see he’s not alone and that Steve made sure he never was, before. Not when the war separated them, twice; not when it broke him, twice.

Bucky doesn’t cry, but his eyes sting with familiar tears anyway. Steve’s eyes are red, too. He didn’t expect it to be like this; didn’t expect for this small part of the world to open up for them again.

“Um, Cap?” Karen says, voice soft like she doesn’t want to spook them. “Why don’t you have a seat?”

He’d forgotten they weren’t alone in the room together. It’s not the first time Steve’s had that effect on him. He really always seems to have that effect on Bucky, and it’s not a new thing between them. It can never be an old thing either.

Steve flounders, going a charming shade of pink and looking around like it hadn’t even occurred to him to sit and now he doesn’t know where to go.

There’s a chair on Bucky’s side of the table. Two on his side to match the two on the other side.
Steve looks at it and then at Bucky. Bucky blinks, wanting to shrink and wanting to move and wanting to stay right where he is.

“Is that…Can I?”

Bucky startles when he realizes Steve’s asking him, looking right at him and into him and silently imploring for a million things like he always is. Bucky swallows and nods his head yes, rattling his chains on the tabletop when Steve moves behind him to get to the chair.

They don’t touch. They also don’t speak.

Bucky talks at length about the holes in his story that they couldn’t piece together before, and Karen scribbles away making notes. It doesn’t bother him anymore that they write when he’s speaking. He trusts that they’re doing everything they can to stay organized, to connect all the dots that he can’t see from standing too close to them. Steve stares at him and Bucky glances up at him, too, still clenching his hands fruitlessly on the table.

They’re maybe nearing the hour-mark and Bucky’s throat’s gone dry with all the talking when he looks at Steve and sighs and says, “I wish I’d been on the plane with you.”

Shocked, not anticipating a conversation, Steve blanches. He makes a quiet, astonished sound.

“I wish you hadn’t had to see me fall.”

He means it in so many more ways than just the obvious one. Chains scrape against the table and across from them, his lawyers go silent. There’s a hitch in Steve’s breathing, but he doesn’t reply, sensing that Bucky’s not finished yet and that he won’t be able to start a second time if he’s not allowed to get it out now, while he’s strong enough.

Bucky licks his lips and grits his teeth, heart hammering uncounted beats in his chest. A tear slips out.

“I wish I wasn’t putting you through all this. I wish I hadn’t hurt you.”

“Bucky…”

There it is. Steve’s crying, too. They’re crying, these traumatized men of war reduced to boys in each other’s company. Bucky makes to continue, but all that comes out is a pitchy, uneven gasp.

“I’m sorry I didn’t jump after you,” Steve whispers, wide-eyed and shaking so finely Bucky thinks he’s imagining it.

It sinks like ice down his spine. “What?”

“I should have jumped after you, on the train when you fell. I should have never stopped looking for you.” Steve shakes his head. “It’s my fault this happened to you. It should have been me.”

The thought is abhorrent. Steve already let one government agency change him. Granted, the one that interfered with Bucky was technically the same one that created Captain America. More’s the irony. Bucky starts to protest, distracted from his guilt and self-loathing by Steve’s very own brand of guilt and self-loathing.

It won’t do to argue over where to point the finger. He knows because Steve saying it’s all his fault doesn’t change how deeply the Soldier blames himself.
He’s tired of carrying it on his shoulders. Bucky’s so goddamn tired of it weighing him down. It makes him sick to think that it’s weighing down Steve, too; that neither of them is safe from the cloying net of shame and regret. He’s weary with how it festers inside of him, with seeing how it festers inside of Steve.

“I’m so sorry,” Bucky rasps.

Steve looks tired then, too. He looks—not his age, but older. He looks exhausted and heartbroken and desolate. He shouldn’t look heartbroken.

“Steve…”

Their time runs out and someone knocks on the door to signal as much to them. Bucky deflates and Steve expels a ragged sigh. Across the table from them, Nelson sniffs discreetly and Karen flashes a tearful smile at Bucky’s timid glance. He taps twice on the table with one metal finger and Matt tips his head in acknowledgment. Steve watches the exchange with a tiny smile quivering on his lips.

Cuomo comes in first and waves for everyone to file out. Foggy turns to go first since he’s already standing and holds his elbow out for Matt so he can stand and walk with him ahead of Karen. She looks from him to Steve and back, inspiring Bucky to turn to Steve and study him in the last seconds before he also rises to his feet. Steve doesn’t want to go, doesn’t want to leave Bucky here even though that’s his only option.

“See you next time?” Steve asks so that Bucky doesn’t have to.

Bucky smiles, wistful and sad. “Sure.”

Steve goes and rests his hand on the back of Bucky’s chair when he passes. They still don’t touch, but the warmth of him is there. The close graze of his hand at Bucky’s back doesn’t frighten or incense him. It doesn’t make him any kind of nervous. There’s only a twitch of recognition in his muscles.

His instincts emit Steve’s name. It’s not a new thing, but it could never be old.

They meet once every two weeks, and while Bucky can talk and talk about all the missions he remembers, there’s always time left over for Bucky to marvel at Steve, and vice versa. There’s so many little gestures Steve makes that Bucky notices and so many clues in his speech patterns that summon all the pre-serum memories Bucky has of Steve.

Steve here-and-now snorts at a bad joke Bucky tells to enliven the mood. The sound calls a skinnier Steve to mind, shivering beneath a blanket with a cold compress on his neck and two more under his armpits. He’d looked like a wet cat in his sweaty undershirt with his hair smeared into his forehead.

Bucky’d said something to the effect of ‘I’ve seen you take on guys twice your size, Stevie. You’re not gonna die from a sore throat.’

And there had been that sound, that unamused, no-nonsense, yet patiently enabling snort. Steve had told him, ‘Yeah, well, that still means it’s gonna rough me up before it’s done with me.’

Bucky wants to talk about all those moments. He wants to ask for Steve’s side and hear what he remembers or if he does remember, but there’s never quite enough time to get into the details. They don’t get far into their words about feelings, after that first day. Maybe it’s because they have an audience or maybe it’s because with every meeting, they get a little farther from this guaranteed safety. Once they go to trial, they’ll fully be at war, and it won’t end until the jury sets Bucky free or condemns him for a murderer.
Wilson told him before he surrendered himself into Mahoney’s custody that the jury would rule one way and the judge the other. Bucky has no clue what that could mean.

“Still no word from Wilson?” he asks, casting a glance in his lawyer’s direction.

Steve is the one to answer, crisp edges turning to steel. “He’s following a lead in Sokovia.”

“Doing what?” Bucky asks, confused and a little afraid of the silent dread Matt’s projecting. “Why is he in Sokovia?”

“Wilson is contributing to this fight for your freedom in the most productive way that he can.”

A spike of anger shocks Bucky’s system.

“You sent him away so you wouldn’t have to look at him.”

Steve’s jaw tightens, but he doesn’t react to the barb.

“There’s a Hydra base in Eastern Europe. We’ve narrowed down its whereabouts to Sokovia. Wilson volunteered.”

He keeps his voice even and continues like they’re in a war room conferring over maps and attack plans. Bucky supposes they are, even if he’s chained to the table like an animal unable to do anything either way. Matt and Karen look uncomfortable at the turn Bucky’s demeanor has taken. Foggy looks baffled. He had no idea where Wilson ran off to either.

“We needed someone on the ground over there, but Tony and I can’t afford to look like we aren’t one hundred percent focused on getting you out of here. If it looked for a second like you weren’t top priority to either of us, the headlines wouldn’t be kind.”

“What’s the mission? Who did you send him with?”

“He’s on assignment with Sam, Bruce, Natasha, and a few others,” Steve tells him, gentling finally like he knows this information will pacify Bucky. “He’s not alone.”

It does pacify Bucky, to an extent. His cold resolve softens, too, at the mention of Natasha, but he buries it. He needs to speak for Wilson, especially if he’s the only one who’s going to and Steve’s in a position to give him the facts.

“What others?”

“People you haven’t met.”

Steve names them anyway: Thor, James Rhodes, Clint Barton. He lists off a few stats on them, what they bring to the field, and how they’re connected to the Avengers. Rhodes is a friend of Stark’s. Thor is a demigod, apparently. Barton is a well-meaning archer who worked for S.H.I.E.L.D. well before the others hitched their wagons to a doomed star.

“He volunteered,” Bucky says, needing it to be true.

He doesn’t doubt Wilson would have jumped at the chance to work with the Avengers up close and personal, but it’s hard to imagine a scenario where he would have been around to hear their plans. Steve has no love for Deadpool. Bucky can’t imagine the others felt any different.

“Wilson cornered Tony at a press conference months ago. He made his position clear.”
“And what was that? That he would go where you couldn’t?” A bitter taste hits his tongue. “Get his hands dirty if the job required it?”

“He said he wanted to help you, Bucky.” Steve gets an exasperated grimace on his face. “And he did. He found and shut down three active bases in six months.”

“What’s in Sokovia, Rogers?”

Steve opens his mouth and closes it. He sighs. “A weapon.”

Bucky looks down and prepares a whole line of swear to unleash, but Steve beats him to the punch.

“My friends are out there, too, Bucky. I convinced them to take a chance on Wilson because I know how much he’s done for you since this started. Their lives are in his hands just as much as his life is in theirs.”

Neither of them says that Wilson’s life isn’t really in anyone’s hands, period. Wilson’s basically indestructible. Steve has no cause to be worried about him at all, but then, neither does Bucky. He’s just upset that Wilson left to fight crime on his behalf and no one told him about it. He deserved to know. Wilson deserves to have someone waiting on him, worrying about whether he’s okay.

“You should’ve told me,” he says in a tight voice, tapping his finger once quietly on the table like an expression of nervous energy but meaning it for Matt.

You should have told me as soon as you knew.

Matt doesn’t move and nobody turns to look at him, but Bucky knows he caught that those words were for him.

“I’m sorry.” Steve actually sounds and looks the part: a little chagrined to be found in the wrong, a little dismayed that he didn’t realize it sooner. “From what I hear, he’s quite the asset. Not the greatest team player, but not for lack of trying. In his last transmission, Clint said Wilson threw himself in the line of fire to keep Sam from getting hit.”

Gratitude lines Steve’s voice, but he doesn’t smile when he says it. He’s happy that Wilson protected his friend, even if the cost of it maybe sickens him just as much as it sickens Bucky.

Of course Wilson would’ve taken on a hail of bullets to keep Sam from getting shot. Even if they hadn’t had their moment of solidarity—‘Wilson & Wilson, yeah!’—Wilson would have done everything he could to come between his teammate and the danger.

‘You think I care about me? I grow back from splattered brain matter. I shoot myself when I get bored. I sure as shit don’t have any hold-ups about letting someone else off me if it gives you a better chance.’

Bucky frowns, quietly nauseous, and doesn’t say anything else. Wilson’s far away on his own terms, happy in the belief that he’s fighting on the right side. If he’s out in some Eastern European wilderness and he’s hurting himself because he thinks it’s the only way he can help, then there’s nothing Bucky can do about it from his prison cell in New York.

He’s not angry at Steve, or Matt, but he wants to be. It would be easier.

It doesn’t make sense to be angry in the first place is the thing. Fighting with the Avengers is what Wilson wants. To be one of the good guys is what Wilson wants.
Bucky just can’t help but feel like the whole thing is underhanded, like the good, clean Avengers will cast Wilson aside once they’re done with him and pretend he never lent a helping hand. His heart breaks predicting Wilson’s devastation. He would stow it away, definitely; would hide behind an expressionless mask and a brave face. That’s what Wilson does. It’s the only means he ever employs of protecting himself.

At their next meeting, with a name put to his dread, Bucky turns to Steve and says, “Promise me you won’t sweep him under the rug. After he’s found your weapon and brought your friends back safe while he’s riddled with more scars that you’ll never see, promise me you won’t act like he never did anything to merit your respect.”

Steve doesn’t bristle. He doesn’t get defensive. His eyes just take on a sadder gleam and he promises.

Bucky gets a postcard a week before the trial date. It’s got a picture of the Empire State Building on one side and frantic, sloppy writing on the other. Actually, he properly looks at it and notices that the handwriting is not sloppy and frantic, but the two sets—no, three sets are sloppy, frantic, and elegant in turns.

‘Hey, Sarge! Guess who just got back into town! We should apologize for not telling him we were leaving in the first place. but i’m not sorry captain devastating face yelled at us. he’s so handsome. Well, it was kind of a dick move, I’ll admit it. Didn’t mean to stress you out, tin man. Didn’t we, though? it is nice to be appreciated! Still not really any excuse to leave you hangin’, though. Apologize. My bad, Barnes. I’m an asshole. Even if the plot did kind of demand that I go away for a while.’

He stares at the postcard for a good twenty minutes trying to figure out why the hell Wilson has three distinct hands, why the transition from one to the next is perfectly seamless, and why one of them speaks in the second person. The phrasing, why one of them speaks tips him off insofar as one can really guess about these things.

Wilson’s yammering in one-sided dialogues with himself aren’t so one-sided, clearly. Reaching that conclusion doesn’t make it any less incomprehensible to Bucky’s untrained eye. He re-reads the postcard once he’s got a clearly defined handhold to explain the decidedly three speakers.

He decides Wilson, as in Wade Wilson who calls Bucky tin man, writes in the sloppy, blocky letters. The second identifiable voice writes in sophisticated, looping script; Bucky calls them Copperplate. The bumbling, excitable voice communicates through hurriedly scribbled text; that’s Curlicue.

It just makes it easier to differentiate according to nicknames rather than appointing one of them as #1 and the other #2, though Bucky’s sure Wilson must have names for them. They have full-blown conversations with Wilson and share margin space with him on postcards; they have to have names. Bucky’ll ask when he can.

Dr. Banner’s back for their last appointment to fine tune the permanent prosthetic. Stark wants to get it as close as he can to user-ready before the trial ruins their meticulously structured schedule.

They’ve come to the agreement that Bucky would stand trial without the temporary replacement. The sight of his missing limb would serve to remind the jury that he’s not come out of his past unscathed. He’ll feel safer without it attached to him anyway—less like he might bring harm to himself or someone else in an act of triggered rage.

He hasn’t had any moments like that outside of that night at the Rail Yards, ensconced in the fight and unable to see past the red in his eyes. Foggy’s shown him the pictures they’ll be displaying at
court for evidence so that he’ll be prepared for it.

There were pictures of him naked and filthy with wires plunged into his arms and IVs snaking up his veins; pictures of him with an oxygen mask tightly strapped over his nose and mouth, leather and steel bands keeping him secured flat to a table; pictures of him lying in a box with his metal arm broken down to vicious parts on a connecting side table.

None of those set him off in a big way. The first upset him, the second spiked familiar fear in his heart, and the third made him grit his teeth to keep the anger down. He hadn’t lashed out, though. He hadn’t wanted to hurt Foggy for simply playing the part of the messenger in a long game of abuses.

“Glad to see you got out of Sokovia all right,” Bucky tells Dr. Banner while Stark’s doing something delicate and precise with the fingertips of the permanent prosthetic. “I mean, if you’re all right.”

“Oh.” Dr. Banner smiles, a small, jittery thing like he’s embarrassed to be asked. “I am, thanks.”

“Wade was okay?”

“Ah,” he chuckles, a slight and funny sound to hear from Banner. “He’s a one-man army.”

“The way Rhodey tells it, your friend hardly left any goons for the rest of the team to take on. I guess someone has to be the Justin of the group if I’m not there to do it.”

“I’m so glad we’re at the point of likening the Avengers to boybands,” Banner quips dryly, calm as ever.

“Otherwise we’re just missing out on a wealth of inside jokes, Joey.”

“I am not Joey. How does the shoulder socket feel, Barnes?”

“Um. Kind of itchy.”

“All right, if you want to go without the temporary from here on out, that’ll knock out the skin irritation no problem.”

“Might be for the best,” Bucky says.

“And don’t take this the wrong way, Tony,” Banner murmurs, swabbing some kind of cold gel on Bucky’s unhappy, marred skin. “But I’m pretty sure Cap’s Justin. You’re more like JC.”

“JC?”

Bucky listens aimlessly to their easy banter. Banner wraps his shoulder in a cotton bandage and lays the temporary down in a padded trunk. Stark explains the developments they’ve made with the sensitivity in the prosthetic’s palm and fingertips. He’s excited about what they’ve achieved and it’s contagious, but instead of excitement, Bucky just feels nervous and afraid, sad.

“What?” Stark asks, alert but trying to pass it off for flippancy. “Don’t tell me you don’t read Braille anymore.”

“No, I do.”

“You worried about the trial?” Banner asks, diffident in tone but bold in expression.

“Yeah.”
“Hey. Your lawyers are the best, okay?” Stark says it like it’s the only version of reality that exists, like there’s no universe where Matt, Foggy, and Karen wouldn’t be his best bet. “We’ve got your back. You’re gonna get through this, Barnes.”

“And now that your friend Deadpool’s basically an honorary avenger…”

“What?”

“Well, he did find Loki’s scepter.” Banner shrugs.

Stark hums and adds, “There are some hurdles to jump in terms of the whole Terrible Past thing, but nobody’s perfect. We accept all types.”

Bucky’s mind spins. “I’m sorry, honorary avenger?”

“Cap made a case for him,” Banner supplies, unbelievably. “He said he proved his worth in Sokovia; said we owed him a shot at making it official.”

“Unofficially, Wilson’s a test drive.” Stark looks pointedly at Bucky. “That was my angle anyway.”

Steve didn’t just take what Bucky said to heart. He took it to the team and all but got it in writing that they won’t give Wilson the brush-off. Stark just said they’re considering taking Bucky in. Bucky doesn’t know what to say.

They don’t press him for answers, nor do they tell him anything more about how it went on the job with Wilson. It’s frustrating. Bucky wants to hear all about it. He asks Steve at their final prep meeting before going to court the following day, and Steve only tells him the bare minimum.

Apparently, Wilson had been scoping out the suspected base in Sokovia for two weeks. Sam, Rhodes, and the Avengers sans Captain America and Iron Man followed him out there once he could prove that Loki’s scepter was inside the facility. The team moved in, took over the base, and brought back a pair of twins in addition to the aforementioned scepter. Bucky doesn’t really get what makes the scepter such a big deal, but he’s not about to waste their precious time in private to ask about it.

By now, it’s clear that Steve understands a lot more about what went down on the mission. He speaks more freely about it and he doesn’t get hung up on the details he thinks are important but that Bucky doesn’t care much for.

Wilson genuinely had a blast, if Steve’s bland, somewhat disconcerted delivery of the fact is to be trusted. Bucky actually cracks a smile at the look on his face. He remembers when Wilson had that effect on him.

“Thank you.”

Steve’s steely, diplomatic expression shimmers into something far more human. “For what?”

“For giving him a chance.” Bucky looks down. “Stark told me what you said.”

“Well.” Steve fidgets, shift a little in his seat. “The Maximoffs might not have come back to the States at all if he hadn’t been there. He’s usually unpredictable, but this time, that was a good thing for us.”

Bucky replays what Stark told him—how his angle on selling the idea of working with Wilson had been to call it a test run for working with the former Winter Soldier. They’re not drastically different,
the two of them. They were experimented on, modified, and made to fight. Neither one of them can boast mental wellness or stability. Probably Wilson has PTSD, too. He said he’s in constant pain, anyway, and that’s a different kind of trauma that Bucky used to be quite familiar with.

He wonders if Steve has put it together, if Stark phrasing it the way he had may have drawn the parallels for him. If he hadn’t picked up on Bucky’s own insecurities about himself projected onto Wilson, he’d at least understand that Wilson’s Bucky’s friend, no compromises. It might not change his attitude toward Wilson altogether, but Steve might feel a touch guilty now if he didn’t before.

It wasn’t the only reason Bucky had for thinking Steve would never trust him in the beginning, before he could remember. Obviously, they’ve had a rocky reintroduction. Even now, Bucky’s alarmed at how eager Steve is to accept him, to do whatever Bucky asks of him just to try and make things better between them.

But this thing they have—this thing that’s warmth and flowing connections and the tremulous sense of coming in from the cold, of coming home—it’s bigger than everything else, though it shouldn’t be.

“See you on the other side, Stevie.”

Steve smiles, strained and anxious but hopeful. “I’ll be there every step of the way, and then I’ll see you on the other side.”

“It’s a date.”

Cuomo knocks on the door to let them know it’s time. Bucky watches Steve’s face for what feels like forever to commit this time to memory. He wants to have it with him on the stand when Steve’s sitting in the peanut gallery far away and not for him, as he should be. Steve reaches out with his hand, stops purposefully mid-gesture to let Bucky anticipate him, and covers Bucky’s shoulder with his palm. It’s a firm touch, warm, solid. Bucky watches his face and wishes they could stay here.

They can’t, though. Steve shuffles out of the room first, followed by Foggy and Matt. Karen makes eye contact with him and gives him a watery smile.

Bucky goes through the letters currently in his possession before dinner. He writes a long response to Rebecca and a short one for Claire. She’s still as busy as ever, but she’s adamant about keeping him company in whatever small way she can. He’s grateful for it and does his best to limit their correspondence so as not to put unneeded strain on her.

There’s a letter from Steve that he hasn’t answered for a few weeks now. He’s been sporadic at best since they started meeting regularly to talk the finer details of his case with the team. Bucky goes over the contents of the letter a few times and tucks it away into the pages of Decameron. Whatever happens tomorrow will be better fuel for his thoughts than anything he can come up with tonight. He thinks so, anyway. Maybe it’ll all be terrible and he won’t want to write for a long time.

People come for him in the morning. His lawyers bought a suit for him to wear and Bucky finds the whole charade of it absurd, but they insist it’ll help him. He plays along, grumbling all the while.

The sleeve’s been pinned up where his lack of a limb would fail to fill it out. It’s nice, looks expensive. All of that and Foggy fussing over his hair—once Bucky also grumbles his permission for that—serves to distract him from the proceedings. He feels more like an unwilling child on his way to Picture Day than he does a wanted fugitive hoping to avoid life in prison or worse.

The usual suspects have come to watch over his trial. Bucky combs over his side of the room with a
wary eye and finds Sam first, dressed down but stern-faced and polished. He notices Bucky looking right away and tips his head, expression only flickering once with recognition.

Steve’s sitting next to him, also dressed down but a little less clean cut at the edges. He looks pale and like he didn’t sleep well if he slept at all.

To Steve’s left sits one Natasha Romanov, already staring Bucky down with a clinical kind of awareness that makes him feel naked as the day he was born. She’s dressed in a black blazer, from what he can tell, with her hair falling perfectly at her shoulders.

‘Did they do it to you, too?’

He kissed her hands, not caring for the conversation but allowing it to happen because it was important to her. Because she was important to him and wishing to become important to her was one of his best dreams, one of his purest.

‘I don’t know,’ he’d said. ‘Can’t remember. If they did it to you, then it stands to reason they did it to me.’

‘That doesn’t upset you?’

‘A child of mine would just be confiscated. Less effort to sterilize us than to eliminate the progeny.’

‘They teach us that family is a detriment to our utility,’ she told him, too bold to yield to reluctance or to half-measures. ‘That it would be a weakness and a distraction. Do I distract you?’

‘Yes, you do,’ he admitted freely, smiling in time with her laughter, so soft and contained. ‘But you make me stronger, too.’

Natasha smiled how she did when something frightened her but she had no other expression with which to communicate vulnerability. She asked him, ‘Do I?’

‘Yes.’ He kissed her hands again, loving the smell of her skin and the strength in her palms, fingers, wrists. ‘That they can take you from me makes me weak. It makes me weakest of all.’

In moments like these, he couldn't help but love her. She was capable of escaping even then, though it might not have occurred to her to try. Her wings would have let her fly away from that place with or without him.

She hadn’t considered, and neither had he, that they might take him from her instead of the other way around. He was easier to control then in many ways. He could be reset with far less hassle. Between the two of them, Natasha was the rising star, not him. At best, he was a blackhole, good for meting out obliteration and little else.

‘Then I won’t let them take me from you.’

It is a strange thing to remember so many instances of love but to be so far removed from them, to crave those tender stolen moments but to have no right to a single one.

Natasha does not look at him as one does someone they admire or remember. She looks at him as one does as enemy and he knows why perfectly well. He has those memories at his disposal, too. None of it is safe from him; he is safe from none of it.

On the other side of Natasha is a man with soft-looking hair and a bruise on his jaw. There’s also a butterfly bandage over the bridge of his nose and another one high up on his cheek. His features and
his eyes are soft. He watches Bucky closely, an unguarded air of curiosity about him that somehow lends an even kinder cast to his face.

Shuffling at the head of the room draws Bucky’s attention away. The bailiff calls for everyone to stand, so Bucky stands in tandem with both Matt and Foggy. Judge Ayers crosses to his seat and bids the rest to be seated. Bucky risks one more glance behind him to look for Karen and finds her right next to one primly immaculate Pepper Potts. Stark’s on Pepper’s right and Dr. Banner’s to the right of him. Karen waves and Pepper smiles. Stark and Banner nod in mismatched intervals.

Judge Ayers announces the reason for them all having assembled in court today and requests that Bucky stand, so he does. He reads off the many charges Bucky’s faced with and because it’s what he’s been instructed to say upwards of forty times, he pleads not guilty.

There’s more shuffling in the courtroom that Ayers quickly disperses with his gavel. The whole rigamarole starts that way and doesn’t ever lose its momentum.

Alder, the Prosecuting Attorney, gives his opening statement first. Bucky only half-listens. It’s enough to twist his guts into nervous knots that the guy’s voice sounds like the brass chime of liberty bells in an even worse way than both Steve and Matt’s combined. He doesn’t have to spin the story at all to make Bucky sound like the scum of the earth.

He just says what happened in plain English, that Bucky Barnes died in 1944 and that someone else came out of the snow—a different soldier sits in the courtroom with them today. Alder’s not wrong. He doesn’t even skip over the torture or ‘alleged’ brainwashing. Sure, he makes it sound like it was a walk in the park, but he owns up to how it all went down. The way he tells it, Bucky’s a murderer and a traitor and a terrorist. He’s still not wrong, is the thing.

Foggy stands up once Alder’s tired of hearing his own voice (“You must find him guilty. You must.”) and paints an altogether unrecognizable picture of who Bucky Barnes was and is. He doesn’t separate the Brooklyn boy from the Howling Commando from the tormented test subject from the Winter Soldier. He refers to them as one person, as a P.O.W. never allowed the privilege of returning home from the war.

“My client is just like you,” he says. “And we don’t want to hear that, I know. It’s terrifying. We look at this man, at James Buchanan Barnes, and we want to think that this would never happen to us. But why would we be the exception?

“At the time that he was captured, my client was an active soldier in Captain Rogers’ elite task force. He was a military sergeant in his own right and all but gave his life fighting in the Second World War. I’d say Barnes was and is the very best of us. How could any of us imagine that we would have been stronger than he was under the same circumstances?”

It’s a speech, and a humanizing one at that. Matt looks deservingly proud but not smug once Foggy’s good and finished. Bucky gives both of them an amazed kind of blank stare that Foggy remarks upon for Matt’s sake. Bucky knew they were good, but he didn’t expect to be eating out of the palms of their hands right from the get-go.

That’s probably a silly realization to have since he was hooked on what they were selling pretty early on. It’s a moot point and there’s no time to get into it now.

The witnesses are called one by one. Bucky’s head spins at how many they’re bound to get through before the day’s end and just how many more are ahead of them. Matt nudges him with his elbow while Alder cross-examines a witness. It’s a small thing, a tactile greeting to remind Bucky that they’re here with him and not going anywhere.
It’s agony and it’s not any easier for the people who come forward. They’re a hodgepodge of witnesses, most of them having had familial ties to S.H.I.E.L.D. or other such government affiliations.

Not all of them are surviving family members to victims of the Winter Soldier. Some of them are surviving family to the Howling Commandos. Jim Morita’s daughter is among them and because Alder allowed the testimonies of the other families, he can’t object to Murdock’s line of questioning for her.

He tries to call it circumstantial, but it doesn’t do much what with the journals Morita left behind that substantiate her claims as to what kind of man Sergeant Barnes was in their time. Murdock milks her testimony for all that it’s worth, laying down the groundwork of Bucky’s character and whether he would have ever willingly betrayed his country.

It gets them into talks of what happened when he was taken the first time, before Steve saved his neck and blew the whole place to hell and back. They adjourn for the day, but it’s pretty clear they’ll be starting in on Steve tomorrow.

Bucky throws up once they put him back in his clothes. The prison-issue material itches on his skin like one day out of them is all it took to make him forget that he’d be coming back.

Nothing he eats stays down. He attributes it to how composed he managed to stay throughout his entire first day in court. Cuomo tells him some stories about Joe the Rescue Dog to try and take his mind off it, but only bits and pieces penetrate the cloud of Bucky’s dread. His one saving grace is that Matt and Foggy are every bit as competent as he let himself hope that they would be. Even if they can’t win this case for him, there’s no one else he’d trust with taking him as far as the verdict.

In the morning, they do start in on Steve. Bucky’s back in his suit with his hair already in the general shape that Foggy seems to think is most appropriate for standing trial. His same supporters are in about the same seats that they were the previous day, scattered about but predictably clumped together. Steve leaves his position of safety in between Sam and Natasha and goes to the stand like a man to the Chair.

Alder’s not completely without mercy. He opens up with talk of how Bucky was Steve’s best friend in another life and he’s deliberate about keeping it all in the past tense.

Steve hangs off every new addition, looking more and more miserable the longer Alder tries to uphold the idea of them as strangers in the present day. Steve flaps his mouth a bit uncertainly once the monologue becomes a question, not wanting to say that Bucky wasn’t his friend but not wanting to say Bucky isn’t his friend either.

“Mr. Rogers, if you could answer the question.”

“Bucky Barnes was my best friend, yes.”

“And to your knowledge, when did he die?”

“He’s not dead.”

“But you believed, after he fell from the train in 1944, that he had, in effect, given his life fighting for our country?”

“He was never officially declared dead. The army’s not keen on calling KIA unless—unless there’s a body, and we couldn’t find his.”
“That isn’t my question. I’m asking if you thought your friend had died.”

“Objection, Your Honor. Relevance.” Foggy stands and leans his knuckles on the table. “We’ve established through a lengthy series of DNA tests that the defendant is unequivocally Sergeant James Barnes of the 107th. His presence in the court today confirms that he is quite alive.”

“Sustained. Rephrase, Mr. Alder, and mind that you don’t badger the witness.”

“Of course, Your Honor. Mr. Rogers, after you discovered that the defendant was, in fact, an operative and assassin known as the Winter Soldier, how would you explain your interaction with him?”

Steve hesitates, a conflicted, unhappy expression settling over his face. He says, “Each time that I encountered the defendant in combat, I attempted to neutralize the threat he posed.”

“What threat was that?”

“The first time, he shot Nick Fury. The second time, Jasper Sitwell was his target. The third time we met was on the Insight Helicarrier.”

Alder’s sharp, though. He gets Steve to admit that he, Natasha, and Sam had been targeted as well. He squeezes every damming piece of testimony that he can out of Steve, which is quite a lot. He gets their encounter on the Helicarrier; he gets the chaos in New York that Steve can only say so much about.

Steve never once says that it was Bucky’s fault, try as Alder might to get him just once to admit it. Foggy lets Alder take his shot and objects whenever Alder gives him a reason to.

Judge Ayers looks unmoved, unconvincing. Bucky’s grateful for his impassivity. It means he doesn’t have an opinion yet or if he does, he’s not letting them see it. If Ayers was already against them, Bucky wouldn’t have a clue how to handle himself.

When it’s his turn, Foggy asks all the questions Alder didn’t. He asks what it was like for Steve finding Bucky in Zola’s lab and if finding him again in D.C. gave him a similar feeling. Alder challenges the relevance of the anecdote, and Foggy defends it eloquently. He says that for Steve there was never any question as to whether Bucky would come back to himself if he just had a chance at recalibration.

It’s hard for Bucky to really plan ahead for what he’ll say of himself when Steve’s up there, looking resolute and infinite but also shaken to the core and heart-wrenchingly mortal.

Bucky probably looks every bit as contradictory—dangerous and distant but wounded and sentimental, holding his heart up in his eyes and in his throat when he looks at Steve just as much as Steve does for him. They must look ridiculous after a fashion, both of them stealing moments in between questions to gawk at each other.

Questioning Steve takes all day. It takes two days, two and a half. Alder doesn’t call Bucky to the stand next. He calls Dr. Banner, Pepper, Dr. Ramirez, and even Charlotte Jones. Bucky almost doesn’t recognize her done up neat and professional in her dress blues.

They tell similar stories about a half-feral but ultimately well-meaning soldier with PTSD. Alder saves Stark for last of the bunch, and Bucky knows why—knows how hard he’s going to hit on the topic of Stark’s parents. He doesn’t get to it straight away, but Bucky waits for it with his heart pounding and his hand fisted up in his neatly ironed trousers.
It starts easily enough. Stark clears his throat a few times to get through the retelling of Bucky’s
catatonic episode. He really sells how bad it was for Bucky.

“You sound moved by what happened, but isn’t it true that the defendant murdered your parents?”

Stark sighs. “I’ve never really been much of a Perry Mason fan. That’s the inspiration for the Lawyer
Voice, isn’t it?”

“Answer the question, Mr. Stark,” Ayers says, one eyebrow arched. “And careful that this court
doesn’t find you in contempt.”

Stark barrels onward without missing a beat, another blustery sigh riding the waves of his voice:
“Yes, the defendant murdered my parents.”

Ayers stops the murmurs with another rap of his gavel. He doesn’t say another word, allowing Alder
to proceed with his line of questioning unimpeded.

“So, your sympathy for James Barnes, would you say it’s unconnected to his affiliation with the
organization commonly referred to as Hydra?”

“I’m sorry, what’s the question?”

“Whether your sympathy lies with a known terrorist, Mr. Stark.”

“Your Honor, objection,” Murdock says, his tone implying that he shouldn’t even have to raise an
objection. “Inflammatory.”

“I agree. That seems to be the Winter Soldier’s MO.”

Murdock stands up. “Counsel is testifying, Your Honor.”

“Sustained. Both of you, up here.”

Alder pockets his hands and approaches the sidebar. Murdock paces up on his left side. Foggy
remains seated to Bucky’s left, openly shaking his head in disbelief. He sits up straighter in his chair
when Matt turns to walk back first. Stark looks annoyed where he sits, mostly ignored for whatever
the hell just happened.

“The jury will disregard Mr. Alder’s commentary. Question your witness or sit down, Counselor. I’ll
have no cheap jabs at the defendant in my court.”

Stark falls in line with the court’s decorum, outside of a few ironic quips here and there. Bucky
doesn’t think he’s imagining that the attempts at humor calm Stark’s nerves.

Alder doesn’t mess around and whether he had intended for his outburst to chastise Stark into
affecting a more somber mood, it doesn’t work. While trying to play up the perception of the Winter
Soldier as Terrorist without ever saying it in as many words, Alder only manages to unveil Stark’s
true source of empathy for Bucky Barnes.

“It’s hard to hold it against the guy. I know what’s it like when your worst becomes someone else’s
best. Doesn’t take much for the right weapon to get into the wrong hands.”

“Just so I understand, Mr. Stark. You don’t hold it against the defendant that he killed your parents in
cold blood?”

Stark’s eyes go a little distant and then they zero in on Bucky, speaking worlds of what he thinks
about that question, how it’s so much more complicated than Alder allows it to be. But the most reductive version of his truth and all Stark can say about it is: “No, I don’t. Any more questions for me, Ben, or can the Defense take their shot?”

They move right along. Murdock asks Stark to go back to when the fight started on the social media front. He asks why Stark supported Bucky so early on and how he came to the decision.

“Cap approached me.”

“For the record, Tony, you mean Steve Rogers?”

The casual use of Stark’s name is a welcome glimpse into the time they must have spent polishing his testimony together. Bucky glances at Foggy, and being the people person that he is, Foggy nods a little conspiratorially in response.

“Sure do. Baby Face Rogers in the back row.” Stark winks at Steve over Bucky’s shoulder. “He’d just gotten out of a hospital in D.C. Sam was with him—that’s Sam Wilson, former PJ.”

“Please describe that conversation for the court.”

It’s a story and a half. Steve and Tony had talked out the many wrinkles in his request for help, one of those wrinkles being the fact that Hydra had his parents killed—that the Winter Soldier, that Bucky orphaned him at seventeen. Apparently James Rhodes had been there, both he and Sam acting as buffers for their respective, incendiary friends.

“At first I was angry, yeah. I was angry like a kid gets angry, how I was after the ‘accident’.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“Uh,” he sighs, scratching at his temple with a fidgety finger. “Once I got tired of yelling, I wasn’t really angry anymore. And Cap was—Steve, I mean—he was still right there, hadn’t raised his voice once.” He sighs again, noisily, and looks down at his hands. “He asked if I’d look over Barnes’ file, think it over. I did.”

“What was it specifically that made you change your mind?”

“Objection. Calls for a conclusion.”

“Seeing as the Prosecution was only too interested in Mr. Stark’s opinion not too long ago, I fail to see the issue with asking for it now.”

“Sustained. Careful with how you proceed, Mr. Murdock.”

“According to the evidence presented to you by Steve Rogers, what was the immediate course of action you took?”

“I started designs on a prosthetic arm.”

“And you worked on a temporary prosthesis for nearly a year while my client awaited trial. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

With a few objections thrown in by Alder for good measure, Murdock paints a picture of Stark’s long commitment to Bucky’s health and wellbeing once the initial friction had worn away. He airs out Stark’s side of Bucky’s genuine horror upon discovering that he’d killed Howard and Maria
Stark, how Stark had felt worse for Bucky’s remembering it—how nothing about it had been fueled by anything even resembling agency on the Winter Soldier’s part.

It takes the rest of the day to get through Stark’s testimony. They start on Maria Hill the next day and end with Sam. Everything’s starting to sound about the same: nearly identical claims of, ‘I thought we couldn’t trust him, but Steve…’

Alder doesn’t overlook the common denominator. Sam’s still up on the stand when he turns and says, “So you actually warned Steve Rogers against trying to reason with the defendant?”

“I did.”

“And why is that?”

“From what I’d seen, it didn’t look like words’d be enough for him. But then, words weren’t really enough for Steve either. He didn’t listen to me.”

“Does it strike you as odd that so many people are willing to turn a blind eye to this person who, according to your own testimony, is too dangerous to be reasoned with, all because Captain America asks them to?”

“Misquoting the witness,” Foggy says.

Sam shoots an apologetic look in Bucky’s direction before aiming it behind him, most likely at Steve. He doesn’t say whatever it is that’s on his mind, but it’s probably a good thing since it doesn’t give Alder a chance to put more words in his mouth. Judge Ayers considers the objection and overrules it. Sam sags a little in his seat. Bucky knows the feeling.

“I don’t find it odd at all. People look up to Steve. He’s Captain America for a reason.”

“Imagine for a moment that Steve Rogers has nothing to do with this case. Would you still support the defendant in question on his own honor, in light of the charges he is facing?”

“Speculation,” Murdock interrupts before Sam can answer. “Does the Prosecution really expect Mr. Wilson to imagine a hypothetical world where Steve Rogers has nothing to do with the Trial of Bucky Barnes?”

It gets a bit better after that, impossibly. Alder can’t get Sam to say that he wouldn’t back Bucky if Steve were out of the picture.

He also can’t get Sam to say that he has no gauge for who Bucky is or what he’s capable of since they’d talked once on the phone before Bucky turned himself in. Sam’s dealt with PTSD often enough in himself and in other veterans to know a trauma case when he sees one.

Alder wants Sam to call Bucky a monster, but Sam only ever implicates Pierce, Rumlow, and Hydra. Monster isn’t in Sam’s repertoire, much as he and everyone else can see that Alder’s angling for it hard.

They call Natasha next.

Bucky has no idea what to expect, but he doesn’t expect her to go up there and tell them that the skills he taught her empowered her to change her life for the better. He doesn’t expect for her to explain how she had been crafted into a weapon and misused just like he was with no hope for escape in sight until someone took a chance on her—brought her in and converted her instead of killing her like his handlers ordered him to do.
She names Clint Barton and Nick Fury, the work they helped her to do simply because she was
given a choice. Even then, S.H.I.E.L.D. turned out to be wrong, though she had no way of knowing.

Natasha names Bucky as the impetus for foiling the rogue agency. She tells it all with ruthless
precision and unforgiving details; details like how terrified she was when they met in D.C. and
before then on a Search and Rescue mission she was on, the computer she and Steve found
containing Zola’s consciousness, Steve’s sporadic transmission while on the Helicarrier, the garbled
words she’d heard: ‘…not gonna fight you.’

“What is your relationship to the defendant, Ms. Romanov?”

Bucky sees her go willfully blank.

“I don’t have a relationship with the defendant.”

“You said earlier he was your mentor.”

“He was.”

Bucky also sees Alder falter and lose his footing. Natasha’s a different caliber of witness than he’s
used to. She doesn’t react at a frequency that he can interpret.

“Did you at one time have a relationship with the defendant that would affect your testimony today?”

Anger flashes lightning fast in her eyes. Bucky recognizes that look from a training room beneath
artificial light.

He’d just taught her how to use the combined forces of his weight and her momentum to conduct a
brutal takedown. Her execution was perfect on the first try, but his resultant surprised laughter at
having the wind knocked out of him confused her. She’d given him that same look, green eyes
glinting sharply in displeasure. She hadn’t known him yet. He hadn’t known her either, but he’d seen
her, had been training her for two months by then.

Alder can guess well enough that that look means trouble, so he backs off when Nelson objects.
Ayers agrees with him.

Nelson has better luck with Natasha than Ayers did. They’ve already gotten through the official story
as is. Foggy asks her to say more about the Winter Soldier as Mentor, about what she’d seen of his
humanity in their time together.

It’s bittersweet. They were strangers, they were more, and one day, they were nothing.

She explains what they must have done to him to make it go away. Alder calls it conjecture, but
Natasha speaks from personal experience. They’d been through the same institution, after all.

Fury takes the stand after Natasha does. He blames the whole thing on Pierce and doesn’t look one
bit sorry that he took him out once he had the shot. Bucky’s not sorry either, doesn’t even wish he’d
been the one to pull the trigger. He has a memory, sharp and clear, of Pierce backhanding him across
the face, ordering a memory wipe.

Son of a bitch got what he had coming to him. Bucky’s only sorry that he couldn’t see it happen up
close.

After Fury, Bucky tenses up, thinking that he must be next. They’ll run out of witnesses and get to
the accused himself at some point. Bucky’s not ready.
Turns out, Fury’s not the last witness before they get to him. Alder calls Brett Mahoney to the stand.

Bucky’s confused but not. He worked pretty closely with Nelson and Murdock to bring Bucky into custody, was there in the prison infirmary when they tried to take the metal arm from him, and walked Bucky to his cell when they flubbed it. He was with them in Harlem when the world briefly exploded.

Alder doesn’t have to work hard to make Mahoney look bad for not arresting Bucky from the start. All Mahoney says in his defense is that he had no proof Bucky was who he said he was and that there were no clear warrants out for his arrest. The leak hadn’t necessarily foisted him onto Interpol’s Most Wanted. All it had made clear to Mahoney, he says, is that the Winter Soldier never operated of his own volition. He says the Winter Soldier doesn’t exist without orders from a commanding officer.

Once they’re done with Mahoney, Bucky waits to be called. It doesn’t happen.

They go over documents and recordings and video footage, and Bucky’s even less prepared to hear the tinny renderings of his feverish babbling in Russian. It’s audio-only, but the recording picks up on the whirring of his arm.

Bucky hears another voice near the microphone say, ‘Должно быть, фантомные боли.’

The mechanical hum ramps up into a whine punctuated by a crack. He shouts once, short and loud, and makes a pitiful sound like a whimper. It’s muffled a second later and bleeds into a tearing scream.

Murdock clicks a button to stop the playback. He clears his throat and explains what they’ve just heard.

“This recording represents just one of many experiences the defendant endured while in captivity. On this particular occasion, my client, Bucky Barnes, was undergoing a change from one prosthesis to another—this one requiring further amputation of the limb.

“For those of us who don’t speak Russian, the doctor on the recording references phantom pain just before gagging Barnes and removing the prosthesis.”

It goes on and on, and Bucky wants to be somewhere else. He wants to be back in Weasel’s apartment lying on the floor with Мурка clawing at his leg. He wants to be asleep in Matt’s comfortable bed in Matt’s impossibly luxurious bathrobe with fuzzy slippers on his feet. He wants to be on a roof somewhere with Wilson talking about the friend he mentioned once, the one who sacrificed so much to give Wilson a shot at freedom and redemption.

He wants. None of it’s within his reach.

They’re talking about it, so he thinks about his missing arm while he’s tuning out the presentation of all this evidence to how badly he was hurt. A few times the onlookers make shocked noises at what they see and Bucky thinks to look, but he doesn’t. There’s never a way to know if they’re appalled at what he did or at what was done to him, and he can’t predict with any certainty which one would be easier to bear.

At some point, they adjourn for the day and Bucky hasn’t kept track of any of it. He’s been listening on and off, hearing what he did and what happened to him. It’s all static after a while.

He can’t sleep that night. There’s no putting it off any longer. He knows he’s up next.

Matt murmurs some words of encouragement to him while they’re waiting for Ayers to come in.
Bucky has a hard time hearing him over the rush of blood in his ears, but he breathes according to the tempo of his heart like Banner taught him. Once the pressure lessens, he makes himself listen.

“Wilson wanted me to remind you that this is just character development. He said you’d understand.”

Bucky understands. He takes a deep breath and nods.

“He’s nodding his head.” Foggy says, offhanded. He glances up after a second. “You know something, Barnes? I hope you’ll stick around after all this is wrapped up. I’m gonna miss seeing you all the time.”

“Gettin’ a bit ahead of things, aren’t you?”

“What, aren’t we everything you dreamed and more?” Foggy’s tone is soft and only a little dramatic.

“This is the homestretch, Barnes. It’ll be all right.”

Bucky risks a glance behind him and finds Steve straight away, looking less frayed and disordered than he has in recent sessions. He actually flashes a small smile at whatever look Bucky’s pointing at him. Natasha’s on his left again, looking altogether less severe and lethal. She doesn’t smile at him, but a twitch flutters over her brow that makes his stomach flip pleasantly.

Judge Ayers comes in not a moment too soon. They rise and sit down. Ayers tells Alder to select his next witness.

“I call the defendant, James Barnes, to the stand.”

He stands, looks at his lawyers, and goes. They have him swear on a bible and Alder starts in on him without standing on any kind of ceremony.

Alder asks how long he’s been able to remember his past life. He asks what jogged the old memories back into place. Bucky tells him just like he was trained: in the order that everything happened, as close to yes and no as possible. He doesn’t answer any questions that Alder doesn’t ask, which helps a lot in terms of keeping them on track and as far away from dangerous subjects as possible.

Getting through his questions isn’t hard. Alder goes by the book with Bucky like he’s more convinced by the evidence than he thought he’d be, like tipping Bucky over one edge or the other won’t satisfy him at all.

It’d probably win him his case if he could trigger an attack of some sort and have Bucky show the jury just what kind of monster he is. Or, conversely, it’d show the court and Ayers what kind of monster Alder is. Either way, he doesn’t push too hard. He pushes, definitely. But it’s nothing that hasn’t been teased out from different perspectives and through the use of various items submitted into evidence. Bucky’s glad to be going last.

The one time Alder really gets on a roll is with Keith Goodman. At first, Bucky has no idea who he’s talking about, but Alder has pictures. Only the first one is necessary. Bucky recognizes Goodman immediately. He’s the man he found dead in the street outside Weasel’s apartment.

“Do you know him now, Mr. Barnes?”

“I’ve seen him before.”

“In Harlem, correct? Was he alive or dead?”
“He was dead.”

“To whom do you attribute his death, if I may ask, Mr. Barnes?”

His knee-jerk response is to blame himself. It always has been, but he glances up at Matt, then back at Steve, cuts around through the room without intent before falling upon a familiar, unexpected face.

Wilson grins, manic and conspiratorial, seated in between a dour-looking Weasel and a fresh-faced young man who can only be Peter Parker. Bucky stops to breathe, to check himself, and to think back on that night.

‘Not in any version of reality, not for anything anybody ever made you do, are you a villain.’

Like he hears him thinking it, and maybe he does, Wilson brandishes a thumbs-up. Bucky cracks a smile.

“Mr. Barnes, please answer the question. Whose fault is it that Keith Goodman is dead?”

“They weren’t in any danger from you, Barnes. You can’t do that to yourself. You can’t assume the blame for what other people do. In the short time that I’ve known you I’ve seen that you don’t enjoy hurting people.’

He looks at Karen, at Foggy, at Matt. Foggy taps his fingers on the desk and Matt nods subtly in Bucky’s direction. They’ve gotten him down to a science, they have. They know him.

‘Hydra killed his parents.’

‘Hydra’s gonna answer for what they did to us.’

“Not me,” Bucky murmurs, softly at first. He speaks up before Alder can ask again. “Case you missed it the first time around, Counselor, I pled not guilty.”

One of the jurors lets out a surprised giggle. Bucky glances that way, caught off-guard by the sound of anyone laughing now, and relaxes at the scattered laughter rippling throughout the courtroom. He has no idea if they sympathize with him or if he should be playing up this comedic stuff in hopes that he’ll win them over, but Alder jumps on him before he can think too much about it.

“So you don’t blame yourself for the property damage accrued at the practice of Nelson & Murdock when your lawyers first agreed to take on your case?’

Murdock spouts out an objection that Ayers overrules. Bucky thinks he’s just curious to see where Alder will take it next. Of course he ups the ante.

He asks about the Helicarrier and the static Romanov heard from Steve’s comm. He asks if that’s Bucky’s fault, and Bucky doesn’t know how to answer. Maybe it’s a trick and he’s supposed to say it’s not his fault so that Alder can pounce on his lack of remorse over what happened. Bucky’s been waiting for him to say that since he brought up Keith Goodman.

“I…” Bucky chews on his cheek. “I hurt him.”

The courtroom stirs into murmurs and Bucky’s skin itches. He said the wrong thing.

“What I’m hearing you say is that when it comes to the deaths of innocent people or even the safety of your own lawyers, that’s not on you. But Steve Rogers, that’s where you draw the line. How convenient then that you share the same weakness.”
‘That they can take you from me makes me weak. It makes me weakest of all.’

“Is there a question here, Your Honor?” Foggy asks, outraged but hiding it well, Bucky thinks.

“Make your point or move on, Mr. Alder.”

“I’m done with this witness. The Prosecution rests.”

Sneaky piece of shit.

Bucky looks at the ceiling and closes his eyes. He listens for his heartbeat and breathes.

Foggy stands and walks the short distance from his seat to the witness stand. He waits a few seconds for Bucky to get his shit together and begins.

“Clearly there’s been a lot of speculation going around about your friendship with Steve Rogers. I’d like to just take a moment here to dispense with all that so we can get to the meat and bones quicker. Mr. Barnes, was Steve Rogers your best friend since childhood?”

Steeling himself, Bucky says, “Yes.”

“And now, after you’ve both been through so much, are you still friends?”

“Yes.”

“You care about each other. Effectively, you’ve both died for one another, isn’t that right?”

Alder makes to object, but Foggy’s ready for him.

“I’m merely establishing a point that we might have gotten out of the way in the beginning, Your Honor. We can’t really expect for these two to be completely unbiased toward each other.”

“Consider your point made, Mr. Nelson. Move it along.”

“Now, in regards to Keith Goodman. I was there that night on the streets of Harlem.” Foggy gestures to the jury as if waving them in closer. “Short of giving my own testimony, I’ll ask the defendant. Mr. Barnes, what was your reaction to seeing the body of Keith Goodman in the street?”

“I checked for a pulse.”

“And when you couldn’t find one, what happened then?”

“You and Sergeant Mahoney pulled me away from him so that we could get to safety.”

“And at the offices of Nelson & Murdock—where Mr. Murdock and I prepared your case, what did you do the morning after the break-in?”

“I helped you clean the place up.”

“It was trashed,” Foggy says, nodding. “Took all day trying to get it up and running again. Why help us?”

“Your office got hit because bad people were looking for me.”

“Yes, but what did you tell my associate, Mr. Murdock, on the phone when he called to tell you what happened?”
“I said…I needed to be there in case they went after your people.”

“Why, Mr. Barnes? What would you have done?”

Bucky licks his lips, points a distressed look at Karen, and remembers how terrible his fear had been when he thought she might get hurt the night that everything went to shit. He’s only ever wanted to keep them safe. From the beginning, just about, the only impact he ever hoped to have was that he might spare them a little of the hurt that being near him promised.

Karen meets his eyes and nods at him, slow and intentional. He’s sure she can track his thoughts. Still looking at her, he says, “I would have protected you.”

“Your instinct in all of these situations has been to protect, hasn’t it?” Foggy waits for Bucky to look at him again. “Would you say that that’s why you blame yourself for what happened on the Helicarrier with Steve Rogers? That you failed to protect him?”

A lump forms in Bucky’s throat. He forces a hard swallow and looks away, eyes stinging and face heating.

A love thing. A caring-about-someone-because-they’re-important-to-you thing.

“Yes,” he says because he can’t say on the stand that the reason he does anything is that he loves Steve Rogers.

Maybe that was true once and maybe it’s a little true now, but he loves other people, too, now. And it’s okay that he does.

“And even in spite of the orders you had been given to kill Rogers, when he fell into the river, what did you do?”

“I dove in after him.”

“You saved his life.” Foggy tips his chin a fraction, eyes shining. “Because the very moment that you were capable, you did what you’ve always done. You protected your best friend.”

Foggy’s a goddamn genius and he’s going to make Bucky cry on the goddamn witness stand if he keeps it up much longer. Good thing for everyone, he doesn’t. He weaves them along to different stitches in the fabric and other questions just because they need to be thorough.

Claire doesn’t come up. The Red Team doesn’t come up. His past with Steve and Natasha resurfaces; the assassinations and the tortures resurface. The good and the bad, for whatever reason it’s good and whatever reason it’s bad, all sound the same to Bucky’s ears. It’s all merged together like one awful open wound he can never shut.

“No further questions, Your Honor.”

Ayers sends Bucky back to his seat and he sags once he’s there.

Alder gives his closing statement first. He talks up the string of kill orders, the Winter Soldier’s perfection as a machine of war. Bucky closes his eyes, wishing that he could unhear the things Alder says about him. They’re things he used to believe were permanent, evil fixtures of his own soul but that he doesn’t buy into anymore.

He feels better immediately once Matt stands to give a closing statement in turn. There’s more buzz
words to cue one in themes of humanity—talk of *mens rea*, the guilty mind. He mentions agency and the existence of two entities, always at separate times, within Bucky: “Two entities, certainly; but one man.

“That is the tragedy of the case you are faced with today.”

Matt returns to his seat and holds out his hand. Bucky mumbles a, “Yeah, please,” before Matt sets it on Bucky’s shoulder.

“What happens now?” he whispers.

The court around them is shuffling, getting ready to head home. The bailiff is already making his way to Bucky to take him back to confinement, and Bucky’s definitely not panicking about it but he’s not relaxed either.

“The jury deliberates. Could take an hour; could take a week.”

“Jesus Christ,” Bucky moans, careful to keep quiet about it but only growing more and more despondent the closer they get to the end. “Блядь!”

“Hang in there, Barnes. You made it. Now we just have to wait.”

*I’ve waited a year*, he thinks desperately to himself. *If I have to wait a week, I’m going to go out of my damn mind.*

He doesn’t go out of his damn mind, but he doesn’t have to wait a week either. The jury takes four days. In those four days, he writes Rebecca, he makes himself finish *Decameron*, and he reads through *The Fox and the Hound* one more time, thumbing apologetically at the bent pages when he finds them.

It’s not a week, but it’s still awful and Bucky wants to chew his remaining arm off. He might even make a project of it if they don’t let him out. A year in the pen’s a year too long. It’s a year of character development that he didn’t ask for.

Bucky’s back in his suit and Foggy doesn’t have to fix his hair because it’s too late for it to matter, but he still does it anyway. It’s an acceptable, if hilarious, shared touch that Bucky’s just in agony over.

If they declare him not guilty, he doesn’t know which one of them he’s going to hug first. If they declare him guilty, he might just will himself to black out. There’d be no point in prolonging the inevitable. He could just sink into black, wake up in his cell, and count the days to see if Wilson’s serious about the whole DTK thing.

Foggy and Matt are sitting on either side of him, so he takes the opportunity to crush Foggy’s hand in his beneath the table. He’d show Matt the same treatment if he had another hand to spare, but alas, this is the first time he’s really mourned not having both at his disposal. In a bleak compromise, he nudges Matt’s foot with the toe of the fancy Oxfords Foggy bought for him. Matt huffs and bumps him with his heel.

Judge Ayers strides in, looking noticeably tired and worried. Bucky hopes that means he’s concerned that the jury will choose wrong, though he’s not sure which verdict would be wrong in Ayers’ eyes. He calls for everyone to stand up and Bucky holds his breath.

“Has the jury come to a verdict?”
“We have, Your Honor,” says their ringleader, a scrappy-looking young woman with her hair woven into a single braid down her back.

Bucky’s seen her hair in profile, so he knows it hangs down at least to her back. She has a straight nose, high cheekbones, and a wide jaw. She looks right at him for a moment as if to get a measure of him and looks down at the paper in her hands. It’s got quite a lot of checkboxes listed on it, probably more than a jury’s used to seeing all at one time.

She starts to read and Bucky takes a sharp breath in and squeezes Foggy’s hand in accidental panic, letting go when Foggy sucks in a startled gasp and only just refrains from squawking. He turns a comically frantic look on Bucky and frowns, but there’s no time to be bitter about it because she’s reading off the charges against him and she’s saying he’s not guilty.

Impossibly, against all odds, she reads off each sordid crime he undoubtedly committed and freeing him from the burden of blame that he’ll, regardless, carry for the rest of his life. Perhaps that’s the sentence they’re counting on letting him serve. Maybe they see well enough that punishment will not equate with healing.

The court dissolves into a chaotic blur of yelling. Someone on the right side of the courtroom is disappointed, someone on the left side (Wilson, he’s positive) is ecstatic.

People are beside themselves with the spectacle. Bucky, since he made up his mind to do it five minutes ago and because Foggy’s still recovering from his power grip, throws himself on Matt and doesn’t let go. It’s difficult to hold onto him what with his one hand being chained close to his body, but he plasters himself against Matt’s front and stays there and lets Matt do the hugging for both of them.

He must look absurd, flailing in his restraints and all but collapsing sideways into his lawyer. The bailiff takes pity on him and comes with a key to at least unshackle his hand.

After that, they’re leading him out a side door where Bucky’s restraints are fully removed. Matt and Foggy are still with him, so he checks with Foggy before throwing a hug on him as well because fuck it, really. He’s been in a box, bereft of this kind of human touch for a year. He’ll take every slip and scrape of it that he can.

Which isn’t to say that he wouldn’t hug Foggy right now if he had other options. As it is, he hugs Foggy for a solid minute while Matt teases that they oughta take pictures. Bucky doesn’t care. There’s a long, long list of things that he feels right now and embarrassed is not one of them.

Ayers comes in through a door on the other side of the one they’d used, and Bucky straightens out, finally releasing Foggy from his grasp.

“Jeez,” Foggy croaks, catching his breath.

“Gentlemen,” Ayers says, regal and amused in his flowing black robes. With a hint of a smile on his face, he looks like his nephew. “Mr. Barnes.”

“Sir.”

“Judge Ayers,” Matt and Foggy say as one.

“You handled yourself well out there, Mr. Barnes.”

“Thank you, sir.” Bewildered, he shakes Ayers’ hand when it’s offered. “I had a lot of help.”
“You had the right kinda help.” He looks at Foggy and Matt in turns. “It was good of you boys to take to his case. You’ll see him through what’s next, won’t you?”

“We wouldn’t have it any other way,” Matt replies, all sincere, clean angles just like Bucky’s come to expect of him.

Grinning, Foggy adds, “Yeah, he can’t get rid of us that easily.”

Ayers nods his head a few times, a bit of the sage in him though he doesn’t look that old. He’s certainly not a young man—if Bucky had to guess, especially going off the knowledge that he’s Mahoney’s uncle, Judge Ayers must be late in his seventies. Throughout the duration of the trial, he’s been nothing but alert and spry.

Bucky’s impressed to stand in his company now and only just pick up on hints of Ayers’ age showing through. This trial’s been hard on him. Bucky’s beginning to see why.

“I wish we hadn’t had to drag you through it like that, son. Damn shame the things I see in this work sometimes. Damn shame.”

“I made it out,” Bucky says, voice wanting to leave him. “I’m not alone. I’ll be all right.”

_I made it out. I’m not alone. I’ll be all right._

He’s surprised that he can say any of those things and mean them, but they’re each unavoidably true. That’s the beginning and the end of it.

“I won’t keep you then, gentlemen. Take him home.”

Home.

Bucky thinks of Steve and Wilson and Matt and Karen and Мурка. Matt happens to be right next to him, so he grabs Matt, the closest reminder he has currently that his life gets to be his life once they walk out of this building—that it’s his life now.

Matt laughs like he’s charmed at Bucky’s clinginess, like it’s not a miracle in itself that he couldn’t handle when they first met. So much has changed, but then, a lot of the important things have stayed exactly the same. Matt smells the same, for example. He still parts his hair down the sort-of-middle, likely with his hand draped over the back of his head when he’s fresh from the shower.

Ayers steps out of their path and crosses into another door. Bucky walks with Matt’s hand clutched in his and Foggy flanking him on the left side. He skitters to a stop, anxious, and asks if he’ll need to return to the prison for his personal effects. Sensing how deeply he doesn’t want to go back, Foggy puts his worries to bed and promises to go get them himself. Bucky allows it and starts walking again, palm sweating where it’s squeezing Matt’s.

They get to the door and Bucky swallows down the fear bubbling up inside him. Through the archway and out onto the pavement, they’re assaulted by blinding, cool air. Bucky drinks it in, squinting in the sun like it’s something strange and wonderful that he’s never seen before. Further off he hears voices.

“Is there a press conference?”

“Steve and Tony are delivering a message to the people of the world,” Foggy says, so comfortable and easy around both their names that he sounds like a friend of the family. “Don’t you remember the Twitter campaigns?”
“Super Soldiers Like Pizza; Classy Ladies, too,” Bucky recalls, not mentioning ‘Stucky is Real’. Because.

“We fought to keep you trending,” Matt picks up. “Wasn’t hard. Anything the two of them tweet goes viral anyway. That they needed you to trend made an even bigger difference.”

He notices that they’ve stopped walking and continues, putting one foot in front of the other in whatever direction Matt and Foggy steer him into. The voices pick up in volume and he looks around, swinging his gaze up a mountain of stairs so he can see Steve and Tony standing side by side, sharing a microphone. Bucky listens, slowing his pace to make it easier on himself. Matt turns his head, also listening.

“…a man out of time. I always have been, but it never made sense to me that I should survive one war and come out clean on the other side, alone.”

Bucky moves a little closer, careful to stay out of sight of any cameras. Steve pauses, doing something with his hands, reading from something to keep his thoughts organized—or maybe to keep himself from thinking, period. He huffs slightly into the microphone, obviously losing his place or going off-script or both.

“I just can’t remember the last time I was honestly happy, about anything.”

Some cameras flash and Bucky’s teeth click in his mouth at these people capitalizing on the chinks in Steve’s armor, the little vulnerable spots that are Bucky’s doing. Matt catches his wrist to stop him from marching over there and extracting Steve from the situation. Bucky hadn’t even realized that he moved.

“Uh, what Cap means to say, I think,” Stark muses, a professional bullshitter and an even better crowd-wrangler, “is that it’s been about, oh, seventy-odd years since he last hugged it out with his recently liberated Bucky Bear? I think we’ll go with that. I can take questions if anyone’s interested in how skillfully we balanced The Trial of Bucky Barnes with our whole Saving-the-World gig.”

“Bucky Bear?” Bucky mumbles.

“What did I tell you, Matt,” Foggy crows. “He’s gonna love it.”

“Foggy,” Matt sighs.

Bucky ignores them briefly to watch Steve’s progression away from the gaggle of reporters. He gauges the best way to clear about a block of civilian-heavy corporate buildings and eyes the nearest rooftop with a visible, climbable fire escape hanging down oh-so-conveniently at the end of the alleyway. Matt turns to look at him over some unmonitored scrape of his heel on the gravel or Bucky doesn’t know what and smirks.

“Can’t wait, huh?”

“I’d really rather not is the thing,” he confesses, smiling in spite of himself, eager to run and feel concrete beneath his hands—hand. “Think I can make it one-handed?”

“I think you’re ballsy enough to make a go of it no matter what I say.”

He doesn’t think he’s ever had practice with it. Sure, he’s gotten the hang of one-handed pushups and assorted yoga poses, but that’s all he’s had the room to try. He could probably track Steve still, but if he’s gotten into a car, Bucky’s chances are a bit more slim.
“I’ll wait,” he grumbles, really wishing he’d been able to sprint after Steve and aerial-strike him with all his pent up energy.

He doesn’t let himself think about how it could have gone wrong if Steve misinterpreted his intent. Actually, he’s not convinced Steve would really react if he read Bucky wrong and thought he’d relapsed or something equally ugly and terrifying that he refuses to think about in detail.

Matt and Foggy lead him the other way down the alley. A car picks them up where the sidewalk feeds into the road and Bucky recognizes the man behind the wheel. He’s not covered in the same assortment of facial bandages, but there’s a new bruise high up on his arm and a flowery, pastel bandaid taped over his eyebrow. The purple plaster really brings out his eyes.

“Clint Barton, sir.” He stretches out his hand from the front seat to reach Bucky in the back. “I’ve been waitin’ to meet you.”

“Have you?” he asks, noting the splatter of black ink on Clint’s wrist.

This Clint Barton is the one who gave Natasha a job when the order had been to kill her. He has a history already of taking in strays. It’s not hard to relax under his gentle scrutiny when he thinks of Natasha choosing to sit beside him in court for days, weeks on end.

Clint chatters on once his car mates make it clear that they don’t plan on talking for the drive home. Bucky doesn’t mind listening, especially since Sokovia ends up being Clint’s topic of interest.

“They’re just confused, you know? They’ve been hurt by the world like anyone else. All they need is an outlet—and we can give ‘em that.”

He definitely has a penchant for taking in strays, from Romanov to these Maximoff twins to Bucky himself, it seems. Clint mentions Wilson and unwittingly reminds Bucky that Steve said the twins wouldn’t have come back with them if not for Wilson’s being there. Bucky asks what Steve meant by that and Clint’s only too happy to tell him.

“So Pietro and Wanda have these special abilities; he’s fast and she’s…telekinetic, I guess is the easiest way to put it. She has this knack for bringing out your worst fear as a hallucination, and if she watches what you see in that other…freaky place, then she gets a sorta sense for who you are. I mean, you’d think so, right? A person’s greatest fear’s gotta tell you something significant about their character.”

“Sure,” Bucky says, following along greedily for information about Sokovia since no one would tell him before.

“Well, we went to get Loki’s scepter and—they tell you what that is?”

“Magical Norse weapon?” Bucky guesses, tone of voice making Clint laugh sharp and loud.

“More or less. Anyway, Thor gets into the room where it’s being held and he’s got Wade as his backup. Sam, Rhodey, and I’ve got the outside secured, and Nat’s off talking down the Big Guy, so we’re all in position, basically, but the twins are unaccounted for. Wanda takes out Thor with her…” Clint wiggles his fingers, the other hand firmly planted on the steering wheel. “And then she goes to work on Wade since she’s seen by now that his regenerative powers won’t make physically hurting him an easy task.”

Clint takes a cautious left turn and Bucky leans back in his seat, noticing belatedly that he’d leaned in right against the front passenger’s side to better hear. Foggy glances at him, unabashedly entertained, and Bucky frowns at him and at Matt’s silent grin, too.
“So she does her thing to Wade, and it flat-out doesn’t work. Does not achieve the desired effect, at all. You gotta figure Wade, he’s been through some nasty shit, right?”

“Right,” Bucky says, eyeing Matt where he’s still grinning ridiculously.

He looks more like a schoolboy than he ever has in Bucky’s presence, which is saying something. Foggy notices, too, and also bites back a smile. Bucky ignores them and focuses on Clint’s story.

“And see, you’d think that she’d be prepared for that, except Wade’s not really your garden-variety mercenary. Whatever he sees in his hallucination, A) he’s perfectly lucid for it and B) Wanda’s along for the ride one hundred percent, whether she meant to be or not. He wouldn’t say what they saw and Wanda gets upset if you ask her about it, but next thing anyone knows, she’s trying to kill him, saying she can’t let him take the scepter or else something terrible will happen.”

Bucky imagines the conversation they might’ve had because he knows Wilson would have tried to talk to her at that point. If it was so bad that even he wouldn’t speak of it after the fact, then he wouldn’t have just taken the scepter from her without trying to get at the heart of what they’d seen.

“So Wanda’s trying to kill him. By that point, she’s so visibly upset that her brother comes in and then he’s trying to kill Wade, and you can imagine. She’s nearly caving the building in because she’s so disturbed by what she saw in Wade’s head and Pietro’s running circles around Wade trying to hit him hard enough that he stays down.”

“Good luck,” Bucky murmurs.

“Yeah, exactly,” Clint hums. “And it’s taking such a long time that Thor actually snaps out of it and grabs the scepter himself. He won’t tell us what they talked about either, but the general gist is that Wanda makes him promise that Thor will take it back to where it belongs. She makes him swear that he won’t let Tony have it, no matter what.”

“Huh.”

“That’s what I said, buddy.”

Matt turns his face to the window to hide how he’s starting to laugh, but Bucky sees him. He also sees Foggy hiding his smile behind his hand in the mirror. They’re laughing at him. Thing is, he doesn’t give a shit. Clint’s telling a fucking story and they can laugh if they want, but Bucky’s gonna hear about Wilson’s contribution to the mission in Sokovia already, damn it.

“Well, eventually, Thor talks the twins down so that they’re not trying to kill Wade anymore, and Wade manages to convince Wanda that he wants to prevent whatever they saw from happening, too.”

“That why they came back with you?” Bucky asks, remembering that Steve said Wilson played a huge part in getting them to join the Avengers’ ranks. “The hallucination scared them straight?”

“I think that was part of it. If Tony had been there, they might not have come even then. It’s a good thing he had you keepin’ him busy over here. The twins have…the usual tragic backstory you’d expect, with some variations upon the tried-and-true formula.”

That sounds distinctly like something Wilson would say. They’ve all got dark corners and shadowy beginnings laced in pain. He shouldn’t be surprised that Clint sounds like he’s seen his fair share of tragic.

Clint pulls the car up to a very familiar building and stops alongside the curb without parking it.
Bucky waits for Foggy and Matt to disembark first and then reaches to shake Clint’s hand again before slipping out onto the street. He jogs up the steps to Matt’s apartment, hardly waiting for Foggy or Matt to catch up. Expecting the door to be locked, he lags a bit on the step and startles when it swings open.

Karen grins and shouts his name like it’s wonderful to see him. She steps toward him, hesitating for a second to let him decide, and wraps him an a hug to equal the one he’d thrown on Matt after the verdicts were read. They stand there on the doorstep idling, Bucky holding her firmly with one arm barred delicately behind the curve of her back. He peers over her shoulder into the apartment and sees Sam talking to someone—Natasha.

Bucky backpedals and runs into Foggy who nearly flails into Matt. Karen’s surprised, but it’s the kind of surprised where she can laugh through it, so he’s not alarmed at the sound of it so close to his ear.

“I’m everybody in there?” Steve, he means; is Steve in there.

“Sam and Natasha came with Steve,” Karen informs him, unwinding her arms from around his neck and isn’t that a new thing. “Dr. Banner’s here with Pepper to give you the new arm. They were just giving us a demonstration. It’s pretty impressive.”

His heart sinks. “Oh.”

“Come on,” Foggy says. “There’s no time like the present.”

“Wilson’s not here?”

Matt starts to reply, but Foggy beats him to it: “Well, hey, at least you know how to get a hold of him if he doesn’t show up at some point, right?”

“That’s true.” Bucky sighs, ignoring Karen’s and Matt’s curious glances. Wilson’s inexplicable moments of omniscience is not something he wants to get into just now. “Okay.”

Karen walks back in through the door with Bucky hot on her heels, his one hand caught up in hers. It helps him imagine a tether doing the job that gravity can’t and anchoring his mind here with the deadweight of his body. The quiet chatter inside softens into hushed silence. Pepper and Steve stand, Steve pocketing his hands and Pepper stepping in at Dr. Banner’s side.

Bucky’s careful not to squeeze Karen’s hand in his when he sees the arm laid out in the box like an oversized industrial bouquet. It’s sleek and a bizarre color that imitates his skin tone without affecting even a vaguely human texture. It’s all sloping curves of metal and smoothly shifting plates wrapped around a pylon built from adamantium-infused vibranium alloy just as Stark designed.

Pepper tells him some more about what keeps this prosthesis reliably powered while Banner hefts it out of its case. Steve and Sam jerk towards Banner to help him lift the arm without fumbling it or the case it comes in onto the floor. Natasha slips in easy like a dagger between the ribs and takes both of them smoothly out of Banner’s hands. She balances the box on her hip and extends the arm back to Banner. It doesn’t appear to be heavy on its own.

“Careful with the merchandise there, Bruce.”


Considering that Bucky’s been carrying zero weight on his left side for over a month now, he deems it a good thing that the new arm is lightweight. His previous one before the temporary replacement
had been bulky and unkind to his skin.

Derailed quite a bit by the sight of the arm, Bucky backs up a bit so that he almost leaves the living room. Matt turns his head to follow him, but Foggy’s the one to ask if he’s all right.

“Yeah, just…Steve?”

He sees Natasha go tense about the shoulders and Sam start to gradually pivot in Bucky’s direction. They’re here to make sure he doesn’t hurt their friend. It’d been pretty obvious from their seating arrangement in court that they were there to keep Steve from collapsing on himself or managing to fall on someone’s sword to save Bucky. Now here they are in Matt’s living room still keeping watch.

Bucky’s glad of it. He’s endlessly happy that people love Steve and protect him now that Bucky’s made such a piss-poor a job of it. He’s glad of it, but he also hates it, too—hates being on the wrong side of it.

And Steve, the big idiot, he just looks at Bucky like he hung the moon and he can’t wait to see what he’ll do next, and Bucky’s still not ready for that. The drumming in his chest is different than it was before, but he’s probably more afraid of what that means than of what the alternative used to mean for him, for them.

“Buck,” he says, breathes it like Bucky’s name is life-giving and game-changing.

‘I just can’t remember the last time I was honestly happy, about anything.’

‘It’s been about, oh, seventy-odd years since he last hugged it out with his recently liberated Bucky Bear?’

Bucky Bear.

“Ah—Bucky Bear.” He changes the subject, turning to Foggy for help. “Foggy.”

“Oh yeah,” he says because he’s a saint, seriously. “This way.”

Steve doesn’t deflate. He actually really doesn’t. He’s too wrapped up in just looking at Bucky while Bucky looks back at him, freed and alive and as well as he can be expected to get on short notice. Foggy leads him to Matt’s room and plucks a plush bear off of Matt’s nightstand. He waves it briefly and holds it out for Bucky to take. It’s got red and blue blocks of fabric adorning its legs and what looks to be a black mask covering its eyes.

“Bucky Bear,” Foggy says, smiling at Bucky’s perplexed scowl. “Holding a Bucky Bear.”

“Hmm.” He squeezes the bear around the middle and perches it in the turn of his elbow so he can pinch one gloved, amorphous paw without dropping it. “Why does Matt have it in his room?”

“Karen bought it. She thought it’d be funny.”

“It’s…endearing.”

“It’s supposed to be you.”

“No, I…” Bucky squints, remembers where he’s seen the costume before. There’d been comics in the days of the war—another advertising trick to get people to buy war bonds. “I got that. Is there a Steve Bear, too?”

“We could probably find one. The internet is full of wonders.”
Bucky fiddles with the round paws and sits on the edge of Matt’s bed. He’s still in his fancy suit, annoyingly, but being back in Matt’s room on his soft bed with a toy built in his own likeness just distracts from that small frustration. Foggy shuffles toward the door and pokes his head out.

“Everyone’s here for you,” he says, stepping back into the room and turning his back to the doorway. “But if you don’t want to be around all of us right now, that’s perfectly understandable.”

“I just need a minute.”

“Works.” Foggy nods and pockets his hands. “You want me to get Steve?”

Bucky snaps his head up, alarmed for no reason, but Foggy only smiles.

“Alternatively, I could go up on the roof and start yelling for Wilson to get over here, but I have a feeling that’s something that’s specific to you.”

“I dunno, he’s pretty sweet on you.”

Foggy scoffs, grinning, and kicks at the floor with the tip of his shoe. “What’ll it be, Barnes? Need me to cut out, leave you and the bear in peace for a few minutes?”

“I’ll…I mean, if he doesn’t mind, could you bring Steve?”

Foggy’s smile widens and he turns on his heel. Bucky sits in quiet for about a minute squeezing various puffy parts of the teddy bear. Its stomach right above the belt is especially squishy; the ears and legs, too. He pokes at its nose and wrinkles his in time with the scrunched up red felt. Steve knocks on the door, visible through the partial crack Foggy left when left to retrieve him.

Bucky squeezes the bear’s foot and holds his ground.

“Come in.”

Steve steps into the room and leaves the door open behind him. It’s safer for both of them that way, Bucky figures.

“Hi.”

“Hey.” Steve smiles small and even laughs, so softly, when he sees what Bucky’s holding onto. “Cute.”

“Careful,” Bucky says, nothing about his tone indicating danger. “We’re tough.”

“I know.”

The happiness radiating off of Steve is like the heat that accompanies a great fire. Bucky remembers fire, explosions. He remembers slamming his hands down on an iron railing and saying he wouldn’t go without Steve. All he’s got now is the bear in his lap. He curls his arm around it so that it presses close to his ribs.

Steve’s expression softens watching him. Bucky looks away, needing and wanting everything but dreading that he should ask any of them for more. Especially Steve.

“I wanted to say…” he starts saying at the same time that Steve blurts out:

“I missed you.”
They stare at each other, Steve’s cheeks glowing pink and Bucky’s ears burning hot beneath the curtain of his hair. Steve clears his throat and steps away from the door, pulling his hands free of his pockets.

“Sorry.”

“No, I was—me, too.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, um.”

“Buck, is it okay if…?”

Bucky tosses the bear behind on the bed and stands up too fast, startling them both. The thought sinks in that this is their first moment alone together without an audience chaperoning one or the other. It feels like as good a time as any to be honest, and maybe just a little selfish.

“I’m not the same person,” Bucky warns in a small voice, stepping closer. “I don’t think I can be.”

Steve’s eyes look red and glassy. He speaks quietly, too. “You’re here. You know me.”

“Is that enough?” he asks, bewildered and afraid and hoping with his whole heart.

“It is for me.” Steve flashes a quick smile. “Nothing…nothing ever made sense without you.”

“That what you meant at the press conference?”

“Ah. Well. I didn’t think you’d hear that.”

Bucky smirks, but it falls away too quickly. “’S not all I heard. You said you weren’t happy.”

They’re standing about a foot apart. Bucky can hear the steady thud of Steve’s heart if he just keeps an ear out for it. It’s at a strong gallop, super-powered and battle ready like the rest of him. A part of Steve’s always been that way, always been better than the average Joe.

The frown on Steve’s face reminds him of when they were young men; Steve perpetually grimacing while Bucky fusses over him. It’s a return to normalcy, in the smallest, easiest way that they can negotiate.

“Steve,” he sighs, thinking about unhappiness and about warmth that feels like home. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Buck. I was always gonna fight for you.”

“No, I know.” It’s true, Bucky thinks: Steve always was going to be in his corner, and Bucky does know it. “But you worked with a bunch of strangers to make it happen all because I chose them over you.”

“So did you.” Steve shrugs. “Tony, Pepper, and Bruce. They’re the best people I could have brought to you, and Nelson, Page, and Murdock are the best you could have brought to me. I don’t regret that you had someone else looking out for you. I know we’ve got our own support systems outside of each other, and I respect that.”

Bucky’s throat dries up and his hand sweats. He says, “I had the same thought about you.”

“What do you mean? Sam and Natasha?” At Bucky’s nod, Steve says, “You managed to nab an
assassin of your own, at least.”

Bucky snorts. “Yeah, wherever he ran off to.”

Steve’s eyes glitter, shoulders finally loosened up and hands unclenched by his sides. Bucky catalogs himself: the relaxed facial muscles, the slightly hunched shoulders, and his fingers curling, slack, toward his palm. He breathes out in time with the galloping metronome of his heart, knowing all the places where it beats in synch with Steve’s own noisy ticker.

“Can I hug you?”

The astonished fluttering of Steve’s eyelashes paired with his comically widened eyes almost makes Bucky laugh, but he pushes that impulse down. Laughing might make light of his request, or worse, give the impression that Bucky doesn’t want what he’s asking for. Respectful, open communication is the only way that he sees this particular interaction ending well for anyone.

“You can.”

Steve might cry. Bucky’s probably going to cry also if Steve gets started, but he doesn’t let himself think that far ahead. Steve’s warm—too warm, honestly—and at first he just holds Bucky tentatively in place like a praying mantis. The embrace with Matt’s Bucky Bear went over better than this. Disgruntled, Bucky pulls him in close and tight with his arm around Steve’s lower back. Catching on, maybe, Steve wraps his arms more purposefully around Bucky’s shoulders and properly hugs him.

And, yeah. Bucky’s going to cry.

He doesn’t mind so much because Steve pretty much cries immediately and there’s no finesse to the embrace at all, but Bucky would have a harder time of it if they were trying to be curt and aloof about it. As it is, they’re swaying and digging in with their fingers and someone’s trying to sniffle discreetly, but it’s not working. Bucky doesn’t care. It’s perfect.

There are words he or Steve could say to make this moment more or less than it is, but they allow it the silence it deserves. Bucky scrubs at his face once they let go and Steve dabs at his eyes with the heels of his hands.

“I think they’re waiting to get the arm on you,” Steve says, awkward, flushed, and red-nosed.

“Yeah.”

Steve stays behind in the room for a while and Bucky goes out to meet Pepper and Dr. Banner. He needs to take off his shirt and jacket in order for them to get the arm into place, so he goes and sits on the edge of the bathtub and lets Banner fit him out. The arm’s spiffy and comfortable, doesn’t pinch his skin like Bucky worried it might.

Banner explains that the prosthesis has all the right tech in place to allow him to feel sensations in certain sections but only if they go through with surgery to include a cuff electrode to the setup. He says Bucky can think about it. Bucky says he will because he’s been sold on the idea for practically a year now.

Sam, Steve, and Natasha are standing by the couch when he comes out with million dollar technology poking out of his rolled up shirtsleeves. The jacket’s folded neatly over his right shoulder. Natasha whistles.

“Whoa.” Sam says, eyeing the shiny prosthesis.
Foggy raises his eyebrows. “You can say that again.”

“I like it,” Karen remarks around an appreciative gasp.

Bucky looks at her and muses, “Nice, isn’t it? Wanna feel, Matt?”

He holds out his hand and flutters his fingers, thinking back on their first official meeting at Nelson & Murdock. Matt reaches out into the space between them and Bucky places his hand within his grasp. Approval lining his tone, Matt says, “That’s smooth.”

Bucky twists and turns it beneath Matt’s coasting fingers. He studies Matt’s face, notices the slight pinch between his eyebrows.

“Not as noisy as the other one,” he adds, sensing that Bucky’s watching him so closely. “Gonna have to put bells on you after all.”

Karen laughs. Pepper and Banner beam at how well the arm handles when it’s only his first time using it. Steve has a tiny smile on his face that doesn’t look like it’s going to fade away any time soon.

“Bells wouldn’t do you much good, Murdock,” Natasha teases, surprising the hell out of Bucky but not really startling anyone else. “He’d have to want to sneak up on you.”

“He’s far too honest for that,” Matt retorts. “You’re right.”

Bucky crosses his arms in front of him and stands next to Karen. “First of all…”

Someone knocks on the front door and he stops, turning to the sound and following Foggy with his eyes when he runs to go and get it. He listens and takes a few steps that way before stopping in his tracks.

“Mr. Wilson?”

“Foggy! Fancy meeting you here. Don’t you look as handsome as ever.”

Bucky jogs around the corner into the hallway and skids to an unceremonious stop at the sight Wilson makes. He’s leant up against the doorjamb with one arm wearing baggy street clothes and the kind of grin that’s sure to put a blush on Foggy’s face. Wilson glances up at the noise Bucky’s shoes make on the floor and beams, joy suffusing his features where he’d been trying to play it cool in front of Foggy.

“Tin man!”

“Wilson, you…” Bucky doesn’t know what he’s trying to say. He just walks through the open door and closes him in a hug because that’s easier and Wilson told him once that he’d always be good for them. “You came.”

“Well, I am here,” Wilson says, somewhat stiffly. “Jeez, I swear, is it just me hearing the lines we get stuck with whenever we’re together?”

“What?”

They’re hugging still and Bucky’s not concerned about whether they’re inside or outside or what Wilson’s current complaint is with the higher power that only Wilson’s aware of. He just keeps hugging him. That’s the most important thing.
“Sorry I was a no-show for most of this chapter, Buckles. I had a bad Avengers movie to prevent. You weren’t even gonna be mentioned in it, that’s how lousy it was.”

“Is that what you were doing in Sokovia,” Bucky drawls, not following along at all.

“So they told you! See, this is why we need MCU Crossovers! Cut out all the spooky robot apocalypse conflict and skip right to the healing and the hugging.” Wilson sighs, giving Bucky’s shoulders a reassuring squeeze. “I was worried they might leave you in the dark about it, what with the whole Shawshank situation and all. Good stuff. Saves me the trouble of telling you myself.”

“I hope you’ll tell me anyway.”

“Yeah, seriously,” Foggy says from the doorway, now leaned against the doorframe in a picture of easy grace and self-assuredness. “Stick around and tell us. We’ll order pizza.”

“A prophecy at long last fulfilled,” Wilson declares, keeping one arm hooked around Bucky’s shoulder when they turn toward the door together. “I feel like this calls for a photo op. No promises that one of you won’t be gettin’ serious bunny ears from me, though.”

They go inside together, Wilson flirting shamelessly with Foggy while Bucky walks ahead of them into the living room. He regroups with Steve, being that he’s the only one not partnered up with someone else. Pepper and Karen are by the window, Matt and Natasha are on the couch sitting quite close, and Banner’s with Sam near the kitchen explaining something with his hands. It looks like it could be a jetpack. Sam nods emphatically at whatever Banner’s said and continues their conversation.

“Tony built a new set of wings for him before they went out to meet with Wilson in Sokovia.” Steve tells him, gesturing in Sam’s direction. “Dr. Banner’s been working on a more ergonomic design for the harness.”

“Makes sense,” Bucky hums, looking around at Matt’s apartment. “I’m glad everybody could come together like this. I didn’t picture anything so…cohesive in the beginning.”

“We made a great team.” Steve tips his head. “But then, it was for a good cause.”

“Yeah, sure,” Bucky mumbles.

Steve’s lips quirk at one side. He looks up at Bucky the same as he always has and probably how he always will, emotions clear on his face and heart resting full in his eyes. Bucky manages a quiet laugh.

“Same old Stevie.”

“And you, you’re still my best guy, Buck.”

Always has been, always will be. They’re going to need so much help—the right kind of help.

“We’ve got that in spades, I’d say,” Steve tells him because apparently Bucky said that last thing, and hopefully only the last thing, out loud.

Steve looks around now, too, at their surrounding friends. He even spares a cautious glance for Wilson who strolls in—only just now, Bucky notices—half a step behind Foggy with a dazed smile on his face. Foggy, to his credit, doesn’t look any worse for wear. There’s a blotchy bit of red in his cheeks, but otherwise, he looks normal. Bucky bites back a knowing smile and keeps his mouth shut at Steve’s oblivious questioning glance. These things will play out how they play out.
In the meantime, everyone sticks around while they wait on Stark to escape the media and bring pizza like he promised. Pepper gets a texted confirmation from Stark himself that he’ll be on his way within the hour. Clint, Bucky gathers, is his designated getaway driver, which explains why he didn’t stick around to mingle.

Bucky’s settling into their easy peace. He shares the smaller couch in Matt’s living room with Foggy and swipes through Wilson’s phone for pictures of Мурка. Wilson sits on the floor by his feet and provides a story for every photo. In between two pictures of Weasel crawling after Мурка on hands and knees, Wilson makes a completely unsubtle grab for Foggy’s calf like he just can’t help himself. Foggy swats at his hand, but he’s smiling so Bucky doesn’t say anything. He just swipes through Wilson’s pictures and marvels at the change in Мурка since that’s actually his business, sort of.

She’s fully healed with a patch of fur hanging down to cover her missing eye. The remaining one, a sparkling ruddy brown, ensorcel him and steals his heart all over again.

“Got her spayed just like you said, Sarge,” Wilson tells him. “She’s tiptop. Weas wanted me to invite you to go see her sometime. In the sequel, maybe, if you’re up to it.”

“I’m up to it,” Bucky murmurs, swiping back through the photos again.

“What sequel?” Foggy asks, not accustomed to these overtures like Bucky is.

Wilson chuckles and scratches at his cheek. He bounces his shoulders in a shrug and says, “Oh, you know.”

They don’t, obviously, but Wilson isn’t saying any more on the subject. Bucky’s fine with not knowing.

He’s got this incredible life stretching out ahead of him that’s his for the taking. These people fought like hell to secure it for him, so he’s going to do his part and seize it. He’s going to live. The fact that he won’t have to do it alone gives him strength, but it humbles him, too.

They’ll help him as freely as they help each other. He couldn’t accept it easily at the start and caring about any of them wasn’t something he took to gracefully in the beginning, but now it gives him hope. Believing that Steve can be happy and that Wilson can be heroic—that Bucky can play even a small part in helping them achieve those things—gives him hope.

It means Bucky can rest, that he can heal and get better. It means they can play a part in his recovery just like he plays a part in theirs. Wanting to help them makes him see why they’d band together to help him in the first place.

“Whatcha thinkin’ about, tin man?”

Bucky blinks and looks from Wilson to Foggy. He glances around the room for Matt and Steve, faltering at the curious smile Natasha gives him when his gaze happens upon hers.

“I was just thinkin’ how I’m lookin’ forward to this. Um, with all of you.”

Karen beams at him from her place next to Matt on the couch. “Us, too, Bucky.”

“Yes,” Sam adds, tipping his chin in Steve’s direction with a relieved little smile on his face. “Feels like it’s gonna be a good thing.”

“It is a good thing,” Steve says, flashing a smile at Sam and then at Bucky. “It’ll only get better.”
Bucky already knows there are going to be bad days and setbacks and nightmares. They can’t be stopped. He’s living proof that the past can’t be erased, but he’s also proof that the terror ends. The pain ends. People can still love him and he can still love. With everything he has left, he can love.

It’s not a new thing, but it never gets old either.

Chapter End Notes

Some translations because as far as I know Liza is still the only one here who actually speaks Russian:

Ничего - Nothing.
Я такой идиот. - I’m such an idiot.
Должно быть, фантомные боли. - Must be phantom pains.
Блядь! - Damn!

—

*Sorry if you actually liked Age of Ultron. #SprinkleSomeBuckyOnIt #WadeWuzHere

**There’s a shit ton of Easter eggs I scattered about this fic that I’m just going to explain in a bonus chapter because I spent too much time being an absolute nerd about it all to not take a handful of you fuckers with me. Some spoilers for the Deadpool Comic Universe incoming in the seventh chapter because I ran out of fucks to give.

***Also I’m pretty sure Bucky would’ve had to go back to the prison rather than just walking out of the courthouse, but this happened instead and I like it so like idk what to tell u bro
Extras

Chapter Summary

I was going to not post this, but it's a full page. Share my pain.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

These might not be listed in order of appearance. Oh well. Also, there are some spoilers, as I said, for the Deadpool Comic Universe, some of which bleed into the Deadpool film, ish.

1) The super secret knock comes from Léon: The Professional. IMDb tells me 2-1-2 is Manhattan’s area code, and Hell’s Kitchen just so happens to also be in Manhattan. Yoooooo.

2) Nelson & Murdock ends up coming under attack with Matt fending off Hydra goons by himself, but the action happens off-screen. Meanwhile, Bucky practices Braille with random letters and numbers in Matt’s apartment, but they’re not random. They’re scrambled military acronyms and ten-code (Bucky recognizes the latter in the car with Mahoney for the next scene). Each one tracks the progression of the fight at the office:
   TARFU - Things Are Really Fucked Up
   BUNDY - But Unfortunately Not Dead Yet
   BOHICA - Bend Over Here It Comes Again
   1078 - Need assistance
   (10)26 - Detaining subject
   (10)95 - Prisoner/suspect in custody

   (These two are the ones I really wanted to explain, but I figure everything else is worth mentioning, too.)

3) Wade’s friend who died believing in him is a reference to Worm, a patient he met at Hospice. Ajax lobotomized Worm as a means of punishing Wade for saying his real name to humiliate him in front of the other patients. If you’ve seen the Deadpool movie, there’s a moment when they make you think they’ll go this route, but they don’t. -shakes fists at the heavens-

   EDIT: In my second viewing of the film, I noticed that they did actually include a nod to Worm and I just hadn’t noticed it the first time around. God bless Ryan Reynolds. This is why he produced the film and not me, clearly. Beautiful man.

4) Karen says she lights the candles in memory of someone she’s lost. She’s referring to Elena Cardenas and Ben Urich.

5) When Bucky asks how Spiderman and Deadpool met, Wade goes really quiet and lets Spidey explain. He then follows up with, “I don’t know why you’re complaining. No marriage is perfect.” He’s talking about Cable. His adventures with Nate Summers ended right about the time that he started running with Spiderman.
6) Also, Wade’s undead wife is Death because they’re happily married. Yep.

7) Weasel mentions Blind Al and that he won a dog, Deuce, in a card game. In comic book canon, he wins Deuce off of Foggy who had originally intended to give Deuce to Matt as a guide dog. Neither Matt nor Blind Al wanted the dog.

8) A white cat sometimes appears in Weasel’s apartment in the comics.

9) Spiderman acts shady about Wade and Weasel’s relationship because it isn’t a very healthy one in the comics.


11) Thor still had a Vision…

12) “Curlicue” and “Copperplate” are references to Deadpool’s Thought Boxes.

13) Look at this Bucky Bear. Just look at it. Imagine hugging such a wondrous plushy in your arms. - https://www.etsy.com/listing/183876863/bucky-bear-plush?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=shopping_us_a-toys_and_games-toys-stuffed_animals_and_plushies&utm_custom1=b1595789-a1e3-48fc-a4c7-951bb710da2c&gclid=CjwKEAiA9JW2BRDxtaq2ruDg22oSJACgtXcnsFO7-BhOf4rWzvazp8J3H1FPMju3Y44-jQl8RgTxoCICPw_wcB

14) Sequel? Wade has such a big mouth, I swear.

15) And again, Wade's pinterest account. It's just for laughs.
https://www.pinterest.com/poolgongiveit2u/

Chapter End Notes

I did a shit ton of research so that you guys wouldn't have to, but it occurred to me that I might have been way too subtle about some of this shit. My bad. -throws hands-

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!