The Real World: Bed Stuy

by jendavis

Summary

This is the true story of two strangers, tasked to live in an apartment building, get their shit together, and have their lives (probably) monitored by Natasha and Steve, to find out what happens when people try to stop being agents and assets, and start getting real.

Notes

Some readers may find the admittedly hand-wavy and inaccurate descriptions of medication and therapeutic regimens troubling. It was the product of lazy research, and not done out of any ill will. Take care of yourself, and if you need to ping me for details, please don’t hesitate to do so.
He blinks awake in Germany with blood on his hands and concrete dust in his hair.

The words are still there, carved into his right arm; he's made a habit of checking, he thinks, for a while now. [You are James Buchanan Barnes]. He doesn't know how long it's been there, though he remembers tracing over a healing James with a scalpel he'd found in the Moscow laboratory.

James Buchanan Barnes is his name. He just doesn't know what it means, yet.

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The exhibit at the Smithsonian is gone by the time he makes it back to Washington.

It's not until he's looking for it that he realizes that it hadn't been there last time, either. It's been a long time since he's thought about it.

There are other things he could be looking at- other things that would help, other things he should know.

He needs to go though. Right now.

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He steals a car and drives to Chicago. Doesn't kill anyone this time; someone's already found the lab. The remains of the cryotank are familiar underneath the fist-sized indentations in the door, but he doesn't know if he'd ever been kept here. What's more troubling- more troubling than usual- is the fact that he can't remember if he's already been here. If those imprints are his, if he's going in circles.

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He wakes up in the middle of the night and his arm is itching. There's a name carved into it. Apparently it's his.

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He's in Philadelphia the next time he's got his shit together enough to go out to the library. The librarian tells him that there are several books on Steven Grant Rogers, three published in the last two years. All of them are currently checked out. She suggests databases he might use, if he'd like to sit down at one of the computers.

He shifts to keep his left hand hidden inside his coat. If she can hear the metal plates grinding, she doesn't comment.

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He's just north of Caracas, headed for the coast on a stolen motorcycle, when he glances over his shoulder and sees the black SUV's coming onto the highway half a mile back. It's not until he's ditched the bike and found his way onto a freighter that he remembers why they'd been chasing him. He stays hidden; presses his hands against his ears when the sound of things shifting in their metal crates starts to echo too deeply in his brain. His right hand- the human one- muffles more sound than the other. His left, most of the time, is just cold.
In Miami, he listens to the noise of demolition crews on the next block up; as soon as they tear down the warehouse, the last remaining evidence of the lab there will be destroyed. He'll have to move again as soon as the crews start working past it.

And even though he's ready for it, the morning eventually does come when he's woken by the sounds of trucks that are suddenly too damned close. He breaks cover, leaving the warehouse and heading for the train yard. Someone shouts after him- he's been spotted- but he doesn't stop and he doesn't hurt them and he doesn't stop running until he reaches Jacksonville.

When he arrives, he feels like a puppet whose strings have been cut. There's no impulse telling him where to go or what to do when he gets there. There are no directives cutting up through the noise in his head. Nothing to drive him to tear across the country. No instincts to walk into a building and tear through another half dozen bodies.

He waits, sweating and humid, but nothing comes. He doesn't hurt anybody.

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He's slipping away from the grocery store's loading dock on a Thursday, same as last week, when he catches himself looking up to see the girls coming out of the dance studio across the street and realizes he'd expected to see them.

He's been himself, or at least a version of himself, for three months now. There's a continuity to his thinking that he knows hasn't always been there.

It doesn't mean he's doing great. His left arm's still acting up, catching on some inner working at the elbow that freezes his middle and ring fingers open. He's tired, and he thinks maybe, now, it's time to start facing up to all of this.

He goes to the public library, searches "james buchanan barnes current whereabouts," on a computer, and exhales heavily at the inevitability of it all. He finds a book about the Howling Commandos to flip through while he waits. He sees his name over and over and it still doesn't mean anything.

He can feel it the moment he's been noticed, and he scans his exits again anyway, though he's sitting out here in the open for a reason. One that's walking right towards him, still bigger than he ought to be.

"Hey Buck," Steve says, stopping a few feet away, hands down at his sides, hiding nothing. "You okay?"
Scattering Barney's ashes outside Gibsonton hadn't been as definite a plan as Clint would've maybe liked to admit.

Up until a few weeks ago, had anyone asked him, he might've suggested pouring them out at the bar, if not tossing them into the dumpster out back. But Barney, he'd done right by him in the end, and while Florida had never been their home, the two winters they'd spent there with the circus had been, as far as he knows, the last time he'd known Barney to be truly happy.

Besides. Getting out of town, getting some distance from the doctors and the therapists and the worried neighbors had seemed like a good idea. So when Kate had shown up on his doorstep wearing an expression that didn't brook argument and holding up a note saying, You pick the destination, I'll drive he'd packed a bag.

When he'd poured out Barney's ashes, he'd mostly worried that the wind would change direction, blowing them back against him and sticking to his clothes like a neon sign to the world reading Jesus Fucking Christ, Barton. Nice work.

Kate hadn't tried to suggest that he say any words; if she'd said any herself, he hadn't known; in the luckiest of conditions, they still would've been garbled and unrecognizable. But he'd been squinting down the hill, avoiding her gaze and hoping like hell Barney's particulate didn't get stuck in his eyes.

Once they'd returned to their rooms at the shitty hotel on the edge of town, and he'd used up all the hot water, they'd checked out and driven ten hours up to a cabin her aunt owned near Fayetteville.

The next morning, she'd shoved his bow into his hands and pointed him towards the old hay-bale targets out back. He'd shot for hours, retrieving his errant arrows and walking them back to shoot again, until he'd learned how to account for his new lack of balance. His injuries hadn't blinded him- it had been a concern, apparently, and one that he'd been glad to be too unconscious to know about- but they'd made walking problematic, those first few days. Even weeks later, he'd been off kilter enough that he'd emptied his quiver twice before even hitting the target, much less the bullseye.

Kate, of course, had shot perfectly all weekend. But she'd refused to gloat until he'd called her out on it.

It's not as much fun when you can't hear me singing about how freakin' awesome I am, she'd eventually informed him, scrawling it out across the second-to-last page of the notebook they'd been using, and handing it over with a scowl.

"Caterwaul away," he'd replied. "Just let me know if my ears start bleeding again."

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Kate had started looking tense on the way back to New York, twisting on the radio dial every few minutes and eventually pulling over to the side of the road to bring up her phone. A few moments later, she'd thrust it into his face, eyes wide and scared.
He'd started reading, but he hadn't understood a word of it; then he'd just been terrified, too. Sokovia- the Avengers had been there a few weeks back- had apparently removed itself from the ground and was flying. There were reports of evil robots, Hulk rampaging, and references to someone moving too fast to be seen. Hundreds dead. And nobody knew anything, not really.

He hadn't gotten the full story until Natasha's encrypted email arrived a few days later. The team had survived; at first that was all he'd cared about. But Tony's inadvertent creation of Ultron, and the extinction-grade threat that it brought, had fractured the team. Banner was in the wind. Steve and Tony were barely talking. Thor was gone again.

And Clint, he was sitting on his ass in Bed Stuy, lost and useless as the rest of the human race.

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For most of his adult life, Barney and him hadn't talked much. They'd been on the opposite sides of everything for nearly two decades, and even when truce had been declared, they'd lost the knack for speaking they'd had as kids.

Back then, Barney'd been the one who'd forced him to face up and deal, to learn how to sign when all he'd wanted to do was hide under his bed and wait for the world to go away.

Barney shouldn't have had to do it twice, and he sure as hell shouldn't have jumped up to take that bullet.

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Another day, another disappointing audiologist's appointment, another hour on the subway back to Bed Stuy.

Scrolling down through his messages, there's Steve and Sam checking in with variations on are you okay. A message from Kate telling him that he'd left his pocketknife in her car during their trip last week. A few from Tony, because apparently this entire ordeal's alerted Stark Industries that assistive technology is a thing, and he's been researching hearing aids. A dozen messages from the three audiologists whose expertise hadn't been up to the challenge. There's one from Simone, asking if he's up for babysitting, and five or six from Sam, Steve's buddy that the VA. Most of his have the words "Deaf" and "Resources" featured heavily in the titles; he's sent back thanks far more often than he's actually clicked the links.

The vast majority of the messages are from Natasha, from up at the Academy; they haven't changed much in tone, but he's known her long enough to recognize when she's trying not to seem worried. Mostly, she sends him cringeworthy appraisals of the cadets she's been training. Get well soon, I'm surrounded by idiots. Once she sends a video of a kid showing off like an idiot during a climbing exercise, then tangling himself horribly on the ropes as he dangles upside down in mid-air. He's responded to every one of them, LOL at least, if only to make up for the fact that he still hasn't responded to a single invitation to visit the academy. She'll stop sending them, eventually. Probably.

He deletes every message, one by one, a month and a half's worth, until the last one he'd gotten from Barney is at the top of the list. It reads be back @ 6. The time stamp says that it had been sent at 4:18 in the afternoon. By 7:30, Barney'd been dead.

The message will probably disappear soon, once the account closure's gone through. Maybe it won't. He doesn't know how it works, not really.

He considers asking- Tony would know, or Natasha, since she'd set up the accounts when Kazi had
first put he and Barney in the hospital- but he turns off the phone instead. As he's putting it away, it vibrates in his hand and Tony Stark flashes on the screen.

*Any news from Dr. Carson? Saw you had an appointment this morning.*

*Healing as expected.* Which is to say, not well at all, but if he was gonna cry on anyone's shoulder about it, it wouldn't be Tony's. *Right is FUBAR. Left only maybe cochlear implant, know for sure next month.*

*Cool.* Clint laughs. He'd been expecting another *sorry*, having just deleted two dozen of them from his inbox. *Got some designs I want to run by you and Dr. Van Drier, who I'm bringing onto the project. I think you'll like him. Design's more stable for fieldwork, and should hypothetically get both back up to at least 90% if not more.*

His phone vibrates again- an appointment's been added to his calendar. Van Drier's, too, from the looks of it, which does a good job of ruining the good mood he'd almost found. He's gotten used to the idea that it'll be another month or two before he even has to think about going back into the field, or, more likely, resigning.

Not that there's any point in telling Stark that.

*You planning on turning me into a robot? We heard about Ultron.* He doesn't know for certain, upon sending it, that it's not too soon to joke about it. From what Natasha's told him, though Tony's sticking to Manhattan, and Steve's running things up at the new Academy, the ice is thawing. But it's a cheap shot, maybe. He's about to apologize when Tony responds.

*Thought about it but Steve glared the idea right out of my head, promise. Going upstate tomorrow.*

*Cool if I tell him you're considering it?*

*Yeah,* he sends back, because he's not certain, but Sam and Natasha have been on him, lately, to be better about letting people help him out, so he figures this'll go a long way towards putting them at ease.

It doesn't really matter if he's still not sure about joining up again, anyway.

*Cool. That'll cheer him up. He's been miserable since Bucky came back.*

He reads it again, and a third time.

*Wait WHAT?*

Chapter End Notes

Note: I've seen discussions on this, so in case you're curious: Clint is deaf, though here he's going to be mostly relying on writing notes and adaptive tech to communicate. This was done because after a few months of trying, I still have no idea how to write sign language as dialogue (I also never quite got a handle on Clint's fluency, much less his participation in deaf culture, but that's going into meta territory, and I'm trying to be brief). Therefore, while use of sign language is minimized, it's a storytelling device, and is not meant to minimize Clint's deafness, or anyone's, in any way. If you see that I've dropped the ball in this area (or any other- like, I spell checked this, but you know
how it goes), I'd welcome your expertise, so hit me up in the comments. Thanks! -Jen
Chapter 3

He's seen just enough of the base to know that it's large, it's being used as a training academy, and that with the exceptions of Steve and Natasha, almost everyone here is terrified of him.

On the good days, he knows that he has no intentions of attacking them. He's run out of fight, or maybe, just run out of known enemies. He'd made a choice, to come here, and he can handle this. He's getting better.

On the bad days, his brain's too busy sending horrific fucking shit his way to bother informing him that getting up off his cot is even an option.

It's the average days that give everyone the most trouble. He'll swing from being calm to being furious without realizing that he's doing it. And afterwards, Steve's not selling war bonds but he's got a new script- Steve will explain that he's lashing out, that it's to be expected.

But they never seem to do anything to prevent it happening again. He doesn't know what they want from him.

In addition to the two guards posted outside his cell, there's an unending stream of doctors, shrinks, and agents rotating out on the other side of the glass, taking turns reading him lists of names words and phrases, in alphabetical order and in at least three languages. They only get interested whenever he starts fidgeting out of boredom. Nobody's uncovered any trigger words yet, but every morning, there's a new list.

Part of him is honestly a little relieved to be kept in for observation, to have some semblance of routine again. He has a bed to sleep in, and a bathroom to use whenever he wants. They bring him food, books- not that he can stay focused long enough to do more than look at the pictures- and a radio.

They take the radio away when he pulls it apart, piece by piece, and can't remember doing so. Two days later, they take away the thin metal piece he'd wedged into the crack running between the wall and the concrete floor. When Dr. Gupta asks, from the other side of the glass, why he'd hidden it, he can't remember that, either.

They start searching his room daily. Steve sits on the floor next to him, against whichever wall he's chosen that day, and talks about things that are sometimes familiar, even if they don't come in any particular order. Steve accidentally drinking the Howling Commandoes under the table in in France. Playing Cowboys and Indians on Steve's building's fire escape. Awkward double dates. Choking on one of Steve's asthma cigarettes, and nearly setting the entire building on fire. Of the two of them, he doesn't know which one Steve's trying to distract.

Even so, though he's waiting for it, they don't freeze him or try to pull him apart to see how he works, not like he's used to. They don't restrain him. He still doesn't entirely believe that they won't, despite their assurances. He's pretty sure he just hasn't given them adequate cause, yet.

Gradually, though, he learns that he doesn't have to edge away from every white lab coat he meets. The examinations go more quickly when they don't have to cajole him back up onto the table. He doesn't know why that can't extend to his sessions with the therapists, though. He still flinches whenever they ask him questions he can't answer.

Usually, he can snap himself out of the mental freeze that follows, other times, he blinks to find
Steve sitting in the therapist's chair, halfway through some story about their time before the war. Most of them are alley fights, ones that Steve started and Bucky Barnes finished. Once, Steve tells him about the first time they'd met in this century, though he skims over everything leading up to when he'd found himself on the bank of the Potomac, alive when he shouldn't be. In each of Steve's stories, Bucky Barnes comes out sounding like some kind of hero.

Some days, he just listens mutely, wondering who this man is, talking to him. On others, on the better days, he just wants to shake Steve, tell him that whatever he's trying to do, here, it's not working. But the flinch-and-freeze doesn't happen as often as the weeks go by, and by the time he thinks he can explain it, the opportunity's passed.

Living here has gotten easier, he realizes, now that he's learning his parameters. In return for his answers to their questions, and as long as he keeps trying to become who he's supposed to be, they'll provide shelter and food, and they'll keep him from hurting anyone.

After a few weeks, he starts to feel more awake, and the food starts tasting different, if not exactly better.

"It's not drugged anymore," Steve tells him, apologetically, as he balances his own tray on his knees. "Now all you're tasting is the mess hall's finest."

The doctors want him to start taking some pills though- antidepressants, specifically geared for his metabolism. They scrape his throat when he downs them, but after a few days, he stops noticing the muffled edges they bring.

He adapts.

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"You and me, we missed out on enough that things we hadn't seen yet are in the history books now," Steve tells him. And because he's having another good day, one where he can remember who Steve is and how he smiles when he'd rather scream, he knows that Steve's hoping like hell he'll be the one to understand what that means, that it's something huge.

He's not there yet, but he takes the books Steve's brought him.

For the first few days, he only flips through them idly out of boredom, mostly glancing through the pictures. But he's antsy, can't keep at it for more than a few pages before his shoulders go tight.

He never finds out why he tries shoving the books under the mattress whenever he hears movement in the hall. He suspects, on his better days, but it never tips over into knowledge. There should be a memory there, and there isn't.

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Whether they're from his own head, or Steve's recounting, his memories of Steve, from before the war and during it, are very different. There are enough of them to establish a baseline, though: Steve's smaller, and he's a little scared for him, and then Steve's larger, and he's a little scared of him. It's not Steve's fault.

"Barnes? He was our man, you know? Solid. Steady. Had to be, to shoot like that. I can't even tell you how many enemy soldiers he sent to God before we even saw them coming. But then we were captured, and... I never found out what they did to him, but he wasn't the same, afterwards. Shell-shock, you know? We figured he'd be invalided home, but I'm pretty sure the only time the man's hands weren't shaking was when
And yeah, seeing it in print- in a book that even people he's never met have read- is embarrassing, but Dugan hadn't been wrong. He'd been a little more scared of *everything*, after Zola. Being *terrified*, though, just hadn't quite hit his timeline yet.

He knows that for certain, now, because tonight's the first time in weeks that he's woken up to alarms, flashing lights, and bodies wrestling him to the ground.

It takes him a minute to recognize the grip on his arms, to separate Steve's shouts from the mocking laughter in his head, to realize that Steve's *here*, in the flesh, and not just a grainy picture on the front page of the newspaper- headline reading *Captain America Killed in Action*- being thrust into his face.

"Shh, it's okay Bucky. I got ya."

He's gasping for breath- he's not crying, because Steve's *here*, he's alive- but he stops fighting.

He'd stopped fighting then, too. He'd stopped resisting, he'd let them-

"You're okay," Steve's telling him, now, here in his room as he eases his grip and lets him sit up. He's backing off, giving him some space with eyes that are still too wide. "You're gonna be okay."

Over Steve's shoulder, he can see two guards picking themselves up off the floor. They're talking into their radios, saying that *Rogers has got it*, and *cancel the alarm*, as they're limping out into the hallway.

On the floor, one of the history books Steve had given him, in hopes that he'd see his name in print and find that it means something- as if the words carved into his arm aren't real enough, somehow- is splayed open, pages creased and wrinkled.

He doesn't pick it up again, because he doesn't need to. He thinks he knows now what it was that had finally broken Bucky Barnes, and that after that, it hadn't taken too long for him to stop being anyone at all.

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"There's a guy here I think you should talk to. Might help you out," Steve smiles at him, but it's forced.

It's the same look Steve gets whenever he asks if he wants a haircut. And the truth is, his hair's gotten long enough that stray ends keep getting caught up between the plates on his shoulder whenever he changes his shirt. But the other truth, that he's just starting to figure out, is that Steve's got a picture in his head of what he- of what *Bucky*- should look like, and that it's something that Steve thinks he can fix.

He's taken to pretending that he's still nervous around scissors whenever the subject of haircuts comes up, because it just doesn't seem right, giving him false hope. But he can't keep disappointing him, either.

And while he might not remember Steve perfectly yet- there are still more gaps than memories- he knows that this admission is costing him. Steve doesn't need anyone's help, even when he does.

"I just need you to try, Bucky. I know you can do it."
It's apparently impossible for most people, head shrinkers included, to deny Captain America anything. Dr. Gupta signs off on Sam Wilson taking over as his primary contact with an air of palpable relief.

"You've done well to hide it," she says, when he asks why she's allowing it. "And we appreciate that you're trying, but you're clearly still uncomfortable with myself and the other doctors. It may be preferable for you to think of Sam as a friend, someone you can talk to who understands. But that will take time, and you should feel no pressure one way or the other."

She says it as if its success was a foregone conclusion. Maybe it would be, if his brain wasn't helpfully supplying the details of their first meeting. He manages to hold the question back until that night, when he's eating dinner with Steve. "This Sam guy, he does know that I tried to kill him a few months ago, right?"

"Yeah, well. He knows- we all do- that that wasn't you." Steve studies him, then shrugs. "Convincing you, though, that's what all this is about."

And that's that. Easier said than done, but it's one less white coat he has to look at every three days. Sam favors jeans.

Sam isn't the first to tell him about post traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, trauma, but he's the first to understand that he's asking him to talk about sorts of things that people aren't supposed to talk about.

"Times have changed, since you were comin' up. Dunno if the world got any uglier, but we got more intentional about handling it." Sam gestures at the office; it's just an office- borrowed at that- and not as interesting as the view of the grass outside. "And this is part of it. You talk, I listen." Sam tells him this confidently enough that it feels like it should be easy to do.

It's not.

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"You're kidding me, right?" Clint crosses his arms, wondering how quickly he could make it down to Tony's lab to throttle the man before Jarvis noticed. It had been bad enough coming here so Tony could introduce him to Dr. Van Drier, the audiologist from California who's already on Stark's payroll. He'd only agreed to be here in the first place because of Pepper's text. Tony needs problems to fix, and he's landed on yours. Yes, this is how he worries about people, welcome to my world. Please come so he'll stop whining about it.

But it's turned out to be a bait-and-switch, because the moment he'd left Tony's lab after the examination, Pepper had been waiting for him, and now he's sitting in Maria Hill's office, reading her half of the conversation off of her tablet and trying not to shout his own half back at her.

He'd hoped the last time they'd had this conversation, before Kazi'd reared his ugly clown-painted head, would've been the last time they'd had this conversation. Back then, he'd just been fucked about the helicarrier and Coulson and Loki. Then he'd found out that Hydra'd had double agents inside SHIELD for decades. And now his brother's dead, his ears don't work, his balance is fucked up. Tony's made him his pet project in an attempt to make up for the fact that his evil robots had nearly brought on the apocalypse. And Hill seems to be expecting a different answer out of him.
"You know I'm no use to anyone like this."

She's frowning as she types. We're trying to rebuild. Rogers is keeping to the Academy, Stark's mostly staying here. Banner's more in the wind than out of it, these days. We're scattered more than we should be, from a strategic position. I need to know where everyone stands if we're going to have a chance in hell of handling the next crisis. I know you're having a very rough time, and that we still don't know how things are going to go, but that doesn't mean that we don't need you here, when you're ready to come back.

He looks up to find her watching him. "And if that never happens?"

A smile twitches at the side of her mouth as she types. If you really wanted out, I've got eight years of assessments indicating that you would've at least had the sense to hunker down more than ten miles away from your last known location.

His shoulders loosen up just a fraction, though he doesn't know why and he's not sure he wants them to. "You're just saying that because you're desperate."

Not as desperate as you think. Yes, things are tense. But between Loki and Ultron and Sokovia, people are aware of what's really out there. They don't trust SHIELD, but they trust the Avengers, and if you doubt that, go online and see how many selfies are taken out in front of the gigantic A that's still plastered on the side of this building.

"It's not the people out there that I'm worried about. That hasn't changed from the last time we sat here. It's the people in here. You know? The ones I didn't get around to killing?"

We know what happened, and what was done to you. Everyone who's here wants to be here. We're not forcing anyone, and that includes you. You can name your terms. I just need to know if you're willing to consider it, when you've recovered.

He wants to say no, to pretend like he hasn't been sitting up nights thinking about it. The question's probably moot, given what the last five audiologists have told him- and regardless of what the one on Stark's payroll seems to believe. Even if they figure out some workaround for his lack of hearing, nothing they can do is going to account for the fact that his sense of balance is fucked.

But. Shit. It's not like he's got any other marketable skills. And while Hill might not be Coulson, she's not Fury either, and she's not Sitwell. She's never lied about anything, and if she thinks she can salvage something useful out of him, great. That makes one of them, at least.

She's halfway through typing more when he says, "I'll let you know," and her answering grin is wide and sudden, a lot like it used to be. He's not sure he's seen it since everything fell out from under all of them, leaving her holding the reins.

It makes him feel better, more than it probably should, and it sucks that he already knows it. So he takes his leave, and heads back to Bed Stuy to try to get some dog food in before the good mood can wear off.

Almost. He almost makes it.
The antidepressants don't fix him, and the talking doesn't, either, despite Sam's assurances that he's making progress. And he is remembering more. He's figuring out how to talk about it, and he's figuring out how to talk like Bucky, which is what they want. Or maybe not. He's not sure.

Sam calls him James, which had been surprising at first.

"Well. I know Steve calls you Bucky, but you're friends and I'm not trying to pretend that I know you like that," Sam had said. "Do you want me to call you Bucky?"

He hadn't been able to answer that, too aware that his answer might be something that Sam would file away as some indication that things were worse than they'd thought, that there was no saving him. But Sam hadn't taken any notes, just moved on and asked him how he'd enjoyed his lunch that afternoon.

Sam asks a lot of strange questions, mostly just to keep him talking. It takes a while to get used to.

Hydra hadn't been overly interested in hearing his voice. Sometimes he finds himself working his jaw, expecting to meet resistance from a muzzle that he hasn't worn in almost a year, now. And he's already reported his kills- the ones that he's certain of, so far- because he knows there's a cost for being allowed to stay here and it's better than finding out what happens if he says nothing.

But Sam's not interested in the mission reports, he wants to know how he feels about everything- and that's just it.

He's got no idea how he feels.

He remembers being afraid of the guards, and hoping that they'd slip up and accidentally nick an artery when they'd installed his arm.

He remembers the terrified sensation of falling a thousand feet, and the agony of being stabbed to death by his own shattering bones.

He remembers the dread of sitting in a chair as it tilted back, so that generations of assholes could fry his brain. He's sure, now, that he'd never been conditioned enough to not panic, that some small part of his brain always knew that what was coming next would hurt him, even if it never prompted him to fight it.

And he remembers something like pride- in Havana, he thinks- when the extraction team came to find all fourteen known targets, plus three unknown, dead forty minutes ahead of schedule.

But the man falling from the train hadn't been the man being praised in Cuba, who hadn't been the man wiped in Belarus, or the one in DC, or the one in Toronto. Those men hadn't even known each other, and honestly, he wonders if he's really got the right to speak for all of them.

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"...so I asked them if they wanted me to neutralize the son," he tells Sam; it's not the first time he's told the story; he'd recounted the kill to Hill's people, and again to Steve at three this morning, when he'd found him trying to punch his way through the concrete wall of his room.

So it's not so surprising, maybe, that Sam's bringing it up.
"They said that if we left him alive, we'd only be delaying and amplifying the threat to the world's security."

"Why's that?" Sam sips his coffee, though the cup's been empty for a while now. It's hard to say whether or not he notices.

"We ran the risk of making his father a martyr for the cause, and setting the son up to become someone far more dangerous, a decade or two down the line."

Coffee sounds good, now that he thinks of it. Sam's already told him that he can help himself to the pot on the counter, and even though pouring himself some would be an excuse for Sam to refill his own cup, which would, in turn, allow him to stop focus on Sam's unconscious tics and tells, the offer had been made an hour ago. It might not still stand.

"So did you take the shot?"

He'd tracked the sound of a child's muffled crying, and crouched to peer under the bed to find a dark-haired boy with his face buried in his arms. But sometimes, one memory bleeds into the next. He remembers one thing starting, and another thing finishing, and assumes they're connected when they aren't, really. It might've been a different kid, on a different mission. All he knows here is that at one point, on this mission or another, he took a shot and left a child to die underneath their own bed.

"I think so. There wasn't any reason not to."

Sam tilts his head forward and looks at him, the way he usually does when he's about to ask whether he's saying that to convince him, or to convince himself. This time, though, he asks, "So why do you think it is, that you're remembering this so clearly?"

He shrugs. These questions are the worst. He doesn't know what he'd thought; he can only apply what he knows he's supposed to think now. "Maybe because it was the first time I was relieved to be allowed to go back to the lab?" If that even happened. "I felt like, I don't know, something was wrong and liable to interrupt my functions. I knew they were going to fix me."

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It's a Tuesday, but this time, when he makes the trip to Manhattan for the usual barrage of MRIs and hearing tests, Tony meets him at the door, holding his hand out. Behind him, Dr. Van Drier is rolling his eyes.

[Give him your phone.] Van Drier signs; he's one of the only hearing people Clint's met who can do so without making it weird.

Tony disappears the moment the phone's in his hand, and doesn't reappear until Van Drier's finished with his exam. Now that the initial damage is mostly done, he wants to see about minimizing the scars in order to maximize access to the undamaged areas. No conversation that includes "if we do this, there's no coming back from it," is fun, but Van Drier's assurance that a cochlear implant will still be an option, if Tony's device doesn't work, takes the edge off.

He's putting his hat back on- it needs to be washed, he's easily the biggest slob outside of Tony himself to set foot in this tower in years- when Tony appears behind him without warning.

He's Hawkeye, not Rabbitear, but either way, he's not used to being startled. Tony's too busy running at the mouth to notice though, and shoving his phone in his face.
I've installed a voice recognition program on your phone to tide you over, the words spool out across the screen. Based it off Jarvis's command input protocol. Anyone speaks within the range that you set, which you do by sliding here. He drags his finger up along the right side of the screen, and the percentage in the top corner goes from five feet to fifty. *Keep in mind that it will read everything within that range, and display it all at once. Good for eavesdropping in an empty room, bad for dinner at Sardie's.*

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For the first day and a half, it's great. Not great enough that he wouldn't prefer not holding his phone in front of his face all day long, and it won't work with incoming or outgoing phone calls, but it beats the hell out of waiting for people to write things down for him.

The kid behind the counter at Starbucks probably just thinks he's another jackass addicted to Facebook, but doesn't seem to notice anything other than that, and by the time she's handing him his coffee, her attention's already on the next guy in line. No staring at the side of his head, no sudden aversion of the eyes that indicates she'd just been staring.

It's been weeks since he's had the bandages sticking out from under his admittedly lame attempts to keep them under his hat, but he'd survived on not being noticed for years. And having to hold over a scrap of paper with his order scrawled on it, he'd felt conspicuous, like he was supposed to be robbing a bank.

The kid behind the counter has no idea that this is the first time he's ordered a cup of coffee in weeks, or that he's been going to grocery stores with self-service checkouts just to avoid being face-to-face with a cashier. But it is, and it's kind of stupidly huge.

Not that he's going to bring it up to anyone, ever. It's not that he's a coward, or anything. It's just that talking about his fucked up ears makes people awkward enough. Natasha's cool with the topic, but Steve and Simone? Their eyes had gone wide, when it had come up. Like he'd just told them that he'd just told them that he'd been standing there, in front of them, dying an excruciating death right at that moment.

So no, he's pretty sure that he's not planning on explaining that yes, it sometimes does fuck with him beyond the lack of identifiable sound, or beyond the balance issues.

Not that anyone's asking him to. For now, he's free to walk down to the subway, coffee in hand, to dial up the range on his phone and eavesdrop on two dozen conversations happening all at once once he steps into the car. It all turns to gibberish on the screen, but it looks exactly like how he knows the train should sound.

It's seven kinds of awesome.

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Three days later, his phone alerts him of a software update, and he downloads it, tanking the whole damned program.
Sometimes, Sam repeats his own words back to them, and they sound okay, when he says it. They make sense. Sometimes he hears them directed back at him and he wants to wretch. He never knows which way it's going to go until it happens.

"Okay. James, you've told us what happened with Hydra, and filled us in on what you were up to in the time between pulling Steve out of the river in DC, and reaching out in Florida. From what you've said, it seems that lately, this is the time span that's giving you the most trouble. You cool with talking about it?"

He nods, because it's always better to agree than not, and Sam looks down at his notes.

"Okay, I'm paraphrasing, here, but, you said that you feel like there's a step missing between being out there and being in here, at the Academy, talking to me now?"

He nods.

"What step are you talking about?"

"Being wiped, or," he pulls his sleeve down over his hand, then releases it in case Sam decides that it's supposed to mean something. "I broke protocol. Nobody was giving me orders, telling me to go in and destroy those labs, kill all those people. Hydra or not..."

He knows they're not going to freeze him, though he's not going to be the one to give them the idea, even if he does know that Steve wouldn't allow it. The first time he'd left his cell for anything other than the essentials had been in the middle of the night, when Steve had walked him all around the grounds, stopping at every door to show him that there are no stasis chambers on site.

"Breaking protocol," Sam repeats, "Do you think that's something you would've done before DC?"

He shakes his head. "I think someone would have stopped me."

"And are you disappointed that nobody did?"

He shrugs. "There has to be an accounting." He's heard that before, though he can't place it. *The asset cannot continue to be allowed to function in this manner, it's a matter of accountability.*

"What do you think you've been doing, telling us everything?"

"Recounting," he corrects him. "It's different." Only he doesn't know how. "It's not-" He stops his fingers from twisting in his lap, wonders what he'd be doing if the meds weren't working. Wonders, not for the first time, what impulses they're keeping at bay. "It's as if everyone-" he means Steve, though he can't say it. "Everyone's just okay with it. The things I did."

Sam sighs, but it's followed by a nod. "I think it might be useful to realize that they're coming at it from a different point of view than you are. You only saw what happened on your end. Your reasons, and your actions. Up the chain, all anyone else saw was that you took on fourteen dangerous Hydra cells singlehandedly. You did more to cripple Hydra's recovery than we could've managed in two years."

He raises his eyebrows at this. He'd heard that they'd made progress, there- Steve's told him as much- but this is the first time hearing that he'd had any part in it.
"Look," Sam says. "I know from your files you were, shall we say, taking out your aggressions on the technology that hurt you, and the people associated with it. While you were there, at any of the bases, did you ever take a look at the computers?"

"Most of them were destroyed, I think." Sometimes before he'd gotten there, sometimes because he'd been there already and forgotten. "I wasn't thinking too clearly."

"Before you turned- before you made contact with us, Steve was looking for you. Did you know that?"

He nods.

"I was with him. We found a few sites that you'd been to; you weren't there, but we reported their locations, and Hill sent out recovery crews. Using the intel you've given us, we were able to figure out a few more Hydra operations that you'd visited. Right now, in the lab, we've got techs picking apart what's left of the computers, teasing out all the data they can. You with me so far?"

"Yes."

"As far as we've been able to tell, your actions prevented at least two large-scale biological attacks on US soil, one of which would've been ready to launch in less than a week's time, had you not intervened." Sam leans in and looks at him. "I know it's awkward. But what you did, even if you were doing it out of revenge, saved millions of people. Millions. Nobody's going to forget that."

"That doesn't change the fact that I wasn't following orders. If someone had been there to tell me to do those things, I'd understand it. But I didn't have any orders. And I killed people anyway."

Something changes in Sam's expression, but he can't identify it. "You're expecting to be punished?"

He shakes his head. "Reset." Though maybe it's a fine line.

"Because that's what's done when you go off-script?"

"More like... you rebooted your computer, earlier, when it wasn't picking up the network. It's like that. Clean slates are easier to work with." He's quoting someone here. Given the way the words are twisting like worms in his throat, he thinks it might be Zola. Those memories always feel the worst, regardless of their content.

"...And since you haven't been reset, you're worried that..."

"I don't know," he admits, sitting back into the couch. It always ends up the same way, these sessions. Like Sam's waiting for him to land on something that's not even on his radar, yet.

Stasis had been terrible, most of the time. When he'd done poorly, taking too long to exterminate a target, or attracted too much attention, there wasn't any time left for his handlers to put him under before wiping him. Sometimes there wasn't even enough time to wipe him before putting him in stasis. Those times, he'd stand there, inert as his cells froze one by one, and all he could do to distract himself was, in the privacy of a metal box, try to figure out where the glitch was coming from. Why he'd felt so wrong for operating as he'd been intended.

The thing is, they'd usually wiped him by the time that he'd thawed, and he'd wake up to find himself whole. Functional.

It had, he thinks, been more efficient than talking it out.
Barring the communications level in the main building and the target range, he's been allowed the run of the facility and the grounds for a week. The food's no different than what he's used to, but eating in front of others feels wrong; after about two days he's hungry enough that he can start keeping everything down. There's not much outside besides grass and trees but the fresh air is nice.

He learns quickly enough though, to steer clear of the range hallway whenever the lanes are in use. Turns out, the sound of gunfire- even muffled by soundproofing- makes him angry, and the part of him that knows better isn't half as strong as the part that wants to attack, until every noise, every bullet, every fucking gun is gone.

But it's Natasha, who's just passing by on her way from the cafeteria, who he lashes out at, though he's not thankful for it until later.

She can tell that something's wrong before he's figured it out; in response, he smacks the coffee she's carrying out of her hand and sends it splashing against the wall. Before he can even reel himself back in to tell her to back off - he knows he should, he's just too furious to talk- she launches herself at him, shoving him away from her and against the wall, before stepping back quickly. She watches him for a long minute, leaving herself open to attack, but she's got to know better.

"Stop," she says, voice sharp enough to cut through the gunfire as she points down the hallway. "If you're going to do this, you take it to the gym."

It's twice in a minute that she's surprised him. And maybe that's her preferred tactic.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"See if you can break more punching bags than Steve. He's gone through two this week already."

He stares back at her, not understanding.

It sounds enough like an order that he's halfway there before it occurs to him to look back. She's heading for the janitor's closet, though, to clean up his mess.

The lights are on, but the gym is dark, the walls lined with mats; there are no windows in here, and it's quiet. He can still hear the noise through the doorway, but only just barely, now.

The punching bag is at the far end of the gym, mounted between two pallets piled with spare bags. The larger of the two says To Be Repaired.

There's nobody in here, just him and the bag. Nobody to stop him from hitting it.

He has his orders. Natasha wouldn't have suggested it if she'd had misgivings.

Still looking over his shoulder, he finds his footing to take his first swing. Pulls back, jabs with his right. Not as hard as he could; it barely shifts the bag.

No alarms sound. No flashing red lights. No marching footsteps.

It's just him and the bag and a pallet of bags Steve's already punched open. Steve, of all people. The guy could barely carry his own laundry out to dry, but who had no problem picking fights with guys three times his size. It's hilarious. And then it's not.
If Steve had lived out his life being that Steve, none of them would be in this mess right now.

The next swing and hit comes easier. After the fourth, he stops looking over his shoulder, sets his feet, and throws another punch.

One more, and he's gone, he's not sure for how long, only that he's breathing heavily and there's movement at the door and when he looks over, Steve and Natasha are standing there, watching him. Steve looks less apprehensive than she does. It's not until Steve glances down at her and grins that she relaxes, and he thinks, yeah, this is okay.

---

Sometimes he sits with Steve as they watch the cadets running their paces. Sometimes he watches Steve lead them and tries to remember what it had been like to follow him.

For some reason- and he thinks he knows what it is- it's a little easier to picture when Steve's working with the new recruits. There's one kid that's come in with the most recent batch, skinny and angry and when he asks Steve about him later, all Steve will say is that he's a communications tech, booted from the army for insubordination.

He's confused. "You'd let someone like that join up?"

Steve scowls at him, frustrated, like he should've already known the answer. "What the hell kind of question is that, Bucky?"

On the whole, though, Steve's smiling more, lately, though he still hasn't let up about the haircuts. The questions about what he remembers from when they were kids don't come as often, now that there's other commonalities to talk about- how the cadets are doing, what's for dinner. Whether Natasha's managed to talk Bruce Banner or Clint Barton- teammates who've walked away for reasons that aren't entirely clear- into returning. Star Wars, they agree, is probably the best movie ever made, but Sam must've been nuts to recommend a band called Kiss.

Given their costumes and makeup, Steve reasons, loudly, it's possible that they're failed Hydra experiments. It's also possible that Steve's just fucking with the cadets at the next table over, but apparently, he's the only person in the room who can tell.

It's been a while since he's been confined to his quarters, but the new relative freedom hasn't yet stopped feeling like a bribe. Payment for taking his meds and not breaking down where anyone can see. For being the right version of himself, the one Captain America still wants to believe in.
Now that he doesn't have to be put under just to go into the room- they'd learned that lesson his first week here- the arm examinations are almost entertaining. Even if he still has to take deep breaths just to let Tony Stark anywhere near the damaged plates at the back of his elbow.

He doesn't know why. He's louder than the other doctors and technicians. Even louder than the first-year cadets when they're heading out on leave. He'd been friendly when they'd met two days ago. But he'd had a mad glint in his eye when he'd seen his left arm, and it hasn't left yet.

He's used to people noticing his arm. He's not used to any sort of enthusiasm.

Still, Stark and his technicians keep up a steady chatter as they work. He doesn't understand what they're talking about any more than he'd done when the data had been scrawled on chalkboards and clipboards on the edge of his peripheral vision, or on the green on black of computer screens. Now, at least, at least some of the talk is directed at him, and it comes with a light show. The technicians gesture and twist in the air above him, zooming in and zooming out again; when they open up a new file, it reminds him of fireworks.

At least they're trying to tell him what they're doing, as they examine the arm, finally ready for Stark to make the repairs to his elbow. And they try to warn him when they think they might jolt him. It helps, most of the time.

But even though he's getting better at not ducking his head whenever anyone looks at him too closely- and it's been months since he's dropped to his knees at the sound of a raised voice- he's not getting any better about not flinching whenever Stark comes near him. It's been like this since their first meeting, even though the man's been nothing but helpful.

Stark's familiar, thanks to everything Steve's told him, and the hours of footage he's watched. He lives in a tower in Manhattan, though, and from what he can tell, doesn't come up often. He's heard about the Ultron project and what happened in Sokovia, and he's pretty sure that Steve used to trust Stark more than he now does, even if he's trying.

He's been staring at the far wall for an hour and a half, humming along to the Jimi Hendrix song that's looping in his head, courtesy of Sam's ongoing efforts to drag him and Steve into the modern day, and thinking that, while it not might make up for anything, he's glad he got to live long enough to hear it.

"All right, this should be the last of it," Stark eventually tells him, nodding at the gurney. "I'm gonna need you to lie face down."

"He's done wrong, they're going to fix him so he does what he's told, they're going to punish him to make him better. He's lying face down on a table, strapped down and the scalpel's slicing slowly down his back and they're flaying him to install something stronger than just his spine, it's necessary- only he's awake for it because he'd missed, he'd had to go back and cut the brake lines on the car- he won't do it again and they're not listening and alarms are going off-"

-alarms are going off and he's crouched on the floor, staring up past red and gold metal that hadn't been there a moment ago. Howard Stark's face is staring back at him, eyes wide as they'd been when he'd realized his car wasn't going to stop.

"I watched you die. You and your wife."
The gold and red are falling away, now, and it's just Tony Stark, standing there, looking shocked and lost and furious. And then he's walking away.

---

It's actually surprising, he thinks, that it's taken this long to come to a head.

He can hear Steve, Stark and Natasha fighting through the walls that evening, and he's not the only one. There are at least a hundred people here at the Academy, and by morning, everyone's chosen a side.

It's not as if he doesn't know that his presence here has been a source of friction, even when his kills had still been an abstract thing, decades old and impersonal. But now the murderer of Tony Stark's parents is here, with them, more or less on on Steve's dime.

"Don't worry about it, Buck," Steve tells him, but it's clear that there's more he's not telling him. "There's a whole lot of other issues jumbled up in this. And if it wasn't this, it would be something else. None of this is your fault."

He wonders when, if ever, things will be his fault. Everyone's certainly intent on believing otherwise.

Around noon, the alarms sound, and most everyone is running for the quinjets, off to handle some emergency that nobody within earshot is talking about. Those that remain are in the command center, or rotating through the hangar in case orders for exfiltration are issued. The rest of the Academy is, by comparison, peaceful.

Or maybe just quiet.

He doesn't know how the mission goes; he doesn't have the clearance, and the only people who'd be likely to ignore protocol and fill him in anyway are out in the field. But he can read the tension in the shoulders of the trainees and agents as they pass him in the hallway. They're distracted, worried, and, as opposed to this morning, none of the chatter seems to be about him.

By the time the quinjets land, some twenty hours later, and everyone comes filtering back in, it's obvious that they've suffered some serious losses. Fifteen people dead, another thirty injured. He sits unobtrusively by the door in the mess hall and listens for snatches of gossip. People are rushing about, tired and frustrated, asking if their friends are in the infirmary or in the morgue.

There's talk about restructuring the teams, and some heated arguments in favor of putting Sam in charge. Maria Hill is taking volunteers for the recovery mission, to bring back the bodies of those that haven't come back at all, yet.

He heads down the hall, keeping to the side of the corridor and keeping an eye out for Steve; when he eventually finds him, he, Natasha and Sam are heading towards the infirmary.

"It's not on Stark," Steve's telling Sam, as they step aside to let a gurney pass; the words are hard to hear through all the frustration in his voice. It's small comfort to recognize the lost expression in his face, but he's seen it before. "We're good, it's just everyone else. I can't lead them if they don't trust me."

The three of him disappear, along with Tony Stark, into Hill's office for several hours. After their debriefing, the word spreads like wildfire throughout the Academy: investigations into the five agents accused of disobeying orders are pending.
Later, once everything’s calmed down- more accurately, once the everyone on the base has gone mute in the face of their collective shock and exhaustion- Steve shows up at his door. Tells him everything’s fine, that everything’s going to be okay.

He wants to hit him, just to show him how wrong he is.

One slip, one flinch, and he’d managed all this.

He hasn’t hurt anyone in months, though, and he hangs onto that thought like a fucking mantra.

---

Clint hasn’t left his apartment in three days- it’s been a shitty week, and raining anyway- when Natasha shows up on his doorstep with a notebook in her hands. Under her smile, she looks weary.

He doesn’t blame her. If she came to talk, she's going to have to be writing everything down or fucking with her phone or stopping every few seconds while she tries to remember the next sign she's been trying to learn.

He really needs to text Stark, get him to update the voice recognition program.

[You OK] he signs, though it's probably the question on his face, rather than gestures, that she's reading. She nods, manages to string together a response. [OK. Everyone Alive. Fighting. Need help.]

He sits her down on the couch and grabs two beers, handing one over. In return, she passes him the notebook. At least he's spared the waiting; from the looks of it, she's already filled four pages.

_Things are getting hairy at the Academy. Steve said that you know that Bucky's back. He's been at the base for a few months now, and in bad shape, but getting better. If you're wondering why 80% of the Hydra bases Steve and Sam found had already been destroyed, it was as we thought- Barnes had already gotten there before turning himself in. Steve was trying to play it quiet- was worried what would happen if word got out that he was alive. Still. Sorry about radio silence._

He nods, pointing at the page, as she leans forward to see how far he's gotten.

_He's been recovering his memories. We are sanguine that there are no subconscious triggers left, and he has recently been given the run of the Academy. Mostly he keeps to himself. Stark's been working on repairing his arm, and he's being treated for other things. Sam works with him a few days a week. We thought we had a few more months before we needed to really have a plan for what comes next, but things have changed. Last week, Stark was working on his arm, and something went wrong. Bucky panicked. We found out later that he'd suddenly remembered killing Howard and Maria Stark._

"Shit." He'd known the story- it had been an accident- if it's not, then... He reads on. _Stark was shocked, but he's doing what he can to let bygones be bygones. He understands that Bucky wasn't in control, that he'd had no agency in doing what he did, but it's awkward._

"I'll bet." He points again, so Natasha can see what he's reading. She widens her eyes and nods in emphatic agreement.

_Unfortunately, this is causing dissension in the ranks, people are picking sides, despite Steve and_
Tony urging them to let it be. There is concern that Steve might have a blind spot where it comes to his old friend. That, combined with an at-times rocky recovery process on Bucky’s part, has turned this into an issue that I want resolved before it has time to steamroll. Oddly enough, Bucky’s the one who’s suggested a solution. He wants to leave.

"And everyone's okay with that?"

She takes the notebook, finds a place about a paragraph down and points.

_Sam and the doctors think it might be in Bucky’s best interest. He’s been making process, but it’s stalling, and we don't know how much "better" he's going to get, staying where he is. Getting him on his feet, independent of Steve and the Academy, would be the logical next step, and it was one his doctors had been discussing before the incident. The fact that he's suggesting a solution at least partially because it's beneficial for others does seem to suggest that he's not a sociopath. On top of that, he’d been out on his own for a long time before turning himself in, without hurting any civilians._

_Still, for a variety of reasons, we are reluctant to let him go without some form of monitoring. If nothing else, than for Steve's piece of mind._

"How is Steve doing?"

She waves her hand from side to side. Not great, then. He re-reads over everything she's written, in case he's missed something, and eventually looks up again.

"Is Barnes going to go along with being monitored?"

_[His thought], Natasha signs, frowning. Then she shrugs, wiggling her fingers for the notebook and pulling a pen from her pocket. His idea- he asked for Stark to implant a tracker in his arm before a decision came down. Not sure he knew one had been implanted when we first brought him in._

He scans the rest of the page- there's not much else, just more reasons Natasha thinks it would be a good idea; honestly, he's already convinced, if a little curious as to why she's gone to such extents to talk him into it. There's no telling, though, whether anyone else is on board.

"What was the decision?"

_Drinking her beer, she points at him. Says something- he can almost hear a sound, but not enough of it, even though he's looking right at her and can almost read her lips- before writing again._

_Up to you. I think everyone would be more at peace with the idea if there was someone trusted nearby who could kind of keep an eye on him. And also, I guess, on if that apartment upstairs is still available?_

_He sighs. It is. He hasn't even cleaned Grills' old place out, much less gotten around to casting about for a new tenant. Unfortunately, she's already reading the misgivings on his face._

_He shakes his head. "No. It's okay." His throat's scratchy as hell, already, and who knows what he sounds like. Before her arrival, it had probably been four days since he'd spoken at all. "Wasn't looking forward to cleaning the last of it out, is all. But I don't have much else going on."_

_She brightens, as if she'd honestly expected him to say no, then writes, You sure? We could find another place._

_He nods, sipping his beer, and Natasha's eyebrows raise as he gestures for the pen. Throat hurts, is_
all, he explains. I'm totally good with it. When's he coming down?

She shrugs. I wanted your thoughts before talking to anyone else. Will talk to Steve when I get back. In the meantime, I'm starving. Burgers at Neptune? Or did you have plans?

It's sweet of her to ask.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I went in to fix it, but many thanks to CalciferCai for the sharp eyes on my copy/paste screwup! Much love!

It's been a long, bad week. His throat's sore from talking, and Steve still isn't entirely convinced, even if he's already agreed.

"You'll check in once a day," Steve reminds him, eyes cutting down towards his shoulder like he can see through the metal to the tracker that Stark had- politely but quietly- installed. The expression looks like defeat. "I call and you don't pick up, we'll come looking."

He nods. Natasha had presented the possibility, and they've already discussed the terms.

"One last thing, though," Steve smiles- it's a defeated smile, and he hates it, but it's an improvement- "I want you to know that you are welcome to come back, whenever you want, for whatever reason. I get that this place doesn't feel like home, but you've always got one here, if you want it. You get me?"

He nods, looking down at the duffel bag he's got packed. Bites his lip and doesn't know why.

There was a time- almost eighty years ago- that he'd be the one to sling an arm around Steve's shoulders, telling him things were going to turn out fine, that there was nothing to worry about. He knows this from the books, and from what Steve's told him, and he wishes like hell he could remember it for himself, because when he tries, it's awkward and unconvincing at best.

"Same goes for you." He knows he used to joke more. Now's as good a time as any to practice. "From what Natasha says, this apartment is more than twice the size of our old place. Should be plenty of room, even now that you're taking up twice the space you used to."

---

Natasha's smiling at him from the driver's seat when he climbs in, and he's startled by how easily he's able to return it.

"Thanks for this."

"Hey, it was my idea," she says easily, sliding the car into gear as they turn onto the road. "Besides. You ever know Steve to follow directions to the letter? You'd end up in California on principle."

There's something she's not saying, but it would be stranger if she weren't. It's not that she's a liar; she can, and she does. But she'd been honest with him when everyone else was too scared to be. Because of her, he knows about the Red Room, and that she's got gaps of her own. He knows that the four scars to the left of his spine were caused by her knife, when she'd been twelve or thirteen years old.

"They were training me to attack," she'd told him, the second time she'd visited his cell. She'd made eye contact with him; she'd been one of the first to attempt it. "You'd been instructed not to
defend yourself, and so you didn't. I don't remember much about that time, but I remember the look in your eyes. And I remember thinking that it wasn't just the orders you'd been given, but that you didn't seem to have a self to defend."

He's tried to explain it to Sam, and Steve too, but Natasha's the only one who knows what it's like, not having the memories. Not having the right memories.

Because it's not all sitting on the front stoop, watching Steve draw with wrists no thicker than the pencil he's holding. It's lining up the shot, watching blood and brains arc out as a body drops, jerking, to the ground. It's laughing as Steve imitates some girl Bucky'd tried setting him up with, and it's the sensation of a spinal column snapping in his hands.

---

"So. Steve's told me a little about him, but everyone says you know him best. What's my new landlord like?"

"Good guy. Fun, sometimes, but mostly stubborn."

"And he's okay with this?" It's out before he can stop himself.

"Yes, yes, a thousand times, yes," Natasha says, rolling her eyes, then she sighs and glances over at him. "But while we're on the subject, how do you feel about taking on a secret mission?"

Too nervous to answer, apparently.

"He's been keeping to himself lately. About two months ago, he lost his hearing. Two weeks after that, his brother died. He's not in the best headspace. I think he's doing okay, under the circumstances, but I can't be there to check in on him as often as I'd like. He'd be angry if he knew I was suggesting it, but could you keep an eye on him?"

"You want me to keep an eye on the guy who's keeping an eye on me?"

She shrugs. "I'm not asking you to go out of your way, or snoop around his back or anything, but essentially, yes."

"It's not like I have a lot else going on," he eventually says. There's nothing on his card besides the number Sam had given him, some part time gig shredding documents at a printing company, mostly to keep him busy in the afternoons until he can decide what he'd rather be doing with his time.

There's just one issue. He's not going to get any useful intel if he can't speak to the guy, a prospect that's been making him nervous ever since he heard about it.

"But, he's deaf, right? How's that work, talking with him?" It's embarrassing, having to ask- he probably should've done so well before now. But he's never even met a deaf person before.

"Sign language. Easy." It's not until she smirks and cuts a glance sideways at him that he can tell she's poking fun. "Don't worry. Yes, he uses it. I've only just started picking up anything more than what's useful if you're looking through a scope, though. Most of the time, I write notes, he'll speak or write back. His texting game's getting better by the day, too. We muddle through."

He must not look convinced, because she takes pity on him. "Look. It's only been a few months for him, this time around- kind of a long story. But I think..." Her mouth twists. "He gets that it's uncomfortable for people. Just do what you can not to shove it in his face, and don't treat him like
an idiot. Unless he's *being* an idiot, which he does sometimes, but that's more of a lifelong condition and not connected to the matter at hand."

It's meant as a joke, but it's not setting him at ease. "Does he get like that... like Banner?"

She glances at him, decides that he's serious. "No. But imagine about how tedious it would be when every person who speaks to you is walking on eggshells because you make them nervous, or they're afraid of messing up. Or talking around you like you're not there."

He thinks about the guards, posted outside his cell, his first few weeks at the Academy, and everything they probably shouldn't have let slip. Like he'd been no more capable of hearing than the cot or the concrete walls. "I think I can picture that."

"I thought you might." Natasha's phone vibrates, and she picks it up off the console, glancing at the message. "Hopefully, it all might be academic soon enough anyway," she says, passing it over.

The message reads *At Tony's. VD wants more tests, etc, on prototype before he'll consider it. Running late so let yourselves in.*

---

By the time Natasha's pulling over, he's reconsidering this entire thing. Every time he blinks, they're passing something he recognizes. When he blinks again, the scenery's completely unfamiliar. Despite what they'd told him, he'd half-expected to get dropped off in front of Steve's old apartment; he's spent half the trip convinced he'd be spending the next few weeks staring at his own bullet holes.

But he'd never spent much time in Bed Stuy, as far as he knows.

"This is you," Natasha says, pulling over next to a complicated parking sign that he can't even begin to figure out. He gets out and scans the front. Four stories above an abandoned storefront. Brick. Fire escapes criss-crossing everywhere. It could be that he's gotten too used to holding cells and covert quasi-military bases for his own good, because he's not sure if he understands how people just *live* anywhere else. A pink-haired girl is coming out the front door, slinging a bicycle over her shoulder as she descends the steps, scanning him with a nod as he steps out of her way.

Natasha's tapping at her phone, probably reporting in that they've arrived, as she joins him on the sidewalk.

"Come on," she says, putting the phone away and unclipping a key ring from the mass in her hand, then tossing it over to him. "Clint says he'll be back in a few hours, he'll swing by." He takes the steps up, guesses that the largest key opens the front. Sweeping his eyes over the entryway, he finds nothing but mailboxes and stairs, leading up. "Third floor."

The steps don't creak, but the floor of the landing does, and he's wondering if it's by design- an early warning system- when he realizes what else he's hearing.

Children laughing. Down the hall, behind nothing but a door that-

Halfway up the stairs, Natasha looks back at him over the railing. "What's wrong?"

He shakes his head. This had been his idea. Steve and Sam and Natasha and Maria Hill had all signed off on it. If they'd had concerns-

-but still. There are children, *here*, in this building.
"Kids?"

"Simone's, yeah." She takes half a step back down, though, and waits for him to catch up. Her smile's sympathetic, but all she says is, "You'll get used to it."

Glancing back down to the hallway, he shifts his bag over his shoulder, mustering something that he hopes sounds like confidence. "All part and parcel of this entire thing, right?"

"Attaboy."

She points at the next door down. "This one."

Looking down at the keys, he makes a guess; tries it, and makes another one.

The door opens, and a quick scan of the apartment finds it furnished- obviously lived in, but empty. There's an afghan folded over the back of the couch and books on the shelves, but nothing's hanging from the nails in the walls.

"This place get a lot of use?"

"Not for a while, now." She steps inside, looking around and nodding to herself. "Previous tenant moved on." She heads for the kitchen, humming to herself, and suddenly, it's just daunting, coming in here, taking over someone else's place in the world like this.

He calls out after her. "Do you know the guy who lived here?"

"Met him a few times. Nice guy." Following her voice, he finds her looking through the freezer. "Used to grill up on the roof when the weather was nice, kind of got the rest of the building into the habit."

"He's dead, isn't he?"

She straightens up and blinks at him. "It's that obvious?"

"All this stuff, just sitting here." And all the stuff that's not.

"It happened upstairs," she says, absently, letting the door swing shut. There's a note stuck to the fridge with a magnet; she scans it and passes it over. "Not in here, if you're wondering."

---

Tony's twitchier than usual, probably due to the fact that he's not accustomed to having anyone looking over his designs quite so skeptically. Ordinarily, he would've ordered Dummy back into the corner, but today they're playing fetch with a roll of duct tape. Dr. Van Drier is nothing if not thorough.

Still, there's room for hope. The voice recognition program Tony'd designed for him is working now they updated his phone's operating system again; there's hardly any delay when Tony
inevitably asks, So, Clint. What's up? You having second thoughts?

"Moved out there because it was normal and chill." Not that he'd done a great job keeping it that way. "And I know Cap gave the go-ahead, but..."

Tony's speaking; word by word, it shows up on the screen. Now you've got a super soldier living upstairs.

He nods, which seems to be answer enough, even though Tony misses it, busy as he is wrestling the duct tape from Dummy again. And it's not as if he'd come here wanting to gripe about how Steve had let slip the thought that babysitting said super soldier would be a distraction from his sad pathetic little life.

Not that Steve'd put it like that, or anything.

Offer still stands, Tony says. Shit hits the fan, you've got my number. I can get there inside five minutes.

He nods again, watching Van Drier note something on his laptop. It's as good a time as any to flat-out ask, since Tony's been edging around the topic all afternoon anyway. "What about you? Think it's a bad idea?"

Surprisingly, Tony just shrugs, tossing the roll of duct tape again. He can't integrate into society wandering around a recommissioned military base, right? He's being politic, and it's probably meant to be obvious. But he's not really the sort of guy to let his real opinions go unvoiced. At least this way, we've got good eyes on him.

---

It's strange, seeing the lights on the ceiling start to flash unaccompanied by Jarvis's voice. He doesn't miss the noise, exactly- the klaxons that he knows are accompanying it had been ear-splitting, especially in the labs.

Gotta jet, Tony's saying, calm as he checks his phone for whatever information's come with the alert. You guys finish up here, and-

We're good for now, Dr. Van Drier is saying, scooping up his laptop with wide eyes and shrugging into his coat while trying to sign at the same time.

[Noisy,] Clint picks out, and [annoying]. And [arrange appointment by email]. And [not underlined].

Three months ago, Clint would've been going down to the armory and suiting up, or heading up to ready the quinjet. Today, though, he's just watching Van Drier take the stairs two at a time. Grabbing his vibrating phone out of his pocket, he thumbs open the screen. It's a message from Natasha.

Got called in. Package delivered, all clear, if I don't pass you on the way in. You're out of coffee filters.

He staggers back blinking through black spots at metal that's-it's Dummy's arm, moving away its claw follows the duct tape that's now rolling across the floor.

He must still be looking dazed when he gets down to the lobby. Pepper's striding towards him, brow furrowed in concern and mouthing something that he doesn't quite think to follow. She's
pointing at his forehead and taking his arm, just as he starts feeling the blood running into his eye.

---

Natasha's talking him through his cover story- he's a soldier, he'd lost his arm to an IED in Afghanistan. When he asks why, she says that most people don't understand enough of what's happened there to ask specific questions.

He's no different, honestly, and he'd *been* there three times that he knows of. But the wider political implications hadn't been something his handlers had needed him to know. All he remembers about Kabul, honestly, is peering across the square, the bodies of his target and her children cooling in the alley behind him while he waited for his extraction.

"If anyone asks," Natasha's telling him, "you were named after Bucky Barnes by your very patriotic parents." It's the same story they'd used at the government center when getting his ID. "Fill in the details as you wish, but keep them vague."

"And if someone realizes that I'm me?"

"Use the video chat on your phone to call Steve. He'll talk them around, if there's a problem. And, obviously, if you have any problems, you can call any of us."

At that, her phone buzzes on the table, and she sighs as she picks it up to read the message. "I've got to go report in and suit up. Got a mission." She stands, looking at him apologetically. "You going to be okay for a few hours?"

He nods. Two minutes later, she's leaving him sitting in the kitchen of an apartment that's supposed to be his, but isn't, yet.

Once he's unpacked his bag- it doesn't take long- there's not much to do besides sit around and wait for the walls to close in on him, for someone to pound on the door, for *something* to happen.

Nothing does, but something ugly and tense is creeping up from underneath the antidepressants and he needs a distraction. He sits at the table and stares across at the dripping sink, and concentrates on not getting up and tearing the apartment apart, just to find out where all the bugs are.

He could call Steve, just to check in. Maybe Sam or Natasha. But they've got bigger problems on their hands, if they're all out in the field, and he doesn't need to shove his anxieties at them.

It's nearly an hour before he really starts to realize that nobody's coming to structure his day for him. All he's got is a reminder on his phone that chirps every evening when it's time for him to take his pills. Beyond that, he's free to do as he pleases. Which would be great, if he had any idea what that entailed.

He could leave if he wanted to. Get out, get the lay of the land. Maybe it would settle him.
Chapter 8

He's got gloves- the dark leather ones he prefers, but probably can't get away with right now, and a few light tan ones, meant to replicate his skin, for his left.

He's got two keys on a ring.

He's got the phone Steve had given him. It's still not the kind of thing he'd think to pick up and carry with him, if not for Steve's insistence.

He's got a wallet, and inside is a few hundred dollars that Steve had given him this morning, along with a bank card Stark had arranged for him last week. There's an ID card, too, shoved in the back where he'd have to dig for it. For as used to seeing *James Buchanan Barnes* scarred into his arm, seeing it spelled out on shiny new plastic makes him anxious.

He's got the breath that he's holding in his chest as he forces himself out the door, locking it behind him. He steps outside, and nothing explodes. He exhales, exchanging it for New York afternoon air, and begins to walk.

---

For the first two blocks, everyone's staring at him.

They're not, of course. It's all in his head. He's dressed much like any of the men out here: dark blue jeans, black shirt, and an army green jacket that's never seen combat. He's not wearing the anti-glare paint, and he'd tossed the mask into the river months ago. He'd shaved this morning, and if his hair's longer than a lot of guys are wearing, it doesn't stand out.

He is capable of blending in, of walking around the city like a regular goddamn human being. Even with as jumbled as he'd been, before turning himself in, he'd managed well enough when he'd had to.

Still, he's not used to being out in the world with nothing to kill but time. Most everyone else on the street seems to be going to or from work, or from school, or meeting friends. Even the people waiting to cross the street, standing on their own, half of them are speaking into their phones; the half that aren't are plugged into earphones and tapping incessantly at their screens.

They're all distracted. Easy targets.

---

There's a Starbucks up the block; other than a quick stop with Steve and Natasha, when they'd gone to get his ID card made, he hasn't been to one since Florida.

He knows that he likes them, though. They're all the same, only they're not; they're identical components rearranged to fit inside whatever space the coffee shop occupies, but they all work the same way. And they're safe in ways that restaurants aren't. He cannot eat Indian food; can't even smell it without getting nervous- he still doesn't know why- but Starbucks never reminds him of anything besides Starbucks.

What he pays for the coffee could've fed him and Steve for a week or more, once upon a time, but
it's good, not the reused grounds of wartime rationing.

It's also the best anonymity five dollars can buy. This one, like all the others he'd loitered in, is filled with people too focused on their phones and laptops and newspapers to notice him. Even the cashier who takes his order and jots his name on cup drops him from her thoughts the moment the next customer comes up. The woman snapping the lid on his finished drink doesn't care if he's going by Bucky, James or Rumpelstiltskin when she calls his name out.

And he still doesn't know which name fits best- he goes with James, today- but he likes the vanilla lattes.

---

He commandeers a table next to the wall, with good line of sight on the window, and tells himself that the gesture doesn't have to mean anything. The newspaper, one of the free ones from the rack by the door, is more restaurant reviews and concert listings than actual news.

*Actual* news makes him uneasy, most days. It had taken months for him to break the habit of scanning through every word, never being certain if he'd been looking for code words or references that he'd been spotted.

The back pages of this one are interesting, though. Classified ads, usually three to five lines at the most, offering all sorts of things. Most of them, he doesn't understand. E-cig refills at bargain prices. Web hosting. Media conversion. DUI lawyers.

Some of the ads, though, they just make him nervous. They're larger and garish, even the ones that aren't printed in color. Phone numbers to call for massages and escort services. Women in their underwear- he's pretty sure that there's more of that nowadays than there used to be- and *men*, too.

Some of the ads are for stores with names like *Pleasure Chest* or *Pink Pussycat* or *The Leather Man*. They've got pictures of feathers and plastic and glass things that are supposed to- -everyone's so *blatant* about it, these days.

His table gets jostled by two teenaged girls getting up from the next table over, and it's only when he glances back down that he realizes what he's been staring at.

Face hot, he flips the page, aiming for casual, and glances up to make sure nobody's suddenly looking over his shoulder.

There's a man at the counter, picking up his coffee. He's got a gray knit hat pulled down over his ears, blue jeans and a purple T-shirt. It's loose, but the shoulders and arms underneath are well muscled. When he turns around, he has white butterfly sutures on his eyebrow, and bruises around eyes that are staring, with increasing- no, worse, *decreasing*- confusion, right at him.

---

He's been spotted. He'd let his guard down and now this *guy* is skirting the edges of an empty table and stopping right in front of him. "You're Barnes, aren't you?"

"What? Ah..."

Glancing down, he can't help noticing the man's hands. One is wrapped around his white and green coffee cup, the other is wrapped around his phone. His stance is alert, but... friendly?
The man pulls a face— it looks like wincing, like he's resisting the urge to scratch at his bandages—and nods. "You're Bucky Barnes." He's quieter about it, this time, at least. Nobody seems to be paying any attention anyway, and the espresso machine is screaming in the background. But he's right, and it's troubling.

"Yeah." Tries to swallow but his throat is dry, takes a sip of coffee because for some reason, he doesn't want to cough in front of this guy. "Who're you?"

He looks up from his phone. "I'm Clint."

Blinking in confusion, he manages to nod at the seat across from him, waving him to sit down. It's an awkward time to notice that the page he'd flipped to is a full page ad featuring two men. One has leather straps criss-crossing his naked chest, and his head's thrown back, mouth open, as the other one pulls on the waist of his leather shorts.

He's more relieved than he can say to find that Clint's taking a covert look at his left wrist, where the cuff from his jacket isn't quite meeting the top of his glove.

"Anyway. Good to meet you," Clint says, setting his coffee down to shake hands; he doesn't put the phone away. "You get settled in okay?"

He nods, surprised and tries to think of something to say that isn't I killed women and children and there's still probably a 5% chance I could snap at any minute. Something normal. He figures mentioning the note Clint had left on the fridge would suffice, or asking how he'd found him. He should probably thank him for putting him up. What comes out, though, as they shake, is, "I thought you were deaf."

There's a delay before Clint answers; he's reading something on his phone. "I am. Ninety five percent, or so they tell me," he says, turning the phone so he can read it. On the screen is a record of their conversation; word by word, as Clint speaks, the words appear. "Voice recognition. It records everything that happens within whatever radius I choose, so I can read it on the screen."

It's strange, listening to him. He sounds like he's got a cold. Every word is given equal emphasis. But it's better than he'd been expecting.

"Cool." He raises his eyebrows, unsure that anything he can think to say won't look stupid in print, then decides that maybe it does bear comment. "I don't know sign language or anything. Natasha said you used notebooks."

"Still do. Stark only got this up and running functionally a few hours ago." Clint raises his cup; the lid pops off and coffee sloshes onto his shirt. "Aww, lid," he mutters, patting at his chest with one hand, but deciding, apparently, that the spreading stain is not enough to warrant getting up for a napkin.

It's enough of a distraction that he's able to shut the newspaper and slide it to the side of the table. Beyond that, though, he's not sure what he's supposed to do. He's had no practice, talking to people in coffee shops. And as much as Steve's promised him that he used to be social and friendly, he's at a complete loss.

But Clint's grinning, when he looks up. "Well, now that the making an ass of myself is out of the way, how're you liking New York?"

"It's changed, I think." He resists the urge to glance again at the newspaper. "Far as I know, anyway."
Clint shrugs. "It would be weirder if it hadn't, though, yeah?"

"Yeah," he finds himself casting about for something that won't sound insane. "Thanks for agreeing to this. The apartment, I mean. Putting me up."

Clint reads, then shrugs, looking back up at him. "No problem. Think it might be Natasha and Hill's newest attempt to get me to come in from the cold."

"Huh?"

Eyes suddenly glued to the table, Clint scratches his neck. "Never mind."

It's embarrassment; he doesn't understand it. But he thinks back to what he'd heard around the Academy and hazards a guess. "They want you to come back onto the team."

The grimace that crosses Clint's face now, he does understand. Weary, mild irritation. "Kind of got my own thing going on."

Without stopping to think whether or not he should, he replies, "the kind of thing that gets your head split open?"

"Maybe."

"Nothing major. Small-time stuff."

"This here was me being a klutz. The ears happened a few weeks ago, and it's done with. You might have some issues with the bathtub, but at least you won't have to worry about Russian Tracksuit Draculas crawling out of the woodwork."

"Russian Draculas are something to worry about?" he repeats, uncertain that he'd heard right. And he'd thought Dracula'd been from Romania. Bucky Barnes had read the book.

"Not anymore."

"Just a normal building kind of deal."

"So what, you fix toilets, tell the guy down the hall to turn down his radio, and shoot bad guys with arrows?"

"Yeah. That kind of deal."

"So that's why you haven't been up to the Academy?"

Clint reads, then thinks. "Steve's great, don't get me wrong. Stark and the rest of 'em, too. But this ain't their scene."

"You gotta make your own stuff work out, y'know?"

It's funny, he thinks, that this guy sitting across from him, with his messed up hair and busted eyebrow, manages to hit the philosophical target so easily.

"Yeah," he says, raising his paper cup to toast him, "I think I do."

---

He'd been worried when he'd come up from the subway and opened the link to Barnes' tracker, finding that he was about thirty blocks away from the apartment.

It had only been ten blocks from the subway station, though. He hadn't broken into a run, but it had been a close thing. Especially so, when he'd realized the tracker was indicating Barnes' presence inside the Starbucks up on the corner.
Casing the coffee shop the moment he'd stepped inside, he'd been shocked to see him sitting at a small round table in the corner, near the window, reading a newspaper.

Apart from the long hair falling into his face, he'd looked exactly like the pictures in the history books had said, and even though Clint had been expecting it, it still took him by surprise.

He'd ordered a cup of coffee, mostly to buy himself a few moments to come up with a plan. The man hadn't been shooting the place up, or taking hostages. He hadn't had any sort of Banner-level freakout when he'd introduced himself, either, and that had made Clint the asshole, there, for assuming the worst.

Barnes had been nervous, and a little guarded, but that hadn't been a surprise. And at least combination of his spilled coffee, deafness, and busted eyebrow had been enough to convince Barnes that Clint couldn't manage to be a credible threat on the best of days.

Maybe that's why he's following Clint out and back towards the grocery store so easily. The thought crosses his mind that maybe, when you've had your head fucked with enough, it's just easier to follow orders and suggestions- to let someone else do the thinking- than not.

But that would be projecting.

Even so, once they're meandering through the grocery store's produce section, it's clear that Barnes has no idea what the hell he's doing. He doesn't make any indications whatsoever regarding food selections, nodding that everything Clint suggests is fine. Mostly, he's too busy tracking the movement of every other customer in his field of vision to focus on making any decisions.

Fine. He'd volunteered for this, and Barnes at least seems willing to accept his help. He remembers Steve saying that bananas taste wrong now, so he goes for a few apples and oranges. Eggs and milk, bread and butter, potatoes, onions and cheese. Ground beef and brats- he might be down for coming up to grill- and potato chips. Barnes seems puzzled by the frozen pizza, but it could be that the man's never had it.

They're heading over to the cash register when he remembers Natasha's message about coffee filters. He's pretty sure there's soap in the bathroom. Toothpaste and deodorant, when he suggests them, actually get a shake of the head; presumably Barnes has brought some with him. Shampoo and conditioner, he frowns at, but it's as good an opportunity to test the man's decision making capabilities.

After what feels like an eternity, Banes goes with the cheapest stuff on the shelf and throws it into the basket with a shrug. The next aisle down, Clint grabs toilet paper and paper towels, and then notices the Saran Wrap, and something occurs to him. Grabbing one of the long boxes, he holds it up for inspection.

Barnes frowns, studying it, and scowls back at him, his mouth moving. Clint scratches his neck, frowning. He's not great at reading lips on the best of days, and he's got too much crap in his hands to check his phone. The question's obvious in his expression, though, so he hazards a guess. "You know." He gestures at his left, wincingly. "For showering, or whatever. So you don't fuck up your arm. Or electrocute yourself, or something."

This actually gets a startled grin, and another shake of the head. Barnes takes the box from him and puts it back on the shelf, then gestures at Clint's pocket.

He digs out his phone and thumbs it open. He's had the voice recognition program going this whole
time, it turns out- his battery's at 27%.

The newest words are spooling out now.

"Thanks, but if I was going to rust, it probably would've started by now."

He looks up, and Barnes- he really probably should figure out what the guy wants to be called, and sooner, rather than later- is still smiling, and shit.

That's a nice smile.

---

Clint's going for his wallet, but the man's already letting him stay in the apartment, and there's only so much charity he can take. Still, actually using the bank card is confusing. The kid running the register looks at him like he's crazy when he tries handing it over. Clint taps him on the arm and points at the black box, then, when he realizes that it's not enough, takes the card from his hand and skims it along the edge of the box before handing it back.

He watches the screen blink, and it asks for a signature. He'd had to do that when his ID had gotten made, and honestly, he can't remember what he'd written.

Clint's shoving the plastic not-really-a-pen at him and waving at the machine, dismissively.

He's not certain the gesture means that he's supposed to scrawl as illegibly as possible, but he does. Three seconds later a receipt is spooling out of the register, and Clint's nudging him down the line to pick up their bags.

Outside, Clint strides ahead. Waving into the street, he hails a cab, and they pour their bags and themselves into it. It's not a long drive, and the man driving- he's got a Somalian accent mostly used for muttering irritably at the other drivers- seems disinterested in trying to speak to them until he's dropping them off.

Clint carries half the bags up the stairs, waiting for him to unlock the door before stepping inside, heading straight for the kitchen without having to ask where it is. If he pauses to scan for intruders- which he doesn't seem to do- it doesn't take him more than a half second.

Of course, he doesn't have to. He owns the building. And the biggest threat here is probably standing right behind him.

Clint sets the bags down on the counter, and steps aside to let him do the same. When he turns back, Clint's got his phone out.

"Think you got everything you need?"

He's got a lot. He's not entirely sure what to do with any of it. But that, he supposes, has got to be half the point of this.

"Yeah," he says, just able to see the word pop up on the screen. "Everything's great. Thanks for this. For everything, I mean."

"No problem. Any friend of Cap's is a friend of mine."

This is ridiculous, the way he's being so easy about it. Natasha'd been the same way, and he's got no idea where the boundaries are. It's irritating. "I'm a known assassin."
Clint glances up from his phone and shrugs. "Aren't we all?" He turns away suddenly, back to the bags, and starts unpacking them. "Anyway. I figure, I'm downstairs if you need me, or whatever, so stop by any time." The words are still coming out in a steady, equally emphasized rush, but he's starting to hear hints of inflection. He's getting used to it. "But in the meantime, it's Friday. The neighbors are gonna be grilling up on the roof. Grabbed some brats if you wanted to bring something to throw on. Figure I can stop by in an hour and see if you're up for it?"

At this, Clint turns to look at him, eyebrows raised. The bandage is pulling, slightly, on his eyelid. He nods; even to him it feels stiff. But Clint looks hopeful, so he remembers to grin.

"Cool." Grinning was the right move; Clint's returning it. "I'll grab some beers, stop here on the way up."

---

Nice one, Barton.

Inside his own apartment, he drags off his hat, takes a deep breath and lets his shoulders slump on the exhale. If it was a meditative thing, maybe it would wipe out every stupid thing that he's done in the past two hours. But it's not, so it doesn't.

God, he'd been pushy. Overdid it, as usual. It's not like he'd asked Barnes out on a date, but the man's only, like, what? Ten hours out from prison? More or less? And overwhelmed as all hell?

Barnes probably just wants to be left the fuck alone, to get his feet under him for a bit, but now he's gone and badgered the guy into meeting all the neighbors at once. He should've given him more of an out, when Barnes had grimaced at the invitation. Instead, Clint had just steamrolled over him like he'd done at the store—deciding what groceries he should buy, practically manhandling him through checkout, onto the street, and into the cab.

Of course the guy had just gone along with everything he'd done. He was probably under orders to, if Steve and Hill had signed off on him even being out in the world.

Grabbing his phone, he texts Natasha. You good? Went to store with B. Gonna grill tonight. Everything's cool here, hope it is on your end too.

Fuck, just a few hours in and he's lying already. What he should've sent was Pretty sure I'm freaking him the hell out. Showed up like a stalker, dumped coffee all over myself, and kidnapped him to the grocery store. He wanted to know I was cool with an assassin being here, and I'm pretty sure I wound up blowing him off but I was still shaking off being sucker-punched from when he laughed at me over some Saran Wrap. I'm an idiot, and you were an idiot to let him anywhere near me.

---

"Hey Steve. It's-" he stumbles, like he normally does, but if Steve's phone is anything like this one, whatever name Steve's assigned him will show up on the caller ID. "It's me."

"Bucky, hi!" Steve sounds happy. Happier than he's used to hearing, and it's as good a reason to put off telling him how much the idea of meeting the neighbors is making him so goddamned jittery.

"I take it the mission went well?"

"It was a mess, but... no casualties, no major injuries on our side, and we managed to-" he stops
short, and stumbles. "Managed to stop the bad guys from deploying something horrible."

"Glad to hear it." He smirks. This- this dodging of details, keeping him out of the loop where missions are concerned, is nothing new. Compared to a lot of things, it's one of the easier to accept.


"I did. Got unpacked, went for a walk when Natasha left. Met Clint. Got some groceries in."

"Yeah? Well, do yourself a favor and throw out the bananas."

"We didn't get any."

"Good, you'll be sparing yourself a lot of disappointment," he says, and then, after a beat, "We?"

"Clint was with me at the store." Maybe he hadn't been clear. "He's down at his place, but he invited me up to the roof to meet the neighbors."

"The roof?"

"I guess they grill up there? On Fridays?"

"Oh." Steve chuckles. "For a moment there, I was worried he was keeping pigeons."

There it is again, another almost-memory. Something about a crazy old man and a coop up on the roof, but it's hazy, like he's remembering hearing about it. "Think I remember something about that," he says. "Did it smell bad?"

"Mr. McReary? It was terrible, especially in summer."

"Yeah?" He's trying to imagine Clint as someone who keeps to himself. He definitely hadn't seemed like an antisocial hermit, despite, he's realizing now, what Natasha had told him on the drive down. "Well, I'll let you know if Clint turns out to be a half-mad shut-in."

It's not until he's hung up that he realizes he hadn't said anything at all about his reasons for calling. It's just that, by the time he'd hung up, they hadn't been bothering him any more.

Too bad it doesn't last.
Chapter 9

Clint stops by Simone's door, straining- and failing, as usual- to hear Lucky's feet scuffling on the other side of the door. There's just the weird muted, garbled whine that surges and fades but never really goes away.

He knows Lucky's there, though, and that's got to be enough. By the time he knocks, and Simone's opening the door, he's smiling. Lucky comes bounding out to dance around his legs, and he manages to get out a "Simone, hey, thanks for looking after him," before he's distracted by a paw to the back of his knee that's threatening to knock him over. It's still more easily accomplished than it ought to be, when he's not concentrating on keeping his balance.

When he straightens to look at Simone, she's frowning at him, gesturing at the cut above his eyebrow. She says, probably, "are you okay?"

"Wasn't looking where I was going. It's fine," he tells her, pulling his hat back down over his ears and taking out his phone, which, he realizes, needs charging, soon. "Any trouble with Lucky?" He shows her the screen. "Voice recognition. Go ahead."

*Made a grab for the hot dogs I was defrosting for tonight, but no worries. Is the new tenant all moved in?*

"Yeah. Figure I'll bring him up tonight, introduce him everyone."

She nods. *Good. What's he like?*

All he's really told them is that he's doing a favor for a friend of Captain America's, and that they might want to give him his space.

"He's fine. A little quiet, but. If he wasn't cool, he wouldn't be here."

Her grin is more relieved than anything. *Is that written into the lease?*

"Not yet, but I'll get to the print shop and get it on there."

---

By the time he's taken Lucky out for a walk, changed out of his coffee-stained shirt, thawed some ground beef in the microwave, and plugged his phone in, it's been almost an hour.

He waits for ten minutes, trying not to watch the percentage on his phone as it drags it's feet back up to 19%, and then decides he'll make do. He's got a pen, and a small notebook in his pocket anyway. It'll be fine.

---

It's not horrible, but it's not fine, either.

His right hand's carrying the plate of burgers, and in his left he's got Lucky's leash and the six pack. Which makes knocking on doors hard. Standing outside Barnes' apartment, he deliberates. Kicking seems rude. Putting the plate down means a happy Lucky and a sad Barton. Jostling, he manages to prop the beer on his hip against the frame of the door, and he knocks.

He's finagling a more secure grip on the six-pack when the door swings open, which, yeah, he
should've expected, but he's stepping back too quickly, and the beers are crashing to the floor, and
Barnes is looking as startled as he's gotta be, right now.

He looks down. Thankfully, none of them are broken.

Barnes is shaking his head, crouching down to pick them up, when suddenly he twitches back,
hard, shaking his head, hair flinging beer droplets everywhere. All Clint can smell is beer, and he's
being pulled suddenly sideways by Lucky, who's trying like hell to-

"Lucky, no! Down!"

Lucky's hearing, at least, is as good as it's ever been; he comes back, sits obediently next to the five
beers that haven't exploded, thumping his tail against the floor.

Barnes, on the other hand, is standing up, stricken, and the beer he's holding in his black gloved
hand is frothing over his fingers, more foam than anything. If the cap had come off completely, the
mess would be worse, but at least it wouldn't still be happening.

"I'm sorry, I was-"

Barnes shakes his head, nodding inside, to where at least the beer is dripping on the linoleum
instead of the carpet. He disappears around the corner, then pokes his head out a moment later. He
shakes his head again, and gestures for him to come inside.

Out of habit, he looks down at Bucky, and then back up. Barnes nods, exasperated.

Nice work, Barton, he thinks to himself, stepping inside, setting the plate on the counter while
Barnes dodges around him and Lucky to go back for the rest of the beers.

He's got one hand free, now which he uses to wipe his face off, before wiping it on his jeans and
pulling out his phone, which he sets on the counter.

"I'm really sorry about that," he says, once Barnes is back, peeling off his glove and wiping his
hands on a paper towel. "I was trying to balance everything, and it slipped."

It's fine. Don't worry about it. Should probably change this one anyway. Given that he's tossing the
glove onto the counter, Clint guesses that's what he's talking about. While Barnes disappears into
the bedroom- the ones on this side of the building aren't lofted like those on his side are, he takes
inventory on the rest of the beers.

It would be handy as hell, he thinks, to know if any of the bottles are hissing, getting ready to
explode all over again. But they look okay. Instead, he grabs some paper towels, wetting half of
them in the sink, and trudges out into the hallway, where he stomps them into the stain on the
carpet. He's been meaning to buy a steam cleaner anyway. This, apparently, is the weekend he
actually gets around to it.

Mopping up the thin trail of beer on the linoleum doesn't take as much work, but he can feel
Barnes watching him. Maybe he's talking, maybe he's not. It's unnerving as hell.

Of course it is, his brain tries convincing him, You just startled the guy who could've killed
Captain Fucking America, if he'd wanted to, and now there's beer everywhere, and he thinks you're
an idiot.

When he finally brings himself to look up, though, Barnes is smirking at him. He's got another
glove on- this one looks like it's meant to match his skin, though it doesn't, not quite- and he's got
the beer and the burgers, and his brats, and he's speaking.

*On average, how many shirts do you go through in a day, anyhow?*

---

At least Barnes is still grinning as they head up to the roof, even if it falters a bit when they arrive to find that everyone else is already there. As usual, Aimee's first on the grill- she's not enough of a vegan to insist on using a separate grill entirely, just enough of one to insist on using it before everyone else's filthy meat drips all over it. She waves, turning over her tofu dogs, and turning her attention back to Kent who's leaning against the ledge next to her, smoking a cigarette.

Simone's kids, Charlie and Donnie come running up, mostly to play with Lucky; they don't even bother asking before grabbing the leash, but at least the lecture about not letting him *off* the leash, up here on the roof, seems to have stuck in their brains. Simone's hot on their heels, saying something to Barnes and waving him over to place their plates on the cooler next to the grill, waiting their turn. The beer goes into another cooler, and it according to his phone, she's explaining that the sodas are open game, but the beer *goes to who brung them*.

He misses Grills; it used to be his job, explaining the lay of the land up here, this used to be his *thing*. Knowing that someone's quoting him right now, because he's not *here* right now, sucks. Even if he can't hear it.

He follows them, grabbing two beers before putting the rest in the cooler. One, he passes one to Barnes, who thumbs the cap off with his left hand before Clint can explain to him that they're twist off.

The addition of Barnes to the usual gathering isn't so unusual that he's forgotten the other habits. Deke, when he casts an eye out to look for him, is already smirking back at him like he's been waiting.

Clint raises his eyebrows, and Deke points to the side of the air conditioning unit, the old chimney behind the garbage can, and then to the trashcan itself.

It banks twice, and goes in like it should. If it's not as cleanly as he likes, it's not like anyone else here can tell. He can't hear Deke's applause, but he can see it. Even Barnes is nodding, impressed. He gestures at Clint's pocket, but before he manages to finagle it out, Simone's grabbing Barnes by the arm, and dragging him over to meet her kids.

If there was a point where he'd expect Barnes to have a bad reaction, this would be it. But he seems to just roll with it, letting himself be led. He even pushes up his left sleeve so Charlie can poke excitedly at his arm.

By the time Clint thinks to look down at his phone, the kid's rambling about Iron Man, and, now that Clint thinks of it, this is all probably insanely awkward.

Okay, the part where Donnie starts regaling Barnes with a tale about getting his arm blown off in a video game, *that's* where it gets awkward. Simone looks embarrassed and apologetic, nudging her kids towards the coolers, and Aimee and Deke are slotting into the space she'd vacated.

*I E D in Afghanistan a few years back*, Barnes is saying, but Gareth is tapping him on the arm, pointing at Simone and then holding up five fingers, letting him know that he's up next for the grill.

*What's that?* Gareth, nods at his phone. Given the amount of shit the phone-obsessed nerd had
given him over his land line when he'd found out about it, it's not surprising.

"Voice recognition. Easier than writing." His words are spooling across the screen as he hands it over.

_Stark?_

He nods, hoping like hell he's not going to go on another fanboy geek spiral, but instead he just pokes around, checking out the display settings, before handing it back, apologetically.

_Sorry. Didn't change anything. Just curious, you know?_

He nods again, then remembers. It's almost June. "You done with school yet?"

_One more final, graduation's in a week. And. I already started getting applications out, but... I was wondering if- He glances up, missing rest, but Gareth's the sheepish expression is telling him everything he needs to know.

"I could put in a word for you at SI," he says. He's got no clue what Gareth's specialty is, but it's probably for the best if he doesn't even try to guess. Pepper will probably know what to do with the kid.

---

When their turn comes up on the grill, Clint goes to collect Barnes from Aimee; by the relieved looks on both of their faces, whatever he's interrupting is chew-your-own-arm-off awkward; Barnes falls into step with him immediately.

While he's busying himself getting the brats going, Barnes moves ahead to look over the edge of the building.

"Hey, Barnes."

No response. He wonders, sometimes, if he's actually speaking out loud. If he's losing the ability to make himself heard. Checking the brats- they're good for a few minutes- he sidles up next to him, taking advantage of the luck of position that has Barnes turned away from where everyone else is settling in to eat.

"You okay?"

Evidently not. He looks like he's about to freak the hell out, wide eyed and staring down at the street.

It's stupid, that he hadn't done the math, but if he's from Brooklyn, and this is an old block, he might recognize something, might be having some freakout-level flashback-

But the moment passes, and Barnes is blinking, shaking his head, and stepping backwards before turning to head back towards the grill.

So Clint follows. Taps him twice on the wrist to get his attention; Barnes looks down at his hand, startled.

"What's up? Not liking the view?"

Barnes rolls his eyes. His mouth moves, and it's stupid, but for a moment, Clint forgets about his phone.
Apparently, I really don't like heights.

He looks irritated—offended—more than anything else.

And it's horrible, and he's probably going to go to hell for it, but he's picturing him, in full Hydra uniform, mask, anti-glare paint and all, stuck up on a telephone post, kicking his feet as he holds on for dear life.

He doesn't realize he's smiling until Barnes glares at him, and, er. Yeah. Probably not the coolest thing to be doing right now.

Think I'm going to head back down.

Okay, so definitely not the coolest thing to be doing right now. He blinks, feeling like an asshole. "Shit. I'm sorry, man, I-

Barnes is looking down, so it's not until the words pop up on the screen that he can tell that he's spoken.

It's okay, just. Barnes shrugs.

"I'll bring you down some brats in a bit. Just leave the brick in the doorway on your way down."

Barnes nods, and then his back's to him as he makes his way towards the stairs.

---

His chest feels tight enough that he doesn't feel up to testing himself by looking out the windows when he gets back down to his apartment. He keeps his eyes closed as he shuts the drapes, then heads for the couch.

It's not until he's sitting that he realizes that no, the worst of it wasn't the four story drop, or even the wind. He knows it wouldn't have been enough to move him, but for an instant, the feeling of it rushing against his face—

The worst of it was that Clint—along with everyone up there—had seen him. They're probably all still sitting up there, talking in hushed tones about the pathetic crazy weirdo that's just moved into apartment K who goes catatonic at the slightest provocation. Clint's probably on his phone already, sending out a message to Steve or Hill or someone, letting them know that there's a problem, that he's more defective than they'd thought, that they should probably reassess this entire arrangement.

There's a knock on the door.

"Hey, it's me," Clint calls out. "Food's done. Got beers too, and I promise not to spill them this time."

"Come in," he calls back, but there's no response.

Oh. Right.

Getting up, he goes to open the door. Clint's there, as promised, with a plate full of brats, on rolls, slathered with mustard. He's got beers in the pockets of his jeans, and a wincing expression on his face.

"Sorry. About laughing. I was just surprised, but still. That was a dick move."
It's not until he's looking at him that his brain actually goes through the process of figuring out that if he's standing in the hallway, then he's not upstairs reporting to Steve.

"If it makes you feel any better," Clint offers, "I really hate snakes."

Blinking, he steps aside, gesturing towards the kitchen table. When Clint sets one of the beers down and takes two of the brats, he shakes his head, and points towards the chair.

"Have a seat," he says, not sure if Clint had planned on it anyway. But Clint does, and he takes out his phone, setting it next to the plate.

"Wasn't sure you weren't fed up with people."

He shrugs, sitting down across from him. "Nah," though he's not wrong. "Just. I don't know. Tired or something."

Clint nods, twisting off his beer cap, looking up from his phone to glance around. "Trash can?"

He has to look around himself; he's got no idea. "Think it's in one of the cupboards." Remembering what he'd pulled on the roof, though, he's curious. "Think you can land it in the sink?"

Clint grins. Pinching it above his head, he snaps his fingers, sending it careening against the refrigerator, and across to the cabinets. He loses track of it for an instant, but he can hear it pinging around the metal sides of the sink.

"How long did it take you to learn that?" Following Clint's lead, he takes a bite- it tastes amazing- something about it is familiar, but he can't place it. He's learning not to make the mistake of trying to chase the memory down, just in case it turns on him.

Clint shrugs. "I was, like, five or six. Don't really remember."

"That's cool." He wonders what it's like, living with memory gaps that aren't considered a threat to national security. "You ever get a snake with one of those?"

Clint pulls a face, and only mostly finishes chewing before he speaks. "Got a timber rattler with a golf ball, once." He's washing it down with some beer, and seems to be waiting for something with a serious expression on his face. "But hey, while we're on the topic of crap neither of us like talking about, seriously. I totally didn't mean to drag the guy who'd fallen to his death- or, you know, whatever- out onto an unsecured rooftop."

His mouth is full, it gives him a minute to muster up a response. "Think I was just startled. I also think that I like brats more than I dislike heights, anyway."

---

Clint clears out once the food's done, taking the dirty plate with him, and leaves him to his own devices.

He's only had two beers, but it's more than he's had in decades, probably, and the food's got him sluggish.

Sitting on the couch, he stares at the books on the shelves, toying with the idea of grabbing something to read. But the sun's going down outside the windows, he's too comfortable to get up just to turn on a light, and it's not bad, just sitting here, listening to noises from the street. Cars and music and birds. Simone's kids shouting at each other in the stairwell and a phone ringing
somewhere downstairs.

He thinks he could get used to this.
Chapter 10

It takes a couple of weeks to get used to the new tenant in apartment K. For the most part, Barnes keeps to himself. Clint wouldn't notice it at all if he hadn't promised Natasha he's keep an eye on the guy.

Barnes has probably made a similar promise to someone, though, because he does answer the door whenever he does stop up. After the first week and a half, he even loses the parade rest stance, and gradually, his visits seem less like inspections.

They aren't, of course, because if they were, Clint wouldn't feel the need to have an excuse every time he stops in. Usually, it's under the guise of splitting cab fare to the grocery store or some other errand, but he's used "checking out the bathtub fixtures" twice now, even though he's had the replacement parts on order since last Tuesday.

Still, though, he can't help but feeling like Barnes is simply following orders whenever he agrees to join everyone for grilling up on the roof. Small talk with the neighbors obviously isn't the most insurmountable task he's ever been given, but he tends to stick close to him and Lucky.

Which means that the Tiny Simones, who'd been sole proprietors of Lucky's attention prior to Barnes' arrival, are not usually far off. Which means, by extension, that Simone isn't either. And he's not going to tell Barnes, because it would just be weird, but if Simone's cool with you being near her kids, you're in like Flynn, as far as the rest of the building's concerned.

It's not like he was given a series of benchmarks to look out for, but he does mention it to Natasha. Seems the kind of thing somebody should know.

---

"Hey, uh. Deke says that J&P's got half off walk-in haircuts, I'm heading down. You interested?" Barnes scowls sharply at him, which shouldn't be a surprise; he sounds like Kate, planning a spa day with Darcy.

You think I need one? He can tell from Barnes' expression that it's more an accusation than it is a question, which is new. It's got weight behind it.

"Nah, you look good. Just... like do you need a trim or anything?" he should really just not speak, like, ever, but he's dug himself down this far. "Do supersoldiers even get split ends?" Now Barnes is just looking at him like he's an idiot, which is an improvement.

What the hell, nothing else going on today.

Barnes gets quiet, though, as they head down. There are two spots open right off the bat, so while his own hair's getting buzzed back to something vaguely less homeless, he listens to another barber trying to get Barnes to describe what he actually wants.

It only takes a minute for Barnes to decide on trimming off a few inches, leaving enough to tie back. It takes the hairdresser five minutes to talk him into letting her wash it first. If he were a better person, he'd do something to head it off, but Barnes' confused disbelief- as if hair washing is some newfangled invention, or that the chair's ability to not drop him on the floor as it tips back is not to be trusted- combined with the hairdresser's mounting confusion, is honestly been the most entertaining thing he's seen all day.
The only trouble is that afterwards, when he's telling Barnes that he looks good, he means it, maybe a bit too much. There used to be these ads in the magazines piled up around the farmhouse when he'd been a kid. Cigarette ads and polyester suits and shampoo called, no kidding, "Gee Your Hair Smells Terrific," which his mom had used to laugh at. His dad, back when things hadn't been horrible and terrifying, had said, half jokingly, that he'd tried that line on her when they'd been younger, and that it hadn't much worked.

Barnes, scowling as he strides past him out of the barbershop, his hair does smell terrific.

He smacks that corner of his brain back into submission- he's an idiot, sure, but he's not an asshole. Barnes is good looking, yes. But regardless of how great his hair smells, or- nope, not going there, he's Off Limits.

It's not until a few days later, when Sam mentions, as an aside, no big deal, just something to keep in mind going forward, that Barnes has a twitch about chairs- especially ones that rock back- that he feels like his earlier assessment of his own non-asshole status had been completely wrong.

Barnes, though, when he apologizes about it, just rolls his eyes. Jesus H. Christ. No, I'm not a huge fan of reclining chairs. But what kind of assassin would I be if I couldn't tell a hairdryer from a handgun?

"I dunno," Clint mutters back, thinking, for some reason, of Mr. Magoo, "but it would probably make for a great cartoon show."

It's only after the words are out that he realizes that it's probably not the best idea to tease the Winter Soldier. Barnes is staring at him, unblinking.

His glance at his phone isn't a metaphorical dodge for cover.

I'd suggest having Steve draw it, but he'd show up with an army and a concerned expression.

When he glances up, Barnes scowling, imitating Steve's Seriously Concerned Face. It's surprisingly accurate, even if it only lasts for a second before he starts cracking up.

He doesn't mention it to Natasha. She's probably find it funny, but he's pretty sure Maria Hill would not.

---

It takes a few months for the new routines to stop feeling new.

He gets up in the morning, takes his meds, makes coffee and breakfast. He figures out how to read the news on his phone, and he does the dishes.

He learns to track Sam's location based off their twice-a-week phone calls, as he only ever uses the video chat when he's upstate. Apparently his VA office has terrible wifi, so he uses the phone whenever he's calling from DC. Once every two weeks, Sam and Dr. Gupta visit in person, to go over treatments plans and prescriptions with him. Dr. Gupta takes blood samples and they both loiter over coffee, but it's harder to talk to Sam when Gupta's around. A month and a half in, it doesn't really feel like anything's changing, regardless of the progress they're assuring he's making.

He washes his clothes in the sink, until Clint realizes what he's doing and explains that there's a washer and dryer down in the basement. And it turns out, asking, "who are they?" hadn't been the right response. Even Steve's been giving him shit for that one, which makes him wonder what the hell else Clint's been telling him.
He walks eight blocks to the office where he shreds papers in a navy blue polo shirt. His boss, Candice-Call-Me-Candy, is a short woman in thick glasses and year-round sweaters, who promotes him to running the scanners and handling some of the front office work after a month. He's not sure it's because she's figured out that he's not as slow as she'd initially thought, or just because nobody else, so far, has stayed more than three weeks. And he doesn't ask.

He stops at Starbucks on the way home from work, and, latte in hand- with one name or another scrawled on the side- calls Steve on the walk back. After the first week, Steve stops asking if he's doing okay every five minutes; instead, they catch up. Like normal people, he thinks. Steve visits twice, the first month. The third time, Natasha comes with him and takes them out to a Thai restaurant where he loses his appetite the moment he steps through the door. He doesn't let on, and eats anyway. He manages to hold out until they're gone and he's back at his own place before puking his guts out.

It takes three trips to the library- he's got a card, now- before he realizes he's not under orders to read every history book on the 20th century. Still, it takes him a few minutes to work up the nerve to ask the librarian where the sign language books are. She seems eager to help, her polite curiosity verging on concern when he doesn't know which one to choose.

It's not like he's had a lot of practice, after all, making choices. He checks out all three she's shown him, and wonders if Sam would approve, or decide that he's evading the issue. It's not until he's flipping through them on his couch, finding that they all cover the same material, that he thinks that maybe it's not an issue.

Clint's check-ins turn into beers, sometimes at his place, sometimes at Clint's. On those days, it usually morphs into tagging along when Lucky needs to be walked, or camping out on the couch to watch Clint's TV. Sometimes they kill half an evening practicing sign language, and sometimes they grill on the roof.

Sometimes he can't sleep. Sometimes he has nightmares. Sometimes he's aware enough of the kids sleeping downstairs that he's able to clamp down on the screams, and sometimes he's not.

---

Lucky's pouncing all over him, and it's still dark out, it's-

It's three fourteen in the freakin' morning, and the damned dog is jumping off the bed now, running down the stairs and back up again. Groaning, he drags on some clothes and shoves his bare feet into his shoes. Lucky's tornadoing around the vicinity of the door, and only settles slightly once the leash is on, and it's a miracle that he's able to remember his keys before he's locked himself out.

They make it to the stairs, but Lucky's heading up, not down, and won't be convinced.

Lucky's not Lassie. He knows this. But it's three fifteen in the morning and who knows, maybe he's just dreaming all this. Maybe something just smells wrong.

Maybe something is wrong. When they get up to the landing, he sees Simone poking her head out of her door, looking at him with confused concern in her eyes. When she notices him staring back at her, she points down the hall. To Barnes' apartment.

Okay, then. This looks bad.

He hasn't looked this deeply into the corners since the night Barney got killed, and it's a real bitch that he's remembering that so well right now. Lucky, though, is still insisting on charging straight
ahead, and anyway, it's been there in the back of his head for a month now. Even before Lucky drags him to Barnes' door.

Something like this was bound to happen.

He knocks on it, quietly at first, because- shit, he'd left his phone downstairs- there's no way to tell if whatever's got Lucky spooked is the loud kind of disturbance or the silent kind, and if it's the latter, maybe he can still do this without waking up Mrs. Aslanova down the hall.

Maybe she's already awake. Maybe Barnes is in there, blasting the victrola or whatever it is that dudes listened to back in the day. Maybe he's about to punch through the wall from the other side.

He waits for a second- at least Lucky's just nosing at the door, now, not stampeding all over the hallway- but there's no answer. Knocking again, more loudly, gets no response.

He doesn't like doing this. He's got the master key on his ring, sure, but he feels like a creep whenever he has to use it for regular landlord business. This is an entirely new level of wrong.

"Barnes? I'm coming in."

He's probably-

-he hopes like hell he's got this all wrong.

He's out of shape- apart from a little mild sparring with Natasha and Sam that he'd only agreed to out of guilt, he hasn't been training in hand to hand since he got out of the hospital. He doesn't have any weapons.

Right now, he's not just opening the door, he's scanning the edges of Barnes' kitchen, looking for something that's lying in wait, and he doesn't like it.

There's nothing, though, at least not in the kitchen.

He's just managing to turn on the light when Lucky starts pulling again, dragging him into the living room, then through it, and fuck, if anything happens to Lucky-

Lucky's stopping, finally, in front of Barnes' bedroom door, and an entirely different sort of worry is setting in.

Whatever's going on, it's contained behind that door.

He knocks, again, hoping that Barnes is dressed, isn't in there with someone- oh God, he hadn't thought of that- or that he isn't hanging from the-

The door swings open before he can knock, and Barnes is staring at him, startled, arms stuck in a t-shirt that he's yet to pull over his head. The scarring where the metal joins his shoulder is less angry than he'd imagined it being. The scars on his right forearm, however, are red, and look like words-

Now's not the time.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what's going on, I thought something was wrong and Lucky started freaking out and Simone pointed me over here, are you okay?"

Oh, God, Barnes is going to think he's a freak. In one motion, he's going from hugging his shirt to his chest, to ducking his head through and pulling it on, to kneeling down to put Lucky, who's been nosing at his knee.
Glancing down, he thinks Barnes is laughing. Or maybe crying. It's impossible to tell.

This sucks. He doesn't even know what he's supposed to be apologizing for, or doing, or *what* right now.

"Barnes," he says, to no response that he can see. "Ah. Bucky?"

There's a flinch, maybe, but it could just be that he'd been too loud. Or that his first name sounds as awkward as it had felt, saying it. He's not sure.

It's frustrating, the stops and starts they seem to be having. One day, Barnes will be cracking wise and smirking at him, and the next, he's drawn so sharply into himself that he seems about to crack. Or, worse, he'll just go vacant. Like he's waiting for something to fill his head because his brain won't do it for him.

And it doesn't help that Clint *gets* it. Or that he knows that he *doesn't* get it, really, and that's the thing. He knows the guy's been through the wars, literally and figuratively. Between them and Natasha they could start up a fairly exclusive ex-brainwashed assassins club. But their traumas don't line up well enough that he can have any sort of insight, where Barnes is concerned.

And anyway, the nightmares? They're new, as far as he knows.

But if this is all just a big misunderstanding, though, he has to think that Barnes would be setting him straight by now. Instead, he's just petting the dog. Avoiding eye contact.

Clint crouches, and then sits next to him. Barnes is breathing heavily, but maybe he's just sighing. He hates that he has to duck into Barnes' line of sight just to get a good look; if he's in a bad place, the last thing he needs is this much scrutiny.

He checks his pockets for something to write with, though he already knows his phone's downstairs.

"On the plus side, if you don't want to talk right now, you're totally off the hook."

That, at least, gets a jerk of the shoulders in reaction. He decides that it's a laugh, albeit a weak one.

"Yes or no, though. Do you want me to fuck off?"

Barnes shrugs, but it's something.

"Okay. I'm gonna give you a minute. Can- do you want some water?"

He shakes his head.

"How about a beer?"

A shrug, and then a nod. Lucky's getting in the way, because of course he is, and he finds himself having to tap Barnes' wrist twice to get his attention.

"Is Lucky bothering you, I can-"

Another shake of the head, but this time, Barnes glances up with a rueful half-grin. It doesn't much look like it's going to stay there for long, so Clint shoves himself to his feet so he doesn't have to watch it go.

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He doesn't know what he's doing here, sitting on the floor, scratching Lucky's ears.

The dog seems happy, at least.

He's not sure what time it is; his phone's still charging on the nightstand; he could get up, go check- or better yet, grab it. It doesn't have Clint's voice recognition program on it, but he could type things out-

-only he doesn't feel much like it, and he wouldn't know where to start if he did.

There was the dream- it had been a bad one, he's sure of it, given the way his heart had been pounding when he'd half woken up.

*God*, he must've shouted out, or something. Woken up the whole damned building. Or Lucky, at least. And Simone, apparently, too. He must've drifted off again, afterwards, to not hear them until Clint had been pounding at the door.

He's trying to remember what he'd been dreaming about, but his mind's a blank. There's no helpful flash of images to tell him what his brain had been up to. He hadn't come out of it unable to recognize his bedroom, or himself. But he feels ill. His stomach's aching and there's a bad taste at the back of his mouth, and he wants to go back to bed.

But maybe if he meets this head on, Clint won't have to report back that he's backsliding, that there's still something this *wrong* with him.

Straightening his shirt, he drags his right hand over his face; it's clammy, unpleasant. He takes a breath, and moves to stand up. Lucky's faster to his feet, and already heading for the kitchen, his leash dragging behind him.

Padding into the harsh light of the kitchen, he finds Clint, in clothes that are only slightly more rumpled than they are during the day, spinning a bottle cap on the counter. His hair's like straw, sticking up at all angles. He'd forgotten to throw on the omnipresent knit hat before leaving his apartment, and his left ear is scarred. His right, when he gets a look, is even worse.

Clint's got a pen and the notepad from work that he's been using for grocery lists in one hand, which he holds up with a shrug.

Apparently he's not great at hiding his apprehension, but Clint just nods, tossing it back down on the counter and grabbing the beers instead, passing one over.

He doesn't really feel like drinking. He doesn't even really feel like standing up, but maybe all this is a negotiation; the price to pay for not having to explain how little he knows in print. It's hard to tell, and harder to ask. He moves over to the table, squinting against the light, and Clint takes the chair next to him.

It's strange. Usually, Clint tends to sit across from whoever he's with. Something to do with having to pay more attention to facial expressions than hearing people do. Tonight, though, he's sparing him that. He doesn't think to worry about *why*, though, until Clint opens his mouth.

"So. Shitty dreams?" His voice sounds rough. Combined with his usual near-monotone, it makes him sound tired, maybe irritable.

He can't think of a suitably sarcastic rejoinder, and then feels like an asshole for being relieved that
nobody would hear one, anyway. So he nods. His left hand clinks against the bottle as he picks it up, and Clint huffs out a laugh.

"Congratulations, you're now a Twenty-First Century New Yorker. You know there's been a four hundred percent increase in sleeping pill prescriptions in the past three years?"

He shakes his head, not sure where this is going.

"Battle of New York. Aliens attacked. Half of Manhattan was razed." Clint thumbs the label of his beer, rolling the corner. "All five Boroughs have been trying to sleep through reruns ever since."

He'd spent weeks, poring through newspapers and television documentaries about it, trying to convince himself that it had actually happened. If Steve hadn't been so insistent, he's not sure he would've ever gotten around to actually believing it. Aliens had poured from the sky, and gods were real.

He still only knows a little sign language- Clint's shown him a few things, and he's looked some others up- but he knows he's got enough enough to tap Clint's wrist, twice, to get him to look at him.

He signs, [you too?] And then [S T E V E] and [no] and [talk].

Another dry-sounding laugh. "Yeah, well. Wasn't exactly looking to cry on Captain America's shoulder about it." Clint shakes his head, his mouth becoming a thin set line. "They ever tell you anything about what happened before the aliens attacked? Loki?"

Clint waits for him to nod or shake his head- he goes with the latter- and downs another mouthful of beer. "He brainwashed me. It was just for a few days, but. I couldn't shout my way out of my own head. I just. Did whatever he told me. When the final count came in, it turned out that I'd helped him kill at least one hundred and twenty eight people, including... someone I cared about. Even tried to kill Natasha, but she kicked me upside the head, and then I was just me again."

Setting the beer down to glare at it, as he spins it slowly by his base against the table, Clint doesn't seem to notice him staring out of the corner of his eye.

A hundred and twenty eight people. He almost wonders how his numbers compare.

After a moment, Clint blinks, comes back to himself. "Anyway. Came to to find out I'd done all this horrible shit, and all it had taken to stop me was a blow to the head. It was barely enough to knock me unconscious, just. Nobody had gotten around to it yet."

Jesus.

"Afterwards, everyone wanted me to talk- Natasha, Steve. Shrinks, and everyone up the ranks that was still standing. Hill, Sitwell-" he can't stop himself from looking up, sharply at that, and Clint sees it. "We didn't know about him, yet. You know him?"

Not much more than glasses and the sensation of dread crawling up between his shoulders, but all he has to do is nod.

"Huh. Was wondering about that. Anyway. It sucked. Never knew what I was supposed to say, and it's not like they were breaking out the heavy duty interrogation techniques to make it happen. Mostly, I just wanted everyone to leave me the hell alone." He blinks, sipping his beer. "And all this is just a long drawn out way of me saying, you don't gotta tell me shit if you don't feel like it, okay?"
He nods. Thinks about getting up to grab the notepad, maybe explaining that he *can't* explain whatever it was that made him freak out, but yeah, he appreciates everything Clint's saying. Instead, he thumbs *thanks* on the table, drawing the word through the condensation their beers have left.

It's not until later, once Clint's gone back downstairs, that he goes back to his room to find that he'd ripped one of the pillows, badly. There's not much of a mess, just synthetic foam dangling uselessly from the fabric, but he shoves it to the bottom of the kitchen trash can and hurries it out, first thing, in the morning.
Dr. Gupta's always making notes on her tablet; he knows it's her job, but it makes him uneasy. Especially when she looks up over her glasses at him to ask things like, "are you saying you want to go off them?"

"No. Maybe?" Admitting that he doesn't know how much of his apparent recovery is his, and how much is thanks to the pills he takes every day, doesn't seem like the right route to take with her.

"Are you experiencing any side effects with the medication? Dramatic mood swings, loss or increase in appetite, decreased sexual function, insomnia, migraines- anything like that?"

"I don't think the mood swings have been all that dramatic. I still have bad days, but I'm not going from okay to furious at the blink of an eye, if that's what you mean. No headaches. I'm sleeping for maybe five or six hours a night. Still have nightmares sometimes but they're not regular. Eat a few times a day, that's pretty much stayed the same."

"Good," Dr. Gupta nods, tapping at the form on her screen, ticking off some boxes. "And the sex drive?"

He wants to crack a joke, here, if only because he's got no idea how to talk about something like that. Much less to a woman. Bucky, he thinks, probably could've deflected it easily, but he can't imagine anyone's ever asked any of his other iterations anything like this. What's worse, she seems to understand it. "It's nothing you have to be embarrassed about. The medications are known to have a suppressive effect, but it's one that can be managed, in most cases, by adjusting the dosage. If you'd prefer, you can email me later, once you've had some time to think it over."

"Thanks," he says, sheepishly, while she types on her screen.

The truth is, he hasn't really thought about it much. There hasn't been much reason to. He's just getting to the point where talking to customers at the print shop no longer makes his stomach clench. It's a moot point even thinking about it, even if he hasn't been entirely able to ignore it.

Sometimes he wakes up hard, and has to lie in bed waiting for it to go away because while he knows how to take care of it- he's not that screwed up- his brain goes strange places whenever he attempts it, and it never really works the way he suspects it should.

He gets distracted, winds up remembering the way Alexander Pierce would clasp his shoulder while telling him how proud he was of him, or he'll feel Zola's hand carding back through his hair as he places the electrodes in. The most functional he's been, as far as he knows, is when he'd woken up to stained sheets and muscles going lax. The sweat hadn't yet cooled on his skin, and his mouth tasted like dust, and he'd Rumlow's pleased laughter had been echoing in his head.

He knows it's the wrong reaction to have. If it's Zola and Pierce and Rumlow that he winds up thinking about, it's probably because he's been programmed to. Or Stockholm Syndrome. Or a host of other conditions that aren't on the radar of someone who's healthy.

But if he doesn't think about it, he doesn't have to figure out how to fix it. It's not like it matters. He can't imagine even taking a lady out on a date, now. Bucky Barnes had obviously had no trouble in that department, but Hydra hadn't made it a priority. Not that he has any idea how to explain it to the woman taking notes across the kitchen table from him. And emailing it to her? God, that's so much worse.
He knows that Sam and Dr. Gupta talk about him, and though he doesn't exactly know to what extent, at least he never has to hear about it.

"How'd it go with Dr. Gupta?"

"Fine." Sam hates one word answers. "The usual. Wanted to see if my dosages were right."

"Any change there?"

"No."

"Cool," Sam nods, taking her spot at the table and nodding at the offer of coffee. "Talked to Steve on the drive in. He's thinking of coming down this week, don't know if you've talked."

"Wednesday I'm off. He wants to go to some museum."

"You looking forward to it?"

"Better than going to work. He's-" he cuts himself off, because he doesn't actually know, anymore. "He used to be really slow. Wanted to study every painting for like three years, and he never exactly moved fast in the first place."

Sam scowls. "Well, that's half the issue gone, then. He'll probably skunk you three times before you get out of the first gallery." He leans forward, elbows on the table. "You said it's better than going to work, though. Any particular reason?"

The polo-shirt-cardigan combination that comprises his uniform is pretty horrible, to say nothing of the mangled looking eagle that comprises the embroidered logos, but at least he doesn't have to think about getting dressed in the mornings. Candice-call-me-Candy, his boss, doesn't expect too much or too little from him. He shreds the documents he's supposed to shred, he fills out forms. He talks to customers sometimes; they talk to him like he's an idiot most of the time, but it would be weirder, probably, if they didn't.

When he doesn't answer, Sam rephrases the question. "Are you thinking of quitting?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Sam doesn't often ask stupid questions, but they always trip him up anyway. "You get a job, you hang onto it, right? And it's not that I don't appreciate it, or have anything else lined up on the horizon." He wants to make a joke about his marketable skills, but that kind of talk tends to make Sam break out the notepad, and it's easier talking to him without it sitting there on the table between them. "The job's fine. Just boring."

"Sometimes, the best way to figure out what you want to do is to do something that bores you enough that you start coming up with better ideas," Sam advises him, offering to help him find something that's less mind-numbingly dull. Unfortunately, the better ideas haven't started happening, yet, and he tells Sam as much.

He's not surprised when Sam gives Thinking About It to him as an assignment for their next meeting. Even reaches into his bag so he can scribble it on his notepad, carve it in stone.
"He gives you homework?"

Truth be told, Clint doesn't know much about what Sam's deal is. He seems chill enough that it's hard to picture him really setting someone on the couch for a rousing round of psychoanalysis. Then again, it's not really his business, and usually, it's not high on the list of things that Barnes seems interested in talking about. Today seems to be an exception, though.

Dog Cops is paused on the screen, Shepherd frozen mid-bark as Officer Cartier looks on, eyes wide. It's not as interesting as it used to be; seeing [dog barking] on the screen isn't as telling as actually hearing it is, and it's a rerun anyway. But Barnes seems to be getting into it, now that he's gotten over the admittedly ridiculous premise. Not so much that he's eager to un-pause the show the moment they've retrieved the pizza from the delivery driver right this instant, but enough that he's still coming around, once a week to get caught up.

Sometimes appears on his phone's screen, but he glances back at Barnes in time to see him shrug, scowling at his hands while he tries to wipe the grease off the metal with a paper towel. Not usually. But yeah. All's I said was that I was bored at work and now he wants me trying to figure out what I want to do with my life.

"Hmm." A piece of pepperoni falls off his slice and Lucky darts for it happily, which is enough of a distraction that he asks, without really thinking about it, "well, what did you want to do before the war?"

When he checks, his phone reads, If I even fucking knew then, I sure as hell don't know now.

And, shit, he might not know what the man sounds like, but he recognizes the set to his jaw, the almost-sneer. It's the same one that starts showing up when Steve's said something stupid on the phone.

"Okay, spill. Something about that question pissed you off."

Barnes blinks, surprised, and shrugs, but at least he's relaxing a bit. Even so, it takes him a few minutes for any words to start filling the screen.

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He knows he's being a jerk. This isn't Clint's problem, only he's just made it his, hasn't he?

It's his fucking problem, and this is why he's got to take pills every morning and night and talk to Sam and Dr. Gupta every other fucking day. And the thing- the main thing he likes about Clint is that he doesn't make him talk about it. He leaves him be, doesn't lecture him about the beers he shouldn't be drinking with his meds. He doesn't have any expectations.

But shit, all the man had done was ask a question.

"Everyone keeps asking me what Bucky Barnes would've thought, or said, or done, like I'm supposed to just flip a switch and be him again."

Clint's scanning his screen, which is preferable, he decides, to being watched.

"I was the Winter Fucking Soldier for a lot longer than I was ever Bucky Fucking Barnes. It's not like all that shit didn't happen." He holds his right arm up and points to his name with his left. He'd carved it into his own arm when he'd known less of himself than he does now. It's a name that
parents that he still can't remember- had given to someone he can sometimes remember being. And it's no more accurate a name, he thinks, than the one Steve had reissued him out of a dusty, eighty year old box.

Clint's looking confused, so he drops his arms back down to his sides and clarifies.

"It's not like I'm remembering some other joe's life, here. It's all mine. But everyone's talking like Bucky Barnes, the way Steve remembers him, is the only real version of me that should exist. And yeah, my head might be a mess, but it's my mess-" Clint snorts, grinning at this- "and at this point I'm pretty sure I'd need to be strapped down, wiped and reprogrammed to have a chance in hell at being that guy again."

"I hear you on that one," Clint's grin's disappeared, and his eyes are darting away towards the television. "Dunno if it helps, but I think you turned out pretty good."

He's got no idea what to say to that. Thankfully, Clint's not expecting a response, saying "I don't think you need to worry about Steve mind-wiping you, though."

"I know, and as glad as I am, the expectation that I'm going to miraculously revert to some pure, perfect state still drives me a little nuts." It takes Clint a minute to look down at his phone, leaving him to sit here cringing under the awareness that he'd gotten so riled up over so simple a question.

"Shit," Clint eventually says, after blinking back down to his phone to read. "Yeah. That sucks." He looks up. "Uh. Sorry. Didn't mean to dredge anything up."

Nodding, he eases back against the couch. But Clint's starting to frown, like he's steeling himself for a fight, or worse, asking an awkward question.

"So, uh. Does it bug you, being called Bucky?"

It's a little too on point, enough that it brings him up short. A few minutes ago, the question would've sent him ranting, but he's out of steam, now.

"Why?" he asks, and then, "What have you been calling me?"

"Apart from 'hey, you?' I've pretty much been sticking with Barnes, I think. But. Like, if it's wrapped up in all that..." he shrugs, scratching the back of his neck. "I could, I dunno. Make sure not to."

He thinks about it for a minute. Not about the question, but about whether or not he wants to answer it.

"Been trying to figure that out, actually," he eventually says, because if Clint thought to ask that question then there's a chance that he'll actually get it. "Bucky's more Steve's thing than anything. Doesn't fit like he probably wishes it would, but it would be weirder if he started calling me something else, you know?"

He catches himself holding his breath while Clint reads, which is irritating, because as much as he'd like to believe otherwise, there's no chance in hell that this isn't all going to wind up in some report back to Steve and Sam, leading them to believe that he's backsliding, or resisting his therapy. It's been a few weeks since the anxiety's crept up on him like this.

But Clint just nods, raises his eyebrows. "You ever go by James?"

He sighs. "That's what my boss calls me. Don't remember anyone else doing so, but they must've."
Clint's eyes are on him long enough that there's no way that he's read it, but rather than waiting him out, he finds himself admitting, "I used to try out different ones. Before I turned myself in. Didn't help much, obviously, but. I actually told the girl at Starbucks my name was Jim a few weeks ago, and then forgot by the time she called out that my drink was ready. Just stood there like an idiot for ten minutes."

This, at least, gets a laugh once Clint's caught up—enough of one that he catches wanting to join in.

Still grinning, Clint shrugs, but there's a renewed energy to it now; he's sitting up straighter. "Thing is, people change all the time, right?" He nods, wondering where this is going. "And you probably wouldn't be the same James Buchanan Barnes even if that Zola asshole hadn't come along, right?" He cocks his head, smirking ruefully. "Course, you'd be dead, so there's that."

But then the smile falters, and he deflates back against the couch; apparently his brilliant thought wasn't quite enough. "Only. Shit. You've got that whole blank slate thing going on in between, euphemistically speaking."

"Yeah," he nods, but ever since the Starbucks story, he's been thinking. And it's weird saying it, now that they've reached this point in the conversation, but Clint, he thinks, might roll with it. "Um. If you want, you can call me James."

Clint looks up from his phone. "You sure?"

"I mean, Bucky's fine too," he says, because yeah, it's as weird as he'd thought it would be— not the name, really, but the fact that he's shining a light on it like this, knowing full well that while Clint might have to turn this into some sort of official intel and pass it up the line, he'll at least wait to do so until after he's gone.

But Clint's just holding out his hand. "All right then. James, nice to meet you, I'm Clint."

They shake on it, and that's that. They go back to Dog Cops and pizza.

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As it turns out, though, Clint apparently hasn't mentioned it, at least not by the time Sam's talking to him through the video link on the computer the next evening.

"And you were okay with it?" Sam's leaning back in the chair of his Academy office; his back's probably killing him. They've been sitting here, hashing through this for an entire hour. "Why do you think that was?"

"I don't know. It just didn't seem like a big deal anymore." He's gotten used to feeling stupid, saying the things he does when he's talking to Sam. But it moves their sessions along a lot quicker when he does. "He asked, so I told him."

"I don't know. It just didn't seem like a big deal anymore." He's gotten used to feeling stupid, saying the things he does when he's talking to Sam. But it moves their sessions along a lot quicker when he does. "He asked, so I told him."

"He asked your name, and you're not angry about it anymore?"

"No, I-" He sighs, thinks through it, tries to find the right combination of words that fit. "It's like, he would've gone along with whatever I said. It, it meaning James, but also meaning Bucky, wouldn't have carried any more weight with him than Tom, Dick, or Harry would've."

"How do you mean? He doesn't have any preconceptions about you?"

"I'm pretty sure he probably does. Did. Whatever. But yeah, maybe. Like, he didn't know me before four months ago, so he doesn't have that, um..." he has to cast out for the term, "basis of
Sam’s grinning at him like he’s just said something impressive, which is unsettling, so now’s as good a time as any to undermine it. He gestures down at the embroidery on his shirt. It's still puckered from when he'd messed up washing it the other day, and it occurs to him that he probably should change and get it in the wash again tonight. "I still don't know what I want to do with my life, though."

"That's fine. And I wasn't trying to hang any sort of existential crisis on you with that- I'm sorry I did, for what it's worth. But you did good this week, man."

---

He talks with Sam for another half hour, until Sam begs off, saying that he's got to get out of his chair before his back locks up on him.

It's a stupid thing to be proud of- toddlers know their own names- but when he finally says goodbye to Sam and closes the chat window, he feels good about things. Enough that when Clint knocks on his door ten seconds after he gets off the phone, inviting him out for drinks instead of suggesting beers on the couch, he doesn't think twice about putting off the laundry.

His good mood lasts until they're walking into the bar and he's scanning for exits and targets and he walks right into Clint, realizing that he'd gotten it wrong again.

The people in here, they're possible collateral, not targets, and Clint's about to turn around and ask him what the fuck is going on in his head.

"Sorry," Clint shrugs, twisting to look over his shoulder. "Perimeter checks. Hard habit to break." He walks to the bar and pulls up a stool. It seems an odd place to pick, if he's got enough training to scan every room he's in out of habit; he'd been expecting him to head for the table in the back corner.

Clint must read it on his face, though, and he nods at the mirror behind the cash register as he reaches back to pull out his phone and his wallet. "Best seat in the house, if you want to find your target before they find you."

"You spend a lot of time looking for targets in neighborhood bars?" He keeps his voice light, though he knows Clint can't hear.

"Like I said. Habit. Sniper, remember?" He shrugs, turns to the short-haired bartender who's wiping her hands on her jeans as she comes towards them, smiling.

"Hey Clint, the usual?" It barely sounds like a question; maybe Clint's enough of a regular here that she knows he can't tell; either way, he nods. "And what can I get for your friend?" Clint raises his eyebrows when he looks at him, and he's got no idea. Last time he'd been in a place like this had been months ago, Natasha had ordered Bloody Marys for everybody. He'd only finished half of his.

"James, man," Clint taps his wrist, twice. "What do you want?"

He's thrown just enough by the way his name sounds when Clint says it that it takes him a moment to even hear the question.

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James is splitting the last of the pitcher between their glasses and Clint's trying not to stare at the glove on his hand because that's exactly the opposite of what the glove's meant to do. It's different than his other ones- more form fitting.

But it's weird. When it's uncovered, it looks more like a hand than it does now. Not that he's going to mention it.

He blinks back to himself as his beer's slid in front of him, and glances over at his phone.

*So what about you? When did you know, deep down, that you wanted to fight monsters and terrorists using antique artillery?* And then, time-stamped a good fifteen seconds later, *Hey. Earth to Clint.*

Great. So Barnes- James, now- had noticed him zoning out. But he's smirking when Clint looks up, and it turns out that it's actually kind of great, having a verbatim record of every conversation on your phone at all times.


"Did I think it through? Nah. Was a carnie and a thief, then Coulson caught up with me and gave me the choice between jail or SHIELD, so... that was that."

*So wait. Is the entire building a halfway house for reformed criminals?*

"Don't tell anyone, Deke's just fresh out of Sing Sing. Racketeering. Aimee's a recovering ecoterrorist. Lucky used to run with the Tracksuit Dracula crew. Simone's kids robbed a bank in Jersey, they've been ducking warrants ever since."

James smirks, rolling his eyes, and his mouth moves. It takes Clint a moment to remember he's got to look at his phone.

*I was wondering about them. They seem shifty."

The voice recognition program is great, he'll give it that. But it doesn't pick up on intonations and he's always left filling in the blanks. Usually, like this one, it's not too hard to guess, but it would be really great not to need to. Especially with Bucky. Most people- people he knew before Kazi came in and fucked everything up- he knows well enough to guess. He can hear Natasha's tone in the text, he thinks he's got Steve's dry sarcasm down. Tony's enough of a caricature that every time he's been quoted in a newspaper- even before he'd met the man-, it's impossible not to hear his voice in his head.

With James though, who's staring, lost in thought, at the warped mirror behind the bar, drumming his metal thumb against the neck of his beer bottle, there's nothing. And it kind of sucks.

"What's up?"

James is still wearing his cardigan-and-work shirt uniform- both are probably meant to make him as unimposing as possible. Clint knows, from looking- more often than he should be, probably- that the shirt sleeve, under the thin sweater, is snug around his right bicep. The left is probably permanently stretched out by now. The fabric of the cardigan's sleeve gets caught between two plates when he shrugs, and James brushes it free with no more thought or attention than anyone else would, scratching a minor itch.

*Work experience include scanning documents, filing, killing a whole lot of people, and running a cash register.*
His brain's casting out - unlike a minute ago, this is one of those times being able to read someone's tone would be helpful - but he's not coming up with anything, and James' face is slack, completely unhelpful.

"I'm not exactly high up on marketable skills myself," Clint says, figuring that if James is making a joke - or isn't - it's a safe enough response. "Least you know how to work a copy machine."

Rolling his head on his shoulders, James raises an eyebrow.

_The bathtub didn't explode when you fixed it last week_, his phone says.

"Yeah, well, don't tempt fate." He clinks his glass against James'- gotta show solidarity for Team Existential Crisis - rolls his eyes.

His phone goes off. It's a message from Natasha, asking him how to do a manual realignment on the quinjet's landing gears. Because apparently some idiot at the academy has no problems fucking with machinery that's above their pay grade, let alone fucking with Clint's evening.

Barnes - James - taps his wrist twice, holding up the empty pitcher with raised eyebrows, because he, unlike some _Academy cadets_, is not a complete moron.
"So yeah," he's telling Steve, dodging a woman with a ridiculously large stroller on the sidewalk. Coffee's dripping through a gap between the lid and the cup, making his fingers sticky. It's one of the most irritating sensations of the 21st century. "We're looking at about 800 documents that need to be re-scanned because the bozo lawyer forgot to actually get his client's signature anywhere. How's things up there?"

"Ugh," Steve groans sympathetically. "Sounds nightmarish. Up here? We're good, though. Just got done with yesterday's mission debrief, finally." There's the usual pause, the one that comes with Steve trying to decide what he can and cannot tell him. "Everyone's fine now, the paperwork's filed, and you might have me paranoid about the signatures, but I think I'm calling it a day in a bit, here."

"Fine now?"

"Ah. Yeah. There were a tense few minutes in the quinjet yesterday." Which is Steve-speak for we almost crashed and burned, horribly. "But we were able to make some mid-air repairs and pull out of it."

Thinking back, the pieces start falling together. He hadn't understood it, when Clint had shown him what he'd been spending ten minutes typing. "Would those minutes have been around 8:45 last night? And involved landing gears?"

"Ah... I guess, with the time difference, yeah?" Steve sounds confused. "Took a hit. Natasha and Stark managed to fix it. Why?"

Nothing in Natasha's texts to Clint had indicated that they'd been in the fucking air at the time, but Steve doesn't mention it, and the odds are good that Clint wasn't supposed to show him those messages in the first place. "Uh, Clint said something about it, that's all." Maybe Clint hadn't been supposed to say even that much. "But it sounded like an Academy thing, is all."

"Yeah, well. No sense in making people worry, you know?"

Steve goes on complain about the mind-numbing thirteen hour flight home with the tone of someone being stuck on a long layover at LaGuardia, instead of being stuck in a military flight that's relying on a text message from Robin Hood for a safe landing.

He lets Steve ramble, and he's back in his own apartment, getting the laundry together, before Steve hangs up.

And yeah, it's obvious that he's probably not supposed to mention it, but it's equally obvious that he should say something to Clint about it, when he gets the chance. It seems like something he ought to know, the whole all your friends would've died if you hadn't saved their asses thing.

---

He should've kept his damned mouth shut, he thinks, heading up to his apartment three hours later. "I'm going to kill her," Clint had groaned, looking up from his phone to roll his eyes emphatically. "And seriously, what the hell were they thinking, taking that one up?"
He'd complained about that a bit last night- something about that particular make and model of quinjet being old and outdated. Tonight, he'd summarized his description, calling it a goddamned hot mess, before going on to point out a few dozen more design flaws- all dating back to before Stark's campaign of re-engineering, reinforcement, and replacement- that he hadn't quite gotten to last night.

It had been strange, though, realizing that while he'd been around for a few months, he'd only just started finding out that Clint had known anything at all about mechanics.

"So," he'd eventually cut in, refilling their glasses in hopes of derailing Clint's tirade. "You know your way around planes?"

"Quinjets, sure." Clint had shrugged, and it had been impossible to tell if he'd been being modest, or merely honest. "Flown a few helicopters. Anything else in the air, though, I'm clueless."

Looking back on it now, he knows exactly when he'd asked Clint the question that had tipped the entire evening from good to bad.

"You miss it? Flying? Going on missions? The whole," he'd shrugged, because he'd never known if it was a term that everyone had actually used, "Avenging thing?"

Clint had shaken his head. "Not as fond of arrows as I used to be. Turns out, the things are dangerous." He'd pointed at his ear. "And anyway, leaving out the whole, 'hey, I'm deaf' thing, my aim hasn't been great since my balance took a hit."

"Bullshit. I've seen you, with those cap things."

Clint had called it muscle memory. "I'm not saying I suck now," he'd explained, "just that there's a hint of suckage there that I'm not entirely wild about." And then he'd gone on to admit that it wouldn't piss him off so much if he didn't honestly know how much better he used to be.

It had been disheartening, but then Clint had brightened, a little, sipping his beer. "Flying, though, that was fun."

He'd found himself wanting to say something encouraging, but he hadn't gotten the chance before Clint had pointed out that you still needed balance for that. "Well, that and a functional control panel, which is, of course, usually the first thing to go, so. Yeah. Not really on option."

The thing is, though, Clint hadn't actually answered his question. He hadn't said that he missed being on the team, or that he didn't. When pressed for more, he'd changed the subject, wondering aloud if his friend Katie would be interested in taking his place on the team. And then he'd started talking himself into it.

Clint had talked about how Katie used to hassle him about being stuck at the kiddie table, and it was infuriating, how much the idea seemed to make him smile, because the news that he'd been a fucking hero sure as hell hadn't.

It's not until now, when he's pulling his laundry out of the dryer and nearly ripping a shirt that gets caught in the door, that he realizes why it's bothering him so much.

He could've grabbed Clint by the shoulders, shaken him until he'd gotten it through his thick skull that, bad ears or not, Steve and Natasha would be dead if not for him. Clint had saved them. And it's like he wouldn't even hear it, he'd just immediately locked onto all the reasons he thought he couldn't. He'd even suggested a replacement, as if his friend Katie's interest and his own lack of ability were both foregone conclusions.
And he'd let Clint get away with it. He'd just come down here to get his fucking laundry, like it didn't even matter.

And he doesn't know, but he thinks it probably does. It probably matters a lot.

---

Natasha texts him a few days later.

_How's Clint doing?_

_Seems fine. Upped my hours at the shop, haven't run into him much._ That, or he's been giving Clint a wider berth than usual, because the irritation hasn't worn off yet, and he doesn't know why his brain's not letting him drop it. _Why do you ask?_

_Has he mentioned anything about coming back?_

_No._ The one word reply seems rude, so he adds, _He still goes to the tower sometimes so maybe Stark knows more._ It's a lame dodge, pushing this off on Stark- especially because he knows that Clint's visits are more about some newfangled hearing aid prototypes and not at all about gearing up for duty, but it's an irritating question.

Two months ago, he might've reported back, told her everything. But now he knows the guy. And though he hasn't talked to him about it- or anything else, really- in three days, and despite how irritating it is, he thinks he kind of gets why he might not be trying to get his hopes up.

And besides. When it comes right down it, it's just not his story to tell.

---

Finally, after five appointments, one design that had to be scrapped due to radiation concerns, two in-house delays, and one that had been more to do with the Houses of Parliament being targeted by extremist nut-jobs, Tony texts Clint.

_Dr. Van Drier's cleared the prototypes for testing, now that he's satisfied that they're noninvasive enough that a cochlear implant will still be an option as a plan B for his left side._

Natasha meets him in the lobby; she's got a brace on her right wrist from her last mission- and yeah, he still needs to give her some shit about that one- but she's happier than he's seen her in a while. It's not until he catches himself in the glass reflection of the door to Tony's lab that she might've just been returning his grin.

_Dr. Van Drier is more excited than he's ever seen him, but he's got about twenty pages that he's got to read, first. What to expect. What to watch out for. How they're supposed to fit in his ear canal. An admittedly distressing nine pages of diagrams explaining how the devices will trigger the nerve endings to replicate the signal that his shredded eardrums should be sending._

He signs where Dr. Van Drier tells him to. No, he doesn't have any questions. Yes, he just wants to get on with it.

The left earpiece is the smaller of the two; that ear's got more to work with, structurally speaking, than the one for his right. Even that one, which has more built into it, is only slightly larger than an average hearing aid. They are, however, both the same depressing hospital-tan "flesh" tone he remembers from when he'd been a kid, meant to blend in, not stick out visually so much. As far as he's concerned, it just means that strangers linger on it more than usual, during that instant where
their eyes aren't certain what they're looking at.

It's been a while since he's had to think about it, but he hates that particular shade, and he brings it up to Tony.

"Any chance we can change the color?"

To what?

"I dunno. Neon green? Purple?"

Tony blinks at him in confusion. And yeah, he gets it. He's being a picky asshole, here.

You're serious?

He doesn't, suddenly, feel like going into it. "Easier to find them if they're not meant to be invisible, right?"

Tony beams, though, like it's the best idea he's ever heard. Awesome. I'll redesign the outer shells, make it so you can change them out to accessorize properly.

Let's see if they work, first, Van Drier adds, setting the first one into his right ear. It takes a few minutes, and feels strange, but it's nothing he can't get used to.

After what seems like hours, they're both in, and Van Drier's instructing him to flip the tiny switch on the unit behind his right ear.

There's a tiny buzzing in his head. Nothing he can hear, really, but he can feel it. After a moment, it's gone.

Van Drier hands him his phone. We need to set your baseline. As the volume increases, I'm going to need you to repeat the letters you're hearing. If any of them are distorted, or you don't understand them, raise your hand. Ready?

There's no sound at all; he looks at his phone, trying not to be disappointed. But then he hears it, muddled and glitching.

"G. R. X. E." Or maybe it had been S and B, there, at the end.

He repeats the letters; he keeps repeating them for an hour, gradually getting more and more of them right. The second hour, he moves up to words, while Stark fine tunes the input and output. Sometimes they're muffled, sometimes they're glitching, though the volume output levels out early on. It should be boring; it's definitely tedious. The gradual increase in what he can hear is so steady that it should be boring as hell, but he can hear his own voice.

He can hear.
"Thought you couldn't get drunk."

They're standing by one of Tony Stark's bars, less than a foot away from each other, and they're practically shouting at each other just to be heard over the music. It's dark, too. The overhead lights are dimmed, but there's smooth red light running the length of the bar, and bright white glinting into green and blue and orange as it cuts through the bottles behind it. Down at his side, he can just barely see it reflecting off his wrist, but there's no need to cover it up, here.

"Doesn't stop Tony and Bruce from trying," Steve says, sipping the drink Banner had just thrust into his hand with a wince. It smells horrible, even from here. "Though, many more attempts like this might stop me from letting them."

As far as he himself goes, he's already on his third, and therefore last, beer of the night. Anything more than that, his meds will guarantee him an agonizing hangover. Not that standing here next to Steve doesn't have him contemplating another anyway.

He and Steve are friends, now. Maybe not like they'd been, once upon a time, but enough to talk on the phone a few times a week without it seeming like it's a prerequisite for anything. Lately, when Steve asks how he's doing, the question's given no more weight than it is when he's asking the same to Stark, or Clint. But the fact remains that it hasn't been all that long since Steve had witnessed him being a gibbering mess, panicking like a lunatic at the slightest provocation.

As far as he can tell, the rest of the guests are having a much less awkward time of things. Banner and Pepper have been locked in conversation for the past hour; Natasha and Hill seem to be debating something over by the windows. Clint's probably drunk; he's already been by about half a dozen times, twirling the drumsticks he's had on him all night, asking him to say something just so he can repeat it back. Painter had come back as an exaggerated paintaah.

This time around, Clint's mouth is ridiculously tight over the phrase what aah ya dooin?, but it's breaking into a wide grin

"What's with him?" Steve asks, glancing between the two of them, as Clint makes his way towards the couches.

"I dunno," he replies, as if he hasn't been thinking about Clint's ability to hear-and be heard- for the past few hours.

He'd gotten used to the head-cold monotone, and hadn't realized, until tonight, how emphatic Clint could be. It's not just his voice, either. One minute Clint's making faces at Kate as she and her friends Darcy and Jane move off towards the bar, the next, he's twirling the drumsticks again and shaking his head at something Sam's saying.

He'd asked Clint about them, when he'd first arrived, and all he'd gotten in response was something about Stark and Black Sabbath. It hadn't made much sense, but then, it hadn't really mattered, either.

Clint's happy, the rest is just window dressing.

"Hey guys," Kate says, stepping around the bar to root around in the cooler as her friends sidle up next to them. Jane's scrunching up her face, obviously getting wind of Steve's drink's fumes, and Darcy's grinning wildly.
"So, like, what's with the beers and whatever that is?" She points at Steve's glass. "Thought you'd be drinking martinis, or weird drinks with egg in them or something?"

That sounds disgusting. "Egg?"

"What, this isn't weird enough for you as it is?" Steve smirks, holding out his glass; their eyes are actually watering. A mock-cross expression comes over his face and he says, "You're talking old timer drinks, aren't you."

He snorts, shaking his head, because they might not have as much in common as they used to, but they're still the oldest people in here by at least sixty years. "Kids these days..."

He knows the line before Steve even gets to it. "With their crazy clothes and music and the hair."

"Back in my day," he leans in, shaking his finger at Jane, who's doing her best not to laugh, "we had to walk up hill to school both ways. In the snow."

Kate looks between them, skeptically, and asks, "really?"

"No idea," he shrugs, straightening up to look over at Steve, who shrugs back, laughing now.

"No hills, lots of snow. We quit going at the same time. You were thirteen, I was twelve."

All three of the girls are staring at them; Darcy's the first one to speak.

"Captain America: Middle School Dropout? Man, the press is going to have a field day."

"Well, if you ever need a backup plan," Kate offers, glancing over her shoulder, "Clint might have spots in his tribute band."

"What is a Black Sabbath tribute band, anyway?"

Apparently, it's the funniest question any of them have ever been asked, but the three manage to cobble together an explanation, in between fits of laughter. By the end of it, neither he nor Steve are honestly convinced that it's something that people do- playing other people's music, sure, but costumes? Pretending to be them? It's strange.

When they make their way down the bar, drinks in hand, he looks over at Steve, and nods at their drinks. "We used to do this a lot, didn't we?"

"Well, the girls- ah, women- were usually just laughing at me. The drinking, dancing and dates, staying out until all hours part of it, that was more your thing."

"Yeah?" He mulls it over, for a minute. According to the books, Steve had been a one woman kind of guy, despite Steve's recent grumbling that it should've read none woman kind of guy. Between the two of them, he'd been the one characterized as some sort of Casanova, which is honestly a little hard to believe.

"Was there anyone- did I?" It's irritating; he doesn't even know how to ask. But it's never even occurred to him to think about it before now.

Steve's concerned expression, he knows for certain, is as sharp as it's always been. It only looks different now because it's directed across the room at Sam. Which tells him that his question, even if he hasn't been thinking about it, is something that's come up, that's been discussed. He knows he's about to be handled even before Steve sighs. "You want to hear this right now?"
It's bad. Whatever it is, it's going to be bad, and Steve's worried that he's going to have a meltdown.

But irritation's as good a bolster as confidence, some days. "No time like the present."

Steve downs the rest of his drink in one go, wincing at the taste, and sets the glass down on the bar. "Okay, then. But we might want to move somewhere else."

And he's not the type of person to believe in omens- at least this version of himself isn't- but something's changed, here. It's only been the past hour or two that he's seen him really look alive, but on the other side of the room, Clint's following Natasha out to the patio, looking wary and resigned, like he, too, is waiting for his own axe to fall.

He catches his eye, if only for an instant, and if Steve wasn't hot on his heels, maybe he'd go over there and find out what's wrong, but now's not the time. He shrugs at Clint, Clint shrugs back.

When he looks back at Steve, he's startled to find him watching so intently.

He's letting his brain get the best of him, but he's exposed, here, and he doesn't like it. He quickens his pace.

---

It's not that Clint doesn't appreciate it. The party's good, everyone's having a great time- even James seems to finally have gotten over the weird snit that's had him sticking to his apartment all week. And the hearing aids are great- and holy crap does James have a nice voice- but his brain's jittery, overstimulated. Honestly, he's had one beer too many and mostly just wants to grab James, get a cab, and get the hell back to Bed Stuy. Take Lucky out, brush his teeth, crawl into bed, and hopefully wake up in up in the morning with little to no memory of tonight's weird fixation on James Fucking Barnes.

But now Natasha's coming over, grabbing him by the arm, and she's anxious about something that apparently he needs to hear right this minute, so it will all have to wait.

As he follows her to the patio, he spots Steve walking with James towards the far lounge, the latter looking nervous and angry. The impulse to catch up with him, to say something- he doesn't know what, only that hold on, wait, just give me a minute figures heavily- is stupid and strong.

And now he's standing out on the patio, staring at Maria Hill and thinking that he's lost his mind. It's these hearing aids. They're malfunctioning, they've got to be. It had all been great for the first several hours, but the last few minutes? He has to play it all back in his head, and even then, it's not making any sense.

"You're serious?"

She sighs, shakes her head at Natasha. "This is why I wanted to wait until tomorrow to tell everyone." Looking back at him, she squares her shoulders, and repeats herself. "You know that Fury faked his death, right? Well. He wasn't the only one."

This isn't going anywhere good. He takes a breath, glaring at the city because he might not be on the roster, these days, but glaring at Hill's never done anyone any favors.

"Coulson. You're tellin' me he's alive?"

"He is," Hill moves to stand next to him. "He's still running SHIELD."
Coulson is alive. "SHIELD is gone."

"No, it's just gone dark."

Coulson is alive. If he doesn't tighten his grip on his beer bottle, it's liable to get launched over the railing. Probably kill three people in the process when it lands. Actually kill them. Not-

Not whatever this is.

"He's still who he always was," Hill's saying. "And he did die. For three days, and not even he knew about it up until a few months ago." She shrugs. "He's still angry."

At this, he looks up at her. "Angry?"

"At me, at Fury. At everything. But he's Coulson. He's doing the job. He's got a team, and... well. I got word this afternoon from a source on that team that they'll be in New York soon. Knew it would take everyone by surprise, but, if things go off the rails..."

She trails off, and Natasha picks up the thread. "Better now than in the middle of the street with guns already blazing?"

Hill nods, and he doesn't freak out, if only because Natasha sounds dangerously angry herself.

Coulson is alive.

His throat's too tight, he's not sure he gets the words out- could be, he's just imagining the sound of his own voice. "You talk to him?"

"Not lately. Like I said, we're allies. Not sure that we're friends anymore, and he's got his hands full with his team." Hill sighs, looking out over the railing like she, too, is considering launching her own drink over. "There've been some issues. He's not in the most trusting place."

"Well, bully for him," he bites out. He's not feeling particularly trusting himself, at the moment. He turns away from the skyline, and looks back inside. Steve is watching James walk towards the elevators; maybe he's leaving, maybe he's just heading for the can. Maybe it doesn't mean anything at all but...

Fifteen minutes ago, he'd been asking him to pronounce- he can't even remember what, any more, only that it had been surprising, actually hearing the man's voice. He'd known James was from Brooklyn. But he hadn't heard it, until today.

That had been the level of bullshit conversation he'd prepared for, tonight. Not this.

Coulson is alive, and nobody had told him.

"I can't tell you everything, Clint, and I apologize for that, but hey, it turns out that being cryptic and horrible comes with the territory." It's more of an apology than he'd ever gotten from Coulson, much less Fury, when they'd been alive enough to play things close to the chest. "But I'm sorry. Both of you," Hill says, shoulders squared, "that I couldn't tell you sooner. Keeping it quiet as long as we did was entirely a matter of his team's safety. Do you understand?"

The bitch of it, is that he does. She's in a tough spot, and as much as he hates her right now, he knows it's not all on her. So he grits his teeth and nods, because even if SHIELD is gone- or mostly gone- he knows where he stands in the ranks. He doesn't throw her off the patio.
Coulson, though. He could've-

He could've fucking said something. Could've found a way to let him know, _Hey, Clint. You didn't kill me. You might've killed a hundred and twenty eight people, but the one who destroyed you? Got out fine._

Or maybe he couldn't.

But this fucking sucks.

---

"Just spit it out, Steve. Did I leave a wife and kids behind?" He manages to make it halfway through the lounge before really noticing more windows, and an entire city that's too far down to really bear thinking about. "A girlfriend, or something?"

"Ah, no. I don't really think that was in the cards." Steve's got one eye on the door like he's hoping for someone else to come in and take over.

They'd let him leave, come down, get his own place, more or less. Given him some independence, and, he'd thought, some modicum of trust. Or, if not that, at least they'd had some basic level of faith that he wasn't irrevocably broken. But Steve's handling him like he's glass, enough that he's starting to get the sense that there's a need for it.

Manhattan from a hundred stories up is a safer view, lends the vertigo a discernible cause.

Steve scratches his neck, eventually. Keeps his voice quiet and his eyes trained on their reflections. "It wasn't that you weren't interested in any of them specifically. It was more of a general thing. You. Ah. You preferred the company of men."

"Oh."

*Oh.*

It's not the first time he's found himself wishing that he knew this version of Steve as well as Steve had known his version of him, but it's-

-there'd been a man, once, named Arnie Franklin. Slow moving- he'd walked with a cane, even though he'd only been a few years older than him or Steve. He'd never really been all there, he'd made the neighbors tense and worried. Not worried for him, but worried about what he'd meant.

When he'd first recalled him, he'd been coming off the subway, stepping aside for a man whose appearance and gait had jogged his memory. He'd meant to ask Steve about him, but he'd forgotten all about it by the time he'd called, later that afternoon.

He doesn't know why he's thinking about him now. It's not new knowledge, it's not a new flash of half-memory. There's no reason for him to be thinking of it now, except-

Bucky had apparently preferred the company of men, and Arnie, lurching up the sidewalk some time in the early 1940s, had been a man. His brain's telling him there's a connection between the two ideas, but it's not the first time it's only gone halfway towards telling him something he'd needed to know.

Taking a deep breath, he lets the name go on the exhale. "Arnie Franklin. Was there..."
Steve starts, enough that he's meeting his eyes a few seconds before he likely wants to.

"You mean, like...

He doesn't know, either. He just waits Steve out.

"He was older. Lived down the block, until his family found out that he was... homosexual. They sent him upstate, and three months later he came back... different." Steve sighs. "You remember him?"

He rolls his eyes, ignoring the question. "Why?"

"They'd lobotomized him, Bucky, shit." Steve rubs a hand over his face; his shoulders twitch. "We fought about this before, you know. Or, fuck. Maybe you don't." Dropping his hand, he smiles. There's not much humor in it.

"Why'd we fight about him?"

"I mean, not really- it wasn't about him," Steve shakes his head. "It was about you. They found out about Arnie because the nightclub he'd frequented had been raided by the police. Everyone knew about it, nobody was supposed to talk about it, but." He shrugs, shakes his head. It takes him a moment to continue.

"A few years later- like maybe four, you were nineteen, I think- you'd let slip once that you were 'going over to Gloria's.' I remember wondering how long it was going to be until you'd finally bring her 'round so's I could meet her, but... There was this one morning, I realized you hadn't come home. I remember heading off to go try to enlist for what must've been the third time, thinking that you were probably over at her place."

He's trying to listen, but the thought's just occurred to him that there's a possibility- a very real possibility that he'd been attracted, that way, to Steve.

"I was down on the corner when I saw the morning paper. A nightclub named Gloria's had been raided the night before, and the reporters were down at the station. Names were going to be published in the afternoon edition, and you hadn't come home." Steve's arms uncross. It seems deliberate, the way his hands unfurl from their fists. "I went back to the apartment- I don't know what I thought I was going to do, but I needed to think. And then I ran into you heading up the stairs to the apartment, reeking of gin, not a care in the world. You were happy, right up until I opened my mouth."

"I know what you're probably thinking," Steve says, though not as suddenly as it seems. He hadn't even realized that Steve had finished speaking, maybe a minute ago; when he tries, he can't run down the thought had been holding his attention since then. But something must be showing on his face. "You and I, we were close, yeah. Like brothers. But that was it."

He nods. Tells himself there's no sense being disappointed by something he hadn't known he'd only maybe hypothetically wanted being taken away. At least Steve's not dragging that out.

"So what was it, then?"

"So yeah. You'd scared the hell out of me and I didn't handle it well. Not at first. It was a bad few days until I figured out how to explain it right, and it took a few months to get it through your thick skull that I meant it."

"Meant what?"
"That I didn't hate you, and wasn't scared of you. I was just scared *for* you. That someone would find out, do to you what they did to Arnie."

Steve had meant well, because of *course* he had, but as far as he himself goes? He's not certain he can pull off being that charitable right now.

"Yeah?." He sips his beer, because otherwise, it's likely to end up crashing against the wall. "Well. It looks like someone got around to it, anyway."

---

He knows he should at least tell Clint good night, seeing as how this party's in his honor, but he needs to get out of here and away from Steve's *bullshit* more than he needs to interrupt Clint's conversation with Hill and Natasha just because he's-

-whatever.

Steve's calling after him, but doesn't chase after him when he heads for the elevator and out of the building.

He's halfway home before his brain actually starts processing anything at all.

The first thing he works out is that he'd left without finding out what Bucky Barnes had thought or felt about it. About. Being homosexual. Gay, or whatever. Not that it matters- he's not *him*, he just *used* to be- but it might be good to know if Steve's going to be having expectations about how he's going to handle all of this.

Steve's apparently been okay- or okay *enough*- with him being bent. But Steve's already forgiven him for being a fucking *serial killer*, so it's likely that his metrics are somewhat unique.

He knows it's legal, now, to be homosexual. He's seen the back page ads, sure, but he's also seen the front page headlines. It had come up back at the Academy, when Sam had joined Steve's mission to get him caught up on his history lessons.

But going back over what he knows and what he's been told and what he remembers, he doesn't think he's noticed any homosexual tendencies. Maybe they'd been wiped out at some point. Maybe they're just buried underneath trauma and antidepressants and his strong suspicions that he's still not yet entirely capable of socializing like a normal human being.

And it might not even matter. It's not like he's got any sort of libido to speak of. As far as he knows, it might just never come up.

Or shit, maybe he's just kidding himself. Maybe he's so fucking...what's the word...*closed*, that he can't even entertain the thought.

But it's ridiculous to even worry about it, because *fuck*, he hasn't even completely decided if his own *name* fits, yet, and he'd carved it into his own damn *arm*. 
Chapter 14

He should be thrilled. Coulson's alive. Still fighting the fight.

He's trying not to be angry at Hill. After all, she's the one who's been around, the past year and a half. She's the one who, even when he was being a depressed alcoholic shitstain on the universe, promised that he'd have a place on the team whenever he wanted it. She'd maintained, even when he hadn't, that he still had some fight left in him.

And it's not like she had any clue that Coulson's death had hit him harder than the names of the other hundred and twenty seven people that went down in the helicarrier. She doesn't know, because he's never said it, not in any way that would've meant anything.

He never had the balls, then never had the chance.

Right now, he's fucking glad.

Sure, he might've been a little bit- no, fuck it, man the hell up- completely in love with the man. Coulson had given a damn about people, and doing the right thing. He'd stuck his neck out for Clint when he'd had no reason to. Given him the benefit of the doubt when he'd let him bring Natasha in instead of taking her out.

He'd earned Clint's trust, trusted him back, and Clint knows it's childish, but there's still a part of him convinced that that should've counted for something.

But it turns out that Coulson, the most solid man he'd ever met, has new people to trust.

---

Clint avoids looking at himself in the mirror, because it's easier to seat the hearing aids properly by feel. They're more lightweight then the ones he'd worn as a kid, enough that it's jarring to look up and see purple plastic jutting out of the side of his head.

Maybe hospital tan- the color of ace bandages, rubber crutch pads, scuffed clipboards and the ergonomic shoes the nurses always wore- would've been a better idea after all. The purple really brings out the bags under his eyes; the smooth edges only highlight that he really needs another haircut already. He's been wearing the gray knit cap for so long- it probably needs to be burned, it's been in the nineties all week and he hasn't washed it in months- that he hadn't actually noticed.

The hearing aids are fine- maybe they could look a little less like he's stuck toy cars in his ears, though switching out the purple covers for the matte silver ones from the box that Stark had given him does help- but a mullet on top of that, it's just a bit too much.

It can wait another day or two, though. He's got a hangover that needs tending, and a broken fucking little heart that needs ignoring. He can probably go another three days before he actually needs to leave the apartment for anything. Hopefully, that'll give Coulson, and his new team, and whoever else Hill's deemed worthy, time to handle whatever chaos seems to be heading for New York.

"Fuck you, Coulson," he mutters. Mostly, he just needs to hear himself say it. But he does flip his reflection the bird the way he'd like to believe he would, if the man was standing in front of him.

---
Sam and Dr. Gupta stop by for their monthly face-to-face session, and he gets through it. Dr. Gupta leaves him with a refill of his prescriptions and a dirty mug in the sink, and Sam only gives him his *we'll talk about this later* look once, as he's leaving. He knows something's up, that he'd left things out, today, but he's not pushing, yet.

Which gives him three days, until their next video-chat session. He'll have to get his shit together- at least enough to give him the broad strokes- by then.

It would help, he thinks, if he had any idea whether or not he actually knew his own brain as well as Steve used to.

All day now, Steve's revelations have had him poring over every fucking interaction he's ever had with anyone, looking for clues. Was it there all along? Or did Hydra strip that out of him along with everything else? Was Dum Dum's face coming to mind because they'd fought together, or because he'd been harboring some deeper attraction? Had he been relieved to find Rumlow smiling at him after a mission because he'd cared, or just because it meant they'd knock him out before connecting the electrodes? Had Peggy Carter made him uncomfortable because she'd ignored him, or because she'd been interested in Steve?

He remembers Steve more clearly than anyone else. Of the people he's met more recently, he probably thinks about Clint, or Sam the most. But all of them could be explained easily enough by proximity and familiarity. It's not like he's caught himself lusting after any of them, as far as he knows.

For as permissive and open about sex as people are these days, and given what he's been finding on his internet searches, it seems like he should actually be attracted to, well, *someone*. There should be some physical or emotional response cluing him in, confirming or disproving Steve's assessment.

He can look at a man- or a woman- walking by on the sidewalk and decide whether they're pleasant to look at- he's been doing it for hours, now, sitting here on the front steps and trying to jolt his brain into *noticing* someone- but beyond that?

He's got nothing. All he's learned is that two of the teenagers who live in the building across the street are probably dealing drugs, the mailman doesn't seem as bored by his job as he probably should be, and that it's hotter than hell out here.

The door opens behind him, so he shifts to the edge of the steps to make way; Lucky's crashing his head against his shoulder before he has the chance to look up.

"You do know that it's a hundred degrees in the shade out here, yeah?"

Scratching Lucky behind the ears, he cuts a glance up, mostly catching Clint in profile. He looks miserable, wilted as everything else out here. "Says the man wearing a ski cap," he smirks. He'd come outside in the first place because his east-facing apartment was even worse. All the box fan in the window's doing is bringing hotter air inside. "Where're you off to?"

"Katie-Kate texted, has something she needs to talk to me about that apparently takes precedence over my hangover. How're you doin'? Saw you taking off last night."

"Yeah. Sorry I bolted without sayin' goodbye. Just got blindsided by some shit and had to get out of there."

"Everything cool?"
His shirt sticks wetly to his back as he shrugs; he doesn't really intend on answering at all. But it's stupid. He's done the research. It's not supposed to be a big deal anymore- and even if he hadn't, it's definitely not in the same ballpark as killing dozens of people. And Clint's not Sam, or Dr. Gupta, or Steve. He should be easier to talk to, especially now that he can talk to him, now.

And shit, Steve had been talking about a Bucky that doesn't even exist anymore. Not him. So it shouldn't be this big a deal. Still, the only reason that he looks at Clint at all when he speaks is that over the past few months, he's been conditioned to do so out of necessity.

"He said that Buck-" he cuts himself off, not wanting to sound like he's disassociating or whatever Sam calls it, "that I was apparently, ah. Gay." Clint's eyes widen a fraction, but he doesn't say anything. "Only I've looked up the signs, which didn't help at all, and I have no idea what I'm supposed to do with that information. I don't even know if it even applies anymore."

"Huh. Wow. Were you and Steve, ah, together?"

Okay, this doesn't look too bad. Clint's not getting on the phone calling someone up to lobotomize him. He's surprised, but that's about it.

"He said we weren't." He stands up; even under his sleeve, his left arm is burning hot against his side. "Guessing I'm going to have to take his word on it, but I'm not sure and now it's weird, so... just trying to wrap my head around it. Any recommendations?"

From this new angle, he can see that this, somehow, is where he'd screwed up. Clint's eyebrows have disappeared under his hat, and he's snorting out a laugh that sounds disbelieving and strained, though he hasn't figured out all of Clint's tones, yet. But on anyone else, that laugh would sound nervous.

"Shit, man. I had no idea." If that's supposed to make him feel any better, it's not working, and neither does, "But I'm pretty sure I'm the last person you should be asking for advice on that particular topic."

It's hard to say, but he might be more relieved than Clint is when Lucky starts straining at the leash, eager to get going. Clint grins apologetically- it would help if he knew what the apology was for- and moves backwards off the step as he nods at the dog. "Pick this up later? I should-ah."

"Yeah," he says, digging out his keys. "Me too."

He makes himself wait until Clint disappears around the corner before heading inside. No sense in letting him witness his retreat.

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"...and then I pretty much bolted and left him there."

"Nice work, jackass." Kate tells him, over her ridiculously overpriced mimosa.

He can't argue with her, really. He's pretty sure that he wasn't supposed to tell her about Coulson being alive; technically, she doesn't need to know. But seeing as how she'd been the first one to call him on his stupid crush in the first place- god, she'd been like seventeen, then- it hadn't occurred to him to not tell her when she'd asked why the half the people at the party had suddenly gone weird.

Outing James, to the extent that he just did, isn't really earning him any grownup points, either.

But she's trustworthy, given half a chance. And as long as she's not related to them, she's better at
people than Natasha is.

"I know, I know." The umbrella might be keeping the sun off, but it's not doing anything to block the glare from the bank tower across the street. Lucky's leash is wrapped around Kate's chair; Lucky himself is sprawled in the shade of the oversized plant stand next to their table. The forecast had called for thunderstorms early this afternoon- he'd listened to the report this morning, laughing at the newscaster's relieved intonations. He hadn't thought to miss that sort of thing the past few months, having to satisfy himself with reading the weather app on his phone.

"I'm gonna go back and try digging myself out of that hole, soon as I get back, but. I mean. What the hell should I say to the guy? I'm sorry I sounded like a homophobic idiot, it's just that I heard that my dead crush has come back from the dead and is avoiding me so I'm- what? Fucked in the head?"

"Seems like a pretty good place to start."

He takes another sip of his Bloody Mary. Whatever they spiced it with is burning the back of his throat but at least the drink's cold. Wiping the condensation off on his neck for the slight relief it brings, he shrugs. "Yeah, but putting that on him when he's all confused, or whatever? Seems like it's not the greatest idea."

"You do realize he's confused about the exact same thing you are, right? The whole, I dunno, weird revelations of the homosexual variety, all tied up with long lost friends that either were, or are, probably straight?"

"Sure. It's the exact same thing. Only he's been brainwashed and I haven't told him shit about me yet, and-"

"Yet?"

He looks up, confused, and catches her rolling her eyes.

"So you're saying that you were going to tell him that at some point, then, yes? About you."

Clint scratches his eyebrows. "I mean... yeah. If it ever came up."

"Seems like it just did." She tips her glass back, finishing her drink, before fixing him with a level glare over the top of her sunglasses. "Look, Clint. I know you're not the type to play it up, but think about it. The past few times we've hung out, you haven't really been talking about anybody besides him."

"It's because there's nothing else going on."

"Either that or you're hot for him."

Now it's his turn to roll his eyes. It had been easier to ignore how young she can sound when he hadn't been able to hear a damned thing. "So what, you're telling me I'm supposed to tell him all this as a means to get in his pants? It's not like that. More like, he's got a lot of stuff going on in his head and he doesn't need me making things any more confusing than they already are."

"Okay, okay. Just checking, you know?" She shrugs. "But still. If you're gonna be real about it, be real about it. If he's having some Kinsey Scale epiphany going on, it couldn't hurt to know that there's someone else he knows- someone he trusts- who's been there."

He doesn't really have anything to say to that. He could tell her that she's probably right, but she's
clearly already decided as much. And hell, it's not like letting her have the last word is costing him anything.

"Okay, my turn," she says, pausing as he flags down the waiter because the slump of her shoulders indicates that they're going to need another round. "I totally fucked up last night and my life is over."

"There was drama?"

She sighs for emphasis, then fills him in. Turns out, once Jane had taken off with Thor, she and Darcy had kept drinking, eventually grabbing guest rooms at the tower. She'd woken up this morning to find that she'd documented everything on Instagram.

She holds out her phone for inspection as if she's turning herself in down at the station, handing over the murder weapon, ready for booking, and he prepares for the worst. Hopes like hell he's not about to see anything he can't unsee.

In the first, Kate's wearing Darcy's glasses and sticking her tongue out while Darcy crosses her eyes. The second has them both staring at the camera, heads together, slack-jawed and zombified. The third had obviously been taken in the bathroom mirror; there's a pair of high heels forgotten behind them on the floor. Kate's holding her phone in front of her and the flash looks like an energy blast; Darcy's standing like she's one of Charlie's Angels, fingers pointed up like a gun. And so on. None of it seems particularly incriminating, though, for which he is immensely relieved.

Only it turns out that there's this girl she's been working with named America- Tony's going to eat that up, especially if Steve doesn't- who Kate's been hanging out with.

"I can't decide if it's a girl-crush or a crush-crush," she admits, frankly. "Like, you know when I was all like, 'I don't know, maybe it was just a phase?' After Samantha?"

He judiciously says nothing about how that had only been a year ago, or that as far as he knows, she's only gone on dates with one or two guys since then. Their drinks arrive, giving Kate a minute to catch her breath, and then the rest of it comes out. America had seemed angry when she'd texted her this morning. Maybe jealous, maybe just irritated at not being invited to party with the billionaire. Or maybe it's the usual competition- apparently there's a lot of it, between the two of them- rearing it's ugly head, and she's misreading the entire thing.

"Sounds like you've gotta figure out what America means to you," he says, flagging down the waiter for the bill.

She curls her lip and shakes her head. "Ugh, you make it sound like a college entrance exam question."

"Five pages, double spaced." He shrugs, considering it for himself. Honestly, it's not like he hasn't realized that writing things down doesn't hurt when it comes to organizing one's thoughts. Not that he wants to get into it. "Then, you either hand it over to her, or set it on fire in the sink, never to speak of it again."

Because he'd sounded like too much of an adult, there, and there's no sense getting anyone's hopes up.

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The sky goes gray as he makes his way back to the apartment, but the breeze isn't kicking up as much as his headache is. Maybe it's the weather, maybe it's the hangover, but the second wind he'd
thought he'd caught at the cafe is fading. He fires off a text to James before it flags completely.

*Sorry I sounded like an asshole earlier. Was surprised is all, not-* It still takes him a block to figure out how to finish, and he's distracted by the first drops of rain splashing wetly against the back of his neck. *-angry or anything bad. Just had some other shit going on. It's kinda funny, I'll tell you sometime.*

He's home for a few hours before he gets a response. *Could use a laugh. Got beers, if you're game.*

By the time he reads it, though, laughing is the last thing on Clint's mind.

Less than a minute after sending the initial message to James, the wind had suddenly picked up, gusting hard enough to scatter garbage everywhere. It was all the warning he'd got, but it hadn't been enough. Caught in the downpour, he'd ripped the hearing aids out, which had at least stopped the screeching, grinding, throbbing static that had suddenly jolted directly into his brain.

As soon as he'd gotten home- Lucky had disappeared into the closet, and he hasn't seen him since- he'd stripped them down to find that he'd mis-seated what should've been an airtight seal over the right earpiece.

He'd dried them off as best he could, and he's hoping like hell that they'll go back to functioning normally, maybe when the humidity dies down. So far, his two attempts to try them on have been for nought. There's nothing, no sound at all. No hissing, no feedback, and no hint of the storm that's still raging outside.

He can deal. It'll be fine. Just. Not yet.
Chapter 15

He'd heard Lucky's paws on the stairs a few hours ago, but so far, there's been no response.

He should go down there. Apologize for making things awkward and dumping all his shit on Clint.

He should leave him be. Clint obviously doesn't want to talk to him. Might not want anything to do with him; it's not like he hadn't seen page after page after website- it's not like he doesn't know that homophobia still exists. He just.

He hadn't thought Clint would take it so bad.

Fuck, for all he knows, Clint's holed up in his apartment, having a teleconference with Steve and Dr. Gupta and Maria Hill and Sam about this new evidence of how unfit he is. Discussing the options- maybe he can't stay, here, maybe he'll have to go back. Maybe Stark's heard by now, too, and maybe things are different.

It's not like he's managed to save enough money to pay for his own place.

Maybe they won't even want him back at the Academy. He'd missed the days of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, but that had been a US military policy, not theirs.

Steve's got his back; otherwise he probably wouldn't have told him in the first place. But maybe he'd reacted wrong, maybe Steve's worried that the shock and confusion's going to send him backsliding into the mess he'd been when he'd first arrived. Maybe it had just been a test, and he'd failed it.

He's showered and changed. The storm's still going strong; the lights have been flickering all afternoon, but so far they're more on than off. The window by his bed is open, making his room the coldest in the apartment by several degrees, and he thinks that maybe he could sleep, if his brain would allow it.

It's not until five that his phone beeps at him.

Hearing aid's busted, been dealing with that. Making spaghetti if you want to come down. Bring all the beer you've got.

---

He feels like an idiot, handing the notebook over the moment James walks in the door, but the sooner they get the elephant out of the room, the better. He's not a glutton for punishment, though; the moment the notebook's exchanged hands, he disappears into the kitchen, takes his time shifting things around in the fridge and pulling out a few beers.

Sorry about earlier. I didn't handle it well, and here's why:

At the party, when Steve was telling you what he told you, Hill was telling me that Phil Coulson (he used to be my handler, and Natasha's) is alive, and that he doesn't want to see any of us. Seeing as how I used to be in love with the man, and that I thought I'd helped get him killed, I didn't take it all that well.

So when you told me what you did, it was a little too on point, and my reaction was more about my bullshit than it was about your situation. What I should've said was that it's cool, that I've been
there, and that I'm here if you want to talk.

Clint drains the pasta and leaves the colander in the sink, then throws the jar of sauce into the microwave; after that, he's out of ways to procrastinate. He feels conspicuous as hell, joining James at the counter, as if this regression back to using notes is some sort of dodge. And maybe it is; his five previous attempts to lay it all out- all either rambling, overwrought, or sarcastic- are shoved down in the bottom of the trash can.

James looks up from the page but doesn't say anything. After a moment, though, his expression cracks and he's shaking his head, laughing. It sucks that he can't hear it- he'd liked the sound of it, when he'd caught it last night, but it's not locked into his head like he's wishing it was.

He checks his phone on his way back to the microwave, hoping to see a message back from Tony saying that he can take a look at the hearing aids. There's nothing, though. Just a notification telling him that his battery's drained down to 8 percent. He manages to dig the charger out of the pile of crap on the kitchen table, and plugs it into the wall.

"Phone's dead," he explains, mostly because James has this apprehensive look on his face that might mean he's not up to being pressed right now. "You good on beer?"

Holding up his bottle with his right hand, he nods, but from this angle, Clint can't help noticing the scars on his arm again. They've healed almost completely; Clint's mostly filling them in from memory. Your name is James Buchanan Barnes. He's got suspicions- he'd needed reminders too, in the days after Loki, and he'd only been under for a couple of days- but he's never asked about them.

It occurs to him that while it's been upwards of ninety degrees all week, this might be the first time he's seen James wearing just a T-shirt. It's not that he's particularly shy about the arm, more like he was given the cardigan at work as part of his uniform, thought this is what people wear nowadays, and left it at that, all 21st century sartorial problems solved.

It also occurs to him that he's staring like an idiot, and that James is staring back at him.

"Your arm," he shrugs, immediately realizing that as far as changes of subject go, it's lacking. All he's doing is exchanging one awkward topic for another. But James holds his left arm up all the same, raising his eyebrows.

"Actually," He reaches over, tapping James' right hand. "This one. Didn't realize how much it had healed up."

Bucky glances down at it before shrugging, then sliding his beer cap it across the counter towards him and pointing at the garbage can. It's an obvious deflection.

Picking it up, he snaps it, sends it bouncing first off the ceiling, then the fridge, and finally landing it in the can. It fucking sucks that he has to watch it to know that it's landed right, but when he looks back, Barnes is smiling. He's already picked up the pen, and he's dragging the notebook over, flipping for an open page.

Not sure when I did it. Before Florida. Pretty sure I had good reasons but I was slightly insane at the time.

James is nodding past him towards the microwave when he finishes reading; the sauce is done.

"Makes sense," he says, shoving away from the counter to get the sauce out. He stirs it again before dumping it, and the pasta, into a large bowl.
You're totally fine with it, aren't you?

"What?" He's got no idea what he's talking about.

The arm.

"Well, I mean. You just told me why you did it." He's in over his head, and he knows it. "I mean, even if you were cutting yourself just to-"

Bucky's shaking his head, rolling his eyes. Actually, this one. His left hand is raised.

He shrugs, all too aware that the next words out of his mouth might shove them both right back to being miserable. "Does it bother you?"

It's been my left arm longer than my original left arm. Keep it covered so I don't attract attention, but otherwise, don't think much about it. Sam fixates on it sometimes. Steve too.

"Like how?"

I don't know, like they think I'm going to wake up one day, see it there, and lose my mind.

He shrugs. "Stark was surprised when I told him I wanted neon green hearing aids." James nods; his head's cocked like he's still listening. "Think it's just that people assume that making all that stuff invisible- prosthetics, hearing aids, what have you, will make you look normal."

James' humorless smirk is as unsurprising as expected. And therefore be normal?

"Exactly."

James looks serious, though, when he speaks next. Sorry to tell you, Clint. Saw you in yours the other day. It didn't work.

"Shut up and eat your damn pasta," he mock-scowls but James' head swivels away, then back again. He's rolling his eyes and getting to his feet, picking up the phone. The screen's turned itself on, someone's calling- and holds it up to him.

It's one of the tower lines.

"Aw, phone, no," he mutters, reaching out to take it before realizing that the voice recognition doesn't work when the line's in use. Tony, of all people, should know better. "Can you answer it?"

James nods,thumbs the green button on the screen, then turns towards him to talk while gesturing at the notebook. He looks worried and frustrated; between the hair and the frown and how animated he is, it's impossible to lip read. After a few moments, James digs his own phone out of the pocket as he says something that Clint can't follow.

Hell is calling back James says. But he must mean Hill, because he's grabbing the notebook, scrawling quickly: Steve Natasha trouble.
Chapter 16

After a few seconds, James’ phone lights up and he accepts the call, setting it onto the counter, close enough Clint’s that the voice recognition will pick it up.

Okay, we’re on, James says, with a glance up at Clint.

Clint, it’s Maria. I heard about your tech acting up, and I wouldn't be calling if there were any better options, but we need your help.

He wouldn't be his first choice either, but it's nice of her to not say it outright, even if he does come within inches of reminding her of it himself. He sighs, closing his eyes. TRIes to remember what it was like to be useful and prepared. He thinks he's about three quarters of the way there; he'll have to fake it until he makes it.

Opening his eyes again, he avoids looking at James. "What happened?"

Coulson’s team got to New York, then got in over their heads. Rogers, Stark and Romanov went to assist, but last we heard, they're boxed in with a few dozen civilians, either on the Myrtle-Willoughby station platform, or in the subway tunnel itself.

"What's the threat?"

Coulson's team got word that Hydra's been tracking a man named Finnegan. He's got augmented hearing.

Clint wants to laugh, because it's a little too on-point, but Hill's still speaking. Coulson's team caught up with him on the train, and were talking him into heading out to a safe house. Then the power cut out and everything went sideways. There were undercover Hydra agents on the train; they broke cover, killed the engineer, and started taking hostages. It wasn't until Finnegan started helping them that anyone realized they were too late, he's already gone Hydra.

Our people arrived on the scene, got in and provided a distraction so Coulson's people could focus on getting the civilians out to safety. Last I heard from Agent May, Coulson's team's made it topside, but our people are still underground with a few dozen civilians. It's a hostage situation. Coulson told me to tell you that it seems to look a lot like Budapest.

Shit. "So, we're talking enough firepower down there that Steve's not going to risk the civilians by making a call. Comms are down which means Tony can't pull anything." He thinks for a minute, and his stomach drops. "Crap. It also means that they've got enough manpower that they're probably sending some of their guys back down to secure their exit route. Any idea how fast they're moving?"

Not fast. Because of the storm, traffic aboveground is completely gridlocked. Breaching from above isn't an option. There's a G line train stuck at the platform, but the line leading up to it from Bedford-Nostrand is clear. We're assuming that if they're not doubling back already, they've at least got guards posted in the tunnel itself. Also, Finnegan's still with them, so the situation demands stealth. It's why I called.

"Any idea on timelines?"

We're in communication with the transit authority office. They're thinking that between the grid, and getting a replacement engineer down there, it's going to be about an hour and fifteen before
they're going to be able to get the train moving again.

"Okay, I'm on it."

You're sure? appears on the screen, but James is already glaring at him, shaking his head, opening his mouth to speak.

Sorry, but. You want to send him up against some rabbit-eared terrorist when he can't even tell how loud he's being?

"I'll go slow, be careful," he glares back, irritated. This is fucking stupid- yes, it'll be tricky, but it's not the hardest thing he's ever been asked to do- they don't have time for this.

I'm coming too, James says; Clint doesn't even have to look at his phone to read the words, but he does have to look at Hill's response.

You're not cleared, and under any other circumstances, Barton wouldn't be either.

Even though James has his heart in the right place, he's never worked a job with the guy. "Two people make twice as much noise," he points out, just in case Hill's at risk of going along with it.

James is cutting off any reply she might make, though. But at least one of us would know when we're making noise. I've snuck up on people before, if you don't believe me, check your files.

"You're out of practice," he argues, weakly, glancing up the stairs. In the case under the bed, he should still have a dozen or so sonic arrows left, and hey, silver lining, at least this time he won't incapacitate himself.

This is actually happening. Not ideal, but the adrenaline's doing its thing. His head's clearer than it's been in a long while.

He looks back down to the phone and sees, So are you.

He doesn't want to ask who said it, because hell, it's not like he doesn't already know that it's true.

"Hill, what do you think?"

There's a long pause before the words start rolling out across the screen.

Barnes, I need to know. Are you up for this?

Yes.

And you'll follow Barton's lead?

Yes.

All right. You get him down there, you watch his back, but you're not clear to engage. You're his eyes and ears nothing more. Are we clear on that?

Understood.

All right then. Consider yourself drafted, Barnes. And thank you.

At least James isn't gloating about it.
"All right, fine," Clint sighs. It's not like they've got the time to fight over this, anyway. "We're on it. Send the GIS layer to both of our phones. We'll gear up and head down there."

"You sure about this?" he asks James, once Hill’s off the line, because asking, flat-out, whether he's actually mentally prepared to be going out into the field- whether there's anything they should be worried about, seems like a very bad idea.

James holds out his phone to him as he glares irritably, like he wants to make sure he doesn't miss it. No, but it's less stupid than letting you go out there on your own.

"This isn't your fight."

*It never is. And it's not a problem.* James is smirking at him, now, tossing him the phone then walking past him to head for the door. *Leave without me, and I'll kill you.*

Not waiting around to watch him go, Clint heads up the stairs to his room. Lucky seems to think that they're about to go somewhere fun and exciting, now that he's finally come out from hiding, and crashes into him halfway up the steps.

"Sorry, buddy," he mutters, scritching him behind the ears in apology while trying not to trip over him again. "Not your kind of fun."

Going to his closet, he pulls on his old night-ops jacket; even with the thin armor, he'd forgotten how fucking heavy the thing was, but at least SHIELD had built some ease into it on the shoulders. He throws on some black jeans because honestly, he has no idea where the pants to go with it went.

His boots are barely strapped on before he's rummaging through the cases in the corner of his room. He's got an entire armory at the tower, full of Stark's latest gear, not that it does him any good right now. He's been meaning to upgrade the household cache ever since Kazi'd happened. He really should've gotten to it by now, he thinks. Or at least pulled his head out of his ass enough to restock.

He doesn't like the modified Black Horse bow all that much- it's heavy and clunky- but his SHIELD issued compound bow- the one that actually has a mount for his night-vision scope- is still lying in two pieces on the floor of the closet. There's the recurve he uses for practice, sometimes, but it's mostly decoration, these days. The BH, at least is completely matte, down to the hardware, and he's going to need all the help he can get, here.

Two of the sonic arrows have lost their charge, but four are still above ninety percent, and should produce a suitable amount of nonlethal agony for anyone with only average auditory capabilities. He's going to have to warn James about them, because there's earplugs somewhere, here in this rapidly worsening mess, but he's just not finding them. Setting them into their slots in the quiver, he leaves the fifth slot empty. It's been jammed since fucking *Loki* happened.

He fills the remaining slots with one smoke arrow, one flash, one flare, and three armor piercers, because nonlethal might be the first best option, but it's not always the last.

James is going to be down there with him, which means there's one more element he's going to have to be tracking the entire time, and it's doubtful that Hill had allowed James to keep an armory of his own.

The Winter Soldier could've killed Captain America with his bare hands, though, if he hadn't decided not to. Still, Clint feels a little better about this entire endeavor when he finds the Ka-Bar
in it's sheath. A knife's better than nothing.

Lucky's bounding up off the bed and back down the stairs, which means James must be back, which means it's time to go get this goddamned shit show on the road.
He's never seen Clint in his uniform, not that he's seeing more than half of it now anyway. Along with the complicated looking jacket hanging open over his T-shirt, he's wearing black jeans, boots, and a black knit cap pulled low over his ears. He hadn't even realized Clint owned anything besides the gray one.

As far as he himself is concerned, he's making do with dark gray jeans, a black hooded sweatshirt, and black leather gloves. Nobody'd told him that weapons were contraband when he'd come out here; it had been a foregone conclusion. Still, he wonders if Bucky Barnes would've at least made an effort to swipe a gun from somewhere by now. All he's managed to come up with is the paring knife shoved into his boot.

He knows his orders- he's not to engage- just as well as he knows that hostages, darkness, and a lack of comms are a bad combination. And he and Clint are looking at all that plus easy bottlenecks and hostiles who'll hear them coming. The paring knife won't hold up to all that; he's just hoping it won't have to.

But then Clint's handing him a knife- a Ka-Bar, judging by the weight. It's comforting.

"I know what Hill told you, and she's not wrong," Clint says, apologetically. "But unless you know how to shoot a bow, I don't really have much of anything else."

"Thanks."

"Just don't be getting any ideas about pulling some sort of jack move, all right?"

He points at his eyes and ears, then spells [B A C K U P] with his awkwardly-gloved fingers, then gives the thumbs up.

Clint nods back, handing him a small, squared off cylinder; it's a night vision scope, clearly meant to attach to a gun, or something.

"I see pretty well," he says. Not as well as he can in full light, and not more than a few feet, but there's no way he's letting Clint go in there completely deaf and blind.

Clint's zipping up his jacket, though, not reading him, so he shoves it back into Clint's hands the moment he looks up. "They have hostages," he says, though it's strange to think that anyone would consider Stark, much less Steve and Natasha, hostages. Enemy combatants, maybe. "They will have lights."

If Clint doesn't understand him, he doesn't let on, just shrugs and takes the scope back. He doesn't seem particularly worried, but then, he's been all over world fighting aliens and gods and who knows what else. A handful of goons in his own backyard must be small potatoes by comparison.

The factor most likely to complicate matters, he knows, is his own presence. Apart from a little supervised sparring back at the Academy, he's not kept in practice and hasn't particularly wanted to.

And for as confident as Clint's trying to be, that's not going to be enough to prevent things from going sideways.

Don't get cocky, he wants to warn him, be careful how much you trust me.
But Clint's heading for the door already.

On the way to the station, they go over hand signals that haven't changed much since he was a kid. [Stop.] [Go.] [Hold your position.] [Hurry.] The practice is more for Clint's peace of mind than anything, but it gives them something to focus on as they walk quickly down the too-dark street. At least the rain's let up for now.

He can't hear Clint's footsteps at all, even in those heavy boots. He doesn't ask, but it seems like Clint's making a point. Showing off, like his trick with the bottle caps.

It takes almost ten minutes to get to the station. Another two to edge their way down and through the platform; there are people here- a few dozen of them- but they're just waiting for trains, or waiting out the rain, it's hard to tell. The lights are on, much dimmer than usual, probably connected to an emergency generator. Clint's bow and quiver get a few uneasy looks and a woman's voice shouts, startled, when they jump down off the platform and onto the tracks.

"It's cool, we're professionals," Clint calls out when he notices her, then trips over his feet. He cuts a warning glare in his direction, daring him to say something, then points at the third rail.

"Barnes, heads up, man. It's probably not live, but don't test it."

They start moving again, much more slowly than before.

Clint's boots crunch once, driving gravel into the edge of the concrete, so he taps him on the arm and points down. It's still light enough to see, here, but it's only going to get darker.

As soon as they're around the first corner, Clint brings the scope up to his eye.

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James is really somethin' else, Clint decides, not sure if it's the Army training or the Hydra training or what that's got him moving so smoothly down the tunnel. He'd seemed resolute enough back in the apartment, but the tension's back. He'd played along with it easily enough when he'd suggested running through their hand signals, but arriving at the platform to find a bunch of stranger commuters staring back at him and gotten his spine up.

Now that they're around the first bend, though, James seems to know where he's stepping, and, apparently, where not to. Every few paces, he's reaching back, tapping Clint's shoulder. Sometimes his right, sometimes his left, pressing him to step to one side or the other, almost without slowing down at all.

It only takes a few minutes for the last of the platforms emergency lights- more ambient than anything on the best of days- to fade past the point of usefulness. And this is how he finds out that the scope is for shit, really. It's enough to fine tune a target in low light, but it's a passive device. There's only so much it can do. It's only a matter of time before he crashes into something.

As it turns out, it's James he crashes into; neither of them move, but he's aware of Barnes' breathing. One deep breath in, one out, slow.

Okay, this entire operation looks bad. He'll admit it. They're standing in the middle of a subway tunnel with no lights and trying to sneak up on someone who'll hear them coming, and he's going to get them both killed.

Something's nudging his stomach. It's James' hand, and Clint doesn't know whether it means stop, or wait, or what, but after a moment it moves. James is grabbing the scope out of his hand. He
seems to be putting it away.

Fuck, even James knows how useless this is.

He's surprised, though, when metal fingers return and close around his hand. James is stepping close, until their arms are lined up from shoulder to elbow. James leans against him for a moment, to get his attention- as if it's gone somewhere else- then begins to move, hesitantly.


It takes a few steps to get the hang of it; James can see, and Clint's able to feel where James is stepping, and figures out how to adjust his own movements to suit. It's fucking weird, not exactly efficient, just less glaringly inefficient than his previous stumbling had been.

Maybe it's a little distracting, too. But at least they're moving.

If he hasn't let go of James' hand, well, James hasn't let go either.

He figures it's been almost fifteen minutes when his eyes start to notice a faint light that's *maybe* visible on the wall down the way. Squeezing his hand, James stops, then lets go, rummaging in his pocket and pressing something against the back of his hand. It's the phone, and it's a warning.

He closes his eyes; the screen light cuts through his lids anyway, but only for a moment, and then Barnes is putting the phone away, having checked whatever he'd needed to check. Clint opens his eyes, and they continue, more slowly than before.

This is where they need to be quiet. James is getting twitchier, and there's no way to tell whether it's because he's hearing things Clint's not, or because of nerves. They stop a lot more than they go. But it is getting lighter- for a while, he thinks he's not sure he's not imagining it- but eventually, it's enough to tell that they're approaching a bend in the tunnel.

James stops again, keeping one hand on his shoulder as he moves to Clint's other side before pushing him, slightly. Grabbing his hand again, he pulls, guiding it. The moment he feels the rough concrete of the wall, James lets go. They're close enough that he can feel it when he crouches, so Clint follows suit, taking care not to let his gear hit the wall or any debris that he's starting to see around him.

They're pressed close together, now. He's braced against the wall, James feels like he might be balancing on him, so he tries not to move.

He's startled by the feeling of a finger drawing a circle on the outside of his thigh. James presses a bit more firmly, though it might not be intentional. He taps twice, then draws the circle again, following with a slow deliberate line, then two diagonals.

*OK.*

It's oriented so that it would make sense from James' point of view.

He nods, reminding himself that James can see, and wishing, too late, that he'd thought to ask him how well he can see, down here. There's a lot to be said for sign language actually, when it comes to working on an op like this. ASL's better for asking questions.

*[You see something?]*

James catches his hand, signs [yes] against it. Two taps to his wrist, and then something's being
pressed into his hand. The scope.

He brings it up, twisting until he can just make out the track as it bends, nods, and turns back.

[No see us] James is frowning as he signs, then pulls off his gloves. [N E A R B Y].

Moving slowly, giving James enough time to keep his balance, Clint steps to the corner, crouches, and, raising the scope again, peers around.

There's still not much light- the source is around another bend, much further away than he'd thought it would be. But he can see tracks, the front end of a train car, and movement. Two people, no, three.

And of course they're wearing night vision goggles. One of them is walking on the third rail, which answers that question at least.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the flash of a phone screen coming on and dimming quickly. Even so, catching it through the scope when he turns before lowering it, it still looks like James is holding a small sun in his hands. For a moment afterwards, Clint is completely blind again.

As soon as his eyes readjust, he makes his way back and sits down next to him, so that the phone's light doesn't have far to go and he can better shield it from view. Even dimmed as far at it will go, it makes everything else darker by comparison.

It's stupid, but it's only just now hitting him how dead he would've gotten himself if James weren't here.

Heard voices, can't make them out is on the screen, before James brings up the map. There's one turn off, a tunnel that Clint's pretty sure was abandoned when the G line was rerouted. It's about halfway between their location and their goal, and James taps at it. It's only thirty yards.

In the light of the phone, he signs, [C O V E R] but Barnes shakes his head, bringing up the text messenger again. Draw them out to intersection?

It would move any fighting away from the civilians. Maybe even draw out enough people so that Steve, Natasha and Stark can pull a jack move, only he's got no idea if they're prepared for it.

The odds are good, though, that they'd be biding their time.

He's got no idea what the acoustics are, here, but he might have a plan. It's all down to angles, but if he can make a noise against the wall opposite the turnoff, it might just be enough to make the Hydra goons assume that they'd be coming from the abandoned tunnel, and from not back here.

What he types back is Throw rock at turnoff so they think we are there? Thin them out?

James seems to give it some consideration, then responds with a then what? before darkening the screen and going rigid, next to him. He's heard something, and he's not moving. There's the potential for it, though; his weight's shifting, he's halfway to his heels, but he's stopping. Sitting down again.

The phone comes on again and James types Be quiet. Draw out good ear, take down, deal with others?

He nods. It's a plan.
His eyes are taking too long to readjust now that the phone's glare is turned off. All he can really see is Clint, preparing his gear a few feet away. There's no use trying to see anything else. Right now, in this instant, all he can do is try not to think about how his plan hinges entirely on Clint's ability to throw a rock at a wall in such a manner that it doesn't bounce, doesn't fall short, doesn't hit anything on the way, and sounds like it's being thrown from 90 degrees away from their present position. In complete darkness.

Clint's good, but that's an oddly specific skill to have. Probably one that takes practice, and there's no telling if he's had it. Never mind the darkness, or Clint's inner-ear balance issues.

All he can do is hope like hell. Stay close. Drag Clint back into cover in case anyone starts shooting, and wait for them to arrive. He'd seen three men; there must be several more waiting up the tunnel if they've managed to get Steve and the others pinned down.

Clint's setting his gear down, fidgeting with the scope, and all he can do right now is listen and wait.

He tries to plan, tries to predict their reaction. If they'll come one by one, if they'll split up, if they'll head right for them.

Clint's got his bow close to hand, and the quiver slung over his shoulder. He'll probably be able to get a few shots off, thin them out before they arrive, but they might have guns, and it's just occurring to him that short of watching him go down, he'll have no good way of knowing when, exactly, Clint's going to be in trouble.

He wants to grab his hand again, tap it twice just to check in like they sometimes do, make sure everything's going okay, but Clint's busy.

He can barely hear Clint move, the gravel grinding quietly beneath his boot as he eases out around the corner, but the sound is there, and right now it's the loudest thing he's ever heard.

There are no answering shouts or footsteps though. Right now, he's just got to trust him.

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Clint finds a chunk of concrete. It's rough, uneven. Not particularly large, it's old enough to be crumbling at the edges. Exactly the kind of thing that might get kicked accidentally, with an edge that'll break on impact, though not loudly.

It'll work. If they manage to draw out Finnegan first, it'll even work well.

He glances back; James is staring in his general direction. His eyes are wide, but his jaw's set. Even if it's only because he doesn't realize Clint's looking, or because he's focusing on listening, it's unsettling.

It's the same expression he'd seen in the footage from DC.

He's in a subway tunnel with the Winter Soldier and he's about to start a fight with some humanized Sonar asshole, because his life just hadn't been weird enough when he'd gotten up this morning.

He edges out into the tunnel, staying low, doing the match and selecting his best target, which, he's now realizing, is in shadow. The train's still maybe another twenty yards past his target, but it's blocking off the source of the light. Even so, there's enough light that the night vision's working overtime, amplifying everything so evenly that it's hard to judge distance.
But he's seen enough. He's got it in his brain. His movements, as he pockets the scope and hefts the concrete, are small, quiet and measured. He'll be throwing blind, and he knows it.

But he knows how to keep his bearings. He's had to learn how, more than once. Aim's half visual, and half visualization. And he's done this, more or less, in a riotously loud circus tent when he was just a kid. The silence helps, now.

He waits for his eyes to adjust, until he can make out the light further down the tunnel, and the edge of the train. He doesn't look at it, just keeps it in his peripheral and stares at a wall he can no longer see.

He takes a practice pitch, just one, and then he throws.

He can't tell if he's hit anything at all. For all he knows, it's just hovering in the middle of the tunnel, never landing. Back-stepping quickly as he brings the scope back up to check, hands grab his shoulders roughly, steadying him as James guides him around the corner, pinning him against the wall. He catches a glimpse through the scope; James is scowling. It looks like a reprimand, even if the glare's missing him by an inch or two, but it's less creepy than his earlier vacant stare.

James is listening, but he's easing his grip, letting go of him, and nodding for him to take a look.

Even before crouching at the corner, he can see that he's not going to need the scope. The night vision's been abandoned in favor of flashlights, now- at least these guys are idiots- and they're heading for the turnoff. One looks like he's shouting at the others, but he has to look back up at Barnes to see what the man's saying.

Barnes is nodding emphatically, holding one hand up to his ear, mouthing It's him, then taking off his glove to spell out [H E A R].

It won't matter much, in a moment. In the land of the blind and deaf, the guy with the flashlight and working ears is king. Or maybe not, because he's going down first, and probably worst.

Shouldn't be hard. The sonic arrow's going to send everyone to their knees, so the Sonar fucker's going to be in agony. Clint almost feels sorry for the guy. But not by much, not really at all.

James, though- shit-

James is watching him, worried now that he's setting the bow and arrow down against the wall. Moving carefully, he taps James' wrist before grabbing both of his hands and lifting them up to press firmly against his ears. He nods emphatically, willing him to understand: this is important.

His hands are clamped over James', and loose hair drifts against the backs of his fingers as James nods back. Okay. Yeah. James gets it. The heel of his hand scrapes against the stubble at the back of his jaw as he withdraws.

Focus, Barton.

Grabbing his gear, he checks the wall across the way. The flashlights haven't found them yet. There's no swatch of light swinging their way, and when he peers around, he finds all three of them still pointed down the abandoned tunnel. He glances back to find James in position, a few steps behind him, ready to break cover.

Nodding once, Clint steps around the corner, draws quickly and fires high, aiming at the train.

Enclosed, echoing place like this? It's going to be beyond loud. Natasha's going to smack him one
for it later, and Tony's gonna bitch for weeks, but hey, if they've been waiting for a signal, they've got it now.

This time, he knows when he's hit the target. Three flashlights hit the ground. It's not much, but it's enough.

The next arrow to be loosed is the flash- all the better to discombobulate you with, my dears. He closes his eyes before it's even released, and keeps them closed, tight, as bright white light cuts through his eyelids. The moment it disappears he's got the flare arrow nocked; the next moment, it's flying.

It buries itself in the track between the train and the juncture; they've got about fifteen minutes of light to work with. He's got an armor piercer ready to fire, though the three men are still too dazed to notice him, so he risks a glance back.

James isn't behind him, like he should've been.

He's crouched against the wall, only a few feet from where he'd left him, and. Shit.

Clint, you fucking idiot.

He can't go back, though, because the shock's going to wear off these clowns any second, and he's got to disarm them all first.

He didn't even bring any zip ties, because it's not enough that he's just blinded James, he's going to actually have to engage these assholes.

This is gonna suck.

Two of them are in ill-fitting Transit Authority uniforms, and they're already trying to drag themselves to their feet, fumbling sidearms out of their coveralls. No insignia, but it's not like Hydra's incapable of going undercover. The third- Finnegan, presumably - is still down, gnashing his teeth with his arms wrapped around his head. At least that part had gone according to plan.

He goes for the guns first; one, he shoves into the back of his jeans like some idiotic street thug; he clears and empties the clip of the second before throwing it down the side tunnel.

The larger of the two Hydra clowns is on his feet now, and isn't weaving enough for Clint's liking, even though his first punch doesn't connect. Clint dodges out of the way, drops his shoulder and rushes him into the wall; the goon's head bounces against his chin from the impact and he's going down.

All this has left his back open; the other operative is right there, trying to wrench the quiver off his back, sending him off balance and staggering sideways. As he swings around, he can see three more uniforms coming his way, and they don't seem to be intent on waiting their turn.

Twisting, he manages to break the hold of the goon on his back, though it feels like it's at the expense of at least one of the arrows, if not the entire quiver. He brings his knee up, hard as he can, but it glances off the guy's hip.

Something's burning, somewhere. There's smoke everywhere, but he can't see any-

-it's gotta be one of the smoke bomb arrows; maybe a few of them; it's spreading to fast to tell where it even is, who has it, for all he knows it's still in the quiver and he's blinding himself like a complete fucking moron.
He stumbles, tripping over the track as he tries to get clear. Someone's grabbing at his arm, wrenching it back and out and he's dropping to his knees and trying to catch himself but it's too late.

He can't hear the impact of the track cracking against the side of his skull. He doesn't even have the chance to feel it before-

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Fucking flash arrow.

His ears are ringing and he's half blind, and he doesn't know how much of it is muscle memory, and how much is memory of being the muscle, that has him heading in the right direction. The bright yellow of the chemical flare Clint must've sent up is bending to orange-gray through the smoke.

Drawing closer, he can make out three- no, four, five- uniformed soldiers gathered around one prone figure. A few feet away from them, he can make out the shape of a man who can't seem to decide whether to huddle into himself smaller or drag himself closer to the wall, but it's not Clint.

The soldiers are focused on Clint, boneless on the tracks at their feet. They're distracted, though, and two of them are trying in vain to fan the smoke away.

It's almost too easy to get the drop on them.

One of them bends down, grabbing a hold of the source of the smoke, he can just make out the contrail as the arrow's thrown back down the side tunnel. The thick, dense fog is starting to dissipate, but he can't see if Clint's breathing and it's just going to have to wait a minute, anyway.

One cheek breaks against his hand, and pulling back, he drives his elbow into the next man's skull, and they've noticed him, now. One's swinging his gun up to shoot, so he drops and tackles low.

The blast of the gun pounds through the ringing of his ears as they fall and it's smoke and it's rubble coming down from the ceiling, and around him, he can feel it, they're starting to panic. More gunfire; his shoulder jerks hard, misdirecting a punch mid-swing and he crashes into his target, he bites down, hard, it's someone's jaw and they're screaming, retreating even before he lets go.

Shoving himself off of the man- his arm's damaged, torquing to the left, but he adapts- he swings around; one gun is within close enough range that it's his now; the hand that had been holding it is broken, the arm that had been carrying it is moving defensively; now it's broken, too.

He gets one shot off- it goes wide, just grazes the man- fucking arm- so he moves the gun to his right hand and shoots again.

Another body drops. He doesn't know why this is the one that startles him.

Reinforcements are coming; there's shouting, more gunfire. It hasn't found him yet but it's wild, kicking up dust and raining down debris. The small pieces of concrete pelting his bad shoulder are merely irritating- it's the chunks large enough to crush a man's skull that-

There's a shout, and the soldiers are all moving back, but not retreating. They're keeping their guns out of grabbing range and he doesn't have to look to know that they're lining up their shots, and Clint's there, on the ground- his forehead's bleeding but he's alive, moving-

"Stay down!" he shouts, but Clint doesn't hear; his eyes are barely open, stung with blood and
smoke, and he's pushing himself up to his knees. Coughing.

He can't see the soldiers behind him, taking aim-

He lunges forward, shoving Clint down onto between the tracks again- too hard, shit, he'd just meant to nudge him- and looks up to see the streaking lights of red laser sights re-converging on him through the dust. Three of them. Four now, and another coming from the top of the train.

He blinks, and the lights have skewed, swerved wide. One's disappeared completely, blocked by the body that's fallen on top of it. One's still moving, slowly, as the train sniper's grip eases, and then disappears as the gun falls to the ground. Two are pointing up at the ceiling like a beacon through the dust and smoke.

They're all dead. Everything's going silent.

Down the tunnel, some twenty or forty yards- it's hard to tell with the sound bouncing so strangely off the walls, another rattle of gunfire ceases abruptly, and he thinks he can hear a voice, but he's not certain.

He's standing, he realizes, and the gun he's holding is a little lighter than it had been a moment ago. Pulling the clip out, he finds that it's empty.

It's unnerving that he can't remember shooting- he'd tracked everything else, easily enough.

Glancing down, the handgun in Clint's waistband is within easy reach, but he doesn't like the way Clint flinches when he grabs it. Eyes swerving to scan the front of the train, he reaches back and taps Clint's arm twice. Clint nods and rolls to his side, blearily searching him out.

"Stay down," he mouths, hoping like hell Clint's not so concussed that he can't read him. Not that it'll do much good either way. Clint's down for the count and the next wave is about to attack. And there's a part of him- the only calm part- that thinks he might not be here for all of it.

The chemical flare is starting to burn itself out, but he still has a few minutes of light left to work with. He's got Clint's gun aimed low- better to take out someone's leg and finish them off when they fall, than to aim too high and risk missing- when he sees the shadow move.

Something small and metallic bounces off concrete and lands about ten yards off, at two o'clock, and he throws himself down, braces himself for a grenade blast, tries to shield Clint for all the good it'll do them. It's not until he's letting out the breath he'd taken that he realizes nothing's exploding.

Adjusting the grip on his gun, he opens his eyes, just in time to catch the red light scattering dully along the plates of his arm. He tries to search out the source, almost misses the faint red streak delineated by the dust and dwindling smoke.

The source is lower than he'd expected; it's not until after he's pulled the trigger- hitting nothing but concrete- that he realizes that it's coming from too far to the right, too low to the ground to be attached to a gun. Some sort of remote target painter, then. Something to distract-

He's pushing himself up off of Clint so that he can steady his aim when his neck twinges against a sting just above his left shoulder.

He's still swatting at it lamely when the rush hits, washing over him, washing him out completely.
Rough hands are shaking him; Clint opens and closes his eyes against the harsh light of a chemical flare and Natasha's concerned eyes staring back at him.

Her mouth is moving and he can't hear a thing- *fuck*, his head hurts- and she's shaking her head, helping him to sit up as her fingers card back through his hair to find-

"Don't." he bats her hand away, risks another glance to the shadow moving behind her, dragging the bodies off the tracks; it's not Barnes, he realizes, stomach dropping. It's Steve.

"Can't hear," he explains, coughing, as her hand goes to his back. "Don't think I was hit. Where's James?"

Natasha's hand freezes against his neck, and she leans down to look at him, shaking her head in obvious confusion as Steve crouches next to her, looking worried. Finding his balance- he needs to stand- he glances up again to see that they're talking, but he can't hear a word.

[Can you walk?] Natasha signs, standing when he nods, then reaching down to help him to his feet. [Follow.]

He doesn't want to look at the bodies, but he has to know. James had just been here a minute ago, *right here*. Staggering closer, Steve holds a hand up to his chest to stop him.

"We need to find Barnes," he says, but Steve's shaking his head, eyes wide like it's not just the question that he's answering. Worse, he's not pointing out James' current location, he's grabbing Clint's shoulders, maneuvering them both over the tracks, towards the train and around it.

It's not far to the platform- five yards at most- but James isn't here, either. Steve is looking back over his shoulder, calling out something to Natasha that he can't make out.

He knows better than to hope, when he finally climbs up onto the platform- Steve would've given some indication beyond angry disbelief, if James were here, and there's no sign of any civilians, so they probably all got out all right. He notices the four uniformed men bound together around a trashcan in the middle of the platform almost immediately, and only then does he catch sight of their guard.

He hasn't seen Melinda May in years. She'd quit, he'd heard, a few months after the battle of New York. Her grim smile hasn't changed much, but it's too much to process right now. Natasha's coming up behind him, guiding him towards a bench against the wall- it smells like piss, over here, cloying and heavy- and she and Steve go over to help keep the men secured as May prepares to move them out.

It takes them long enough that he starts going through his pockets, looking for a pen; his phone's broken, the glass cracked and the screen unresponsive, but there's trash in the can, he can at least start writing-

-he's got to write something down, but he's too tired to think. Between one blink and the next, May and her prisoners are gone, and Natasha's hand is grabbing at his. She's trying to look calm but it's an act, and it shouldn't be because he's not bleeding out, here, it's just a concussion and they've each had dozens of them and-

- James is still missing.

[Doctor. Then talk,] she signs, letting him lean against her for a moment as they head for the stairs.

He doesn't want to go. James could still be down there. Maybe he'd doubled back to the other
platform; maybe he's lost in the tunnel.

Maybe he's been captured.

But then he flashes back to the look Barnes'd had in his eye, just before he'd knocked him down onto the tracks. Maybe he'd escaped.

Either way, he's not going to be waiting up for him at the top of the stairs. Just doctors, debriefs and a lot of time wasted before they can even start looking for him.
Chapter 18

It's the smell that he notices first—dust and old engine oil. He's in a garage?

He's lying down and his shoulder hurts and there's this weight running through his veins that's familiar but he can't place it.

"...but the job's not done," a woman's voice, quiet, drifts over as a door opens. "You really think they'll be willing to negotiate?"

"What we've got is better than what we offered, and they know it," a man's voice replies. "Shit. He's waking up."

There's... a shuffling noise, footsteps coming closer, but he doesn't open his eyes. "Here," she's saying, suddenly much closer now. "You talk to them, then."

"Fine," he hears the man say, and there's a heavy hand at his neck, a stabbing that he can't think to react to, and he's fading.

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"We met before, you know," the man—dark hair, black jacket, moves like he's coiling to strike—notices that he's awake. He's careful not to lean to close.

They've sat him up, which isn't as much of a benefit as it should be. They've stripped him down to his underwear, and his weapons are gone. The tracker's been removed from his left shoulder; he knows because it's sitting on the floor, crushed, a few feet away, along with the bullet they'd probably removed as an afterthought. The plate on his shoulder's still damaged and loose, but his limbs are heavy and unresponsive.

He tests the bindings behind his anyway. They shouldn't be enough to hold him. The man though, he seems crazy, but he's cautious.

Maybe he can throw the whole chair over. The legs are metal but the seat and back are wood. Wood breaks.

But then what?

It couldn't hurt to at least try getting some information. The woman seems to be gone; it's just the two of them in here. "Am I supposed to remember you?"

The man's wearing a black jacket and dark blue jeans. The man's name is lost to him completely but he's seen him from a similar angle before; he'd been speaking. Not to him, he'd been talking over him, to... Rumlow? While handing him a gun, confident that he'd aim it at the target they painted for him and nothing else.

Beyond that, though? There's nothing. And the man seems nearly content to keep it that way.

"Probably not." The man's retreating, but ceding nothing. "Name's Ward, anyway."

The man might not think he's broken—he wouldn't be drugged and bound if that were true—but he's clearly already decided he's breakable. The man's confident enough that he has to force himself not to flinch at the possibility.
"Stop talking," the woman's voice again; she's behind him, somewhere behind him, closer than he'd been prepared for. "Help me with this."

"What's it matter? We're just gonna wipe him anyway." Ward mutters quietly, as if grumbling to himself, but then he smiles down at him as he steps away and-

He'd meant to be heard.

These people know him, and they have plans and he doesn't know what they are, but he can guess.

He pretends to stare off into space, like the Good Little Asset they're clearly hoping he still remembers how to be. If he's zoned out enough, maybe they won't hit him with another tranquilizer.

He's just buying some time, is all. But this is all a lot more familiar than he'd been ready for. Sitting still, waiting for orders, waiting for someone or something to define him again.

Another hand on his neck, another jab of the needle, and the man- Ward- is tutting at him in amusement. Leans down into his line of sight and grins at him again.

"Just because you think you've got it in you to survive, it doesn't mean you're going to." He sighs, stepping away. "At least, not all of you. Best that you accept it."

---

It's disconcerting, waking up to know that you're in a bed, but not knowing where. No sound, of course, but it smells like a hospital. The same bright lights cutting through his eyelids, the same bleached sheets against the back of his arms.

He's going to have to look at that shitty hospital tan everywhere, and he's already having a shitty enough time as it is. When he finally opens his eyes, though, he's pleasantly surprised to see silver instead of gray, green-blue walls instead of sharp white.

His relief at finding himself at Stark Tower- not such a surprise, now that he's a bit more awake- cuts out immediately when he catches movement in the corner of his eye. Turning his head to look, he sees a familiar face smiling tiredly at him.

Shit.

"Coulson?" He does not have time for this. Rubbing his eyes, he mutters, "Am I dead?" He grits his teeth and shoves down against the bed, pushing himself up against the pillows as he opens one eye again to glare. "Oh wait. That was you."

Coulson grimaces. So far, all this is doing is making Clint feel like an asshole. But Coulson passing him a tablet, and it's running voice recognition, and even though the first words he sees on it are I suppose I deserve that, it's nice to have something to look at instead of the man.

"More than that, if we're bein' honest, but I feel like shit and I'm too tired." This can work, he thinks. Be awake. Move this along as quickly as possible. "What's going on?"

You're alive. Coulson's watching the words unspool on the screen, distracted. Civilians safe. Stark sent agents to your place for your hearing aids; he's fixing them now and should have them ready shortly. Agents May and Romanov are questioning the gunmen downstairs.

The room swims when he nods, but he's had worse. "Everyone else?"
Coulson smirks. *Arguing, last I checked.* Coulson leans over, presses the call button on the wall. *Should go back down before it heads to blows, but I wanted to hear your take first.*

"On what?"

*Winter Soldier.* Coulson stands, arms down at his sides; it's what he did- does- when he's deliberately trying to be unassuming. *Do you trust him?*

His brain is trying to do too many things at once; an annoyingly large part of it seems to be processing the fact that he's already forgiving Coulson and doesn't really know why. There's another part that's bristling at the question, and coming up with dozens of implications- none of them good. He's starting to figure out how to ask why Coulson's asking him, when the building's probably filled with perfectly un-concussed people who've been awake longer than five minutes.

"Where is he?"

Coulson shrugs, shaking his head as he writes. *The debate du jour seems to be whether we should expect him to return under his own steam, or if we need to go retrieve him. If it's the latter, we need to know how to go about doing so.* There's enough of a pause in the words that Clint looks up. *You've vouched for people in the past, and I trust your judgement.*

Things might be fucked, but he still knows how to report in like a good, functional agent.

Ignoring the creeping panic that's setting up shop along his spine and abdomen, he says, "the Winter Soldier, no. I mean, I can trust him to operate as, like, the Asset." It does something to his throat, referring to him that way, and he doesn't like it. "James Barnes, though? Yeah. Wouldn't have been down there with him in the first place if I didn't."

His throat's sore and his nerves are twitching; he wonders when the nurse is going to get here; he's not sure he can keep any sort of painkillers down but the sooner he gets out of here, the sooner he'll be able to find out just what it is he's supposed to be afraid of.

It's obvious they're worried that the fight triggered something in James. If he hasn't reverted to his Hydra training, he might still be out wandering the streets somewhere, confused and freaked out. He thinks he recalls feeling the weight of James falling against him, but he'd been losing consciousness; he doesn't know how the fight had ended. For all he knows, James had been overrun and captured; maybe he'd taken a hit and crawled away in the tunnels to die.

Shaking his head, it occurs to him that he hasn't spoken to anyone besides Coulson yet. So these worries, they're all his.

"I have to get down there," he decides.

Coulson's stepping close, shaking his head like he'd force him back down to the bed if he even tried it.

"I'm concussed, not gut-shot," he grumbles, and for a moment this back-and-forth is all too surreal, or, no, just the opposite. It's too *familiar.* There'd been a time, not too long ago, when he would've begged the universe just to experience it again, but it doesn't change anything.

Dr. Van Drier comes through the door and dismisses Coulson before either of them can say anything more, and it's fine.

It's not like he'd wanted to talk to the man anyway.
He doesn't know how long it's been, but this time, at least, he remembers. He doesn't open his eyes. Doesn't make a sound or raise his head or give any indication that he's woken up.

They're talking.

"Well, no, see, trying to back us into a corner isn't going to work. I know about the lab in Pyongyang, and I know it's not you who controls it. And that's not a threat- I'd much rather do business with you than with them, but I need a decision immediately."

He can't hear the response; it's just Ward. He's on the phone.

"I think it'll take you some time, to be honest, but then again, I was never in charge of the freezer section. But yes, I'd say no more than a few months, worst case scenario. More than likely, regardless of anything else, he's conditioned to accept programming. My honest guess is that'll be half that."

So the negotiations are going well. Lovely. He needs to get out of here. Concentrates on pinpointing the sounds in the room. Ward's pacing back and forth as he talks, but there's an echo in here; it's hard to tell exactly where he's at. And then there's the matter of the person- sniper, probably- up on the catwalk. He'd only been able to see one entrance- a plain, heavy door, but there are things in here too large to fit through it; best to assume there's garage doors somewhere behind him, and that they're guarded as well.

He hears the door open and hears footsteps, lighter than the others; probably the woman's. They come to a stop a few feet away from him, but move on.

There's no needle jab. The ruse is working, for now at least.

"No," Ward's saying. "I want him moved soon because, well. Had enough ketamine to keep the good Captain under for three days, and the soldier, here, he's not burning through it as quickly but our supply isn't infinite. Besides. The sooner you get him wiped, the sooner you'll get a return on the investment."

Ward's listening. The woman mutters something at him and there are two sets of footsteps now, coming his way.

"You don't need to worry about it," Ward tells the person on the other end of the line as they approach, hesitate, then pass by again. "Either they don't know where we are, which is likely, since we didn't leave any witnesses, or they've washed their hands of him already. Otherwise they'd have shown by now."

They didn't leave any witnesses.

They didn't leave any witnesses.

Clint's dead. Someone's going to find him, lying down on the tracks, alone in the dark.

He's sure that he gives the game away when he suddenly remembers to breathe, but there's no reaction.

Right now, Ward and the woman are talking in the office; they're arguing about something and this is as good a distraction as he's going to get. He's pretty sure that the person in the catwalk is in front of him, which is good.
They've been counting on the drugs to keep him under. They'd skimped on the restraints; the thin band of metal digs into his right wrist sharply as he twists, carefully. It's sweat or blood, maybe, that's easing the way but eventually he manages to snag it on a plate edge. A little more work and he's got it threaded under. Like flossing teeth.

He's going to have to fight, soon. He's not as reluctant as he'd thought he'd be.

"He's awake," a gruff voice rains down from above, and he freezes, just for a second. The office door opens and there's no point pretending completely anymore, so he allows himself a glance as Ward strides towards him, needle in hand, that stupid smile still on his face.

"Hey now," Ward says, watching him struggle. "There's no need for that, shh."

He's right, and that's the bitch of it. The metal's dug into his right wrist too deeply now, and it's caught between the plates of his left, and he's no closer to being out than he'd been a moment ago.

He doesn't even bother hiding the knowledge when Ward yanks his hair back and sticks the needle in. He knows he's trapped; he needs Ward to believe that more than anything, if only to prevent him from checking the bindings and realizing what he's trying to do.

He also knows that he's going to wake up again. They need him alive to make the sale.

It's just a delay.
Tony frowns in surprise when they run into him in the hallway, but he hands over the hearing aids—plain, semi-clear plastic this time—and makes small talk with Coulson while waiting for him to get them seated.

"All right, we're live," Clint nods.

"Cool," Tony grins. "Heads up though- they're not fully charged and will go out on you inside of an hour. Just charge them like you do your others when you get home, okay?" He nods. "I'm just heading down to render my grudging assistance. Now that Sam's split, Steve and Maria have been trapped in with the prodigal agents for like an hour now. You interested?"

"Where'd he go?"

"Patrol. Figured with whatever's going on, we need to be looking. Well, that and he said that if he left, he wouldn't have to talk Steve out of doing grievous bodily harm to a bunch of squishy idiots, so there's that."

---

Bobbi Morse, it seems, hadn't actually gone as far off the radar after New York as he'd believed. Which would be great if she weren't here now, squaring off against Maria Hill.

"But the fact remains he was in no condition to fight. You've already admitted as much."

"Either was Barton," Hill bites back. "But he was the best person for the job, and, might I add, with the exception of this, the two of them did enable the others to get the civilians to safety."

"That's a pretty big exception," says a scruffy looking man; given where he's standing, he's obviously one of May's people. He sounds British or Irish, though it's hard to tell—already the hearing aids are starting to distort around the edges— but Clint decides on sight that he doesn't like him. His impression is only cemented when the man adds, "Then again, you all do have a reputation for misplacing your monsters, seein' as how I don't see your mate Banner hanging about."

The short woman standing next to him—long brown hair, with a definite British accent, looks apologetic. "I'm sorry for all of this. But arguing about this isn't getting us anywhere. We were prepared— or, well, not so prepared, as it turns out— to handle Finnegan, not...." She glances from Coulson to Hill to Coulson again, and tries smiling. "It's all rather shocking." The short blond guy—wearing a cardigan that reminds him of James when he's heading off to work—leans against her shoulder without looking at his tablet, but beyond that, her attempts to that the ice are in vain.

"He's not a fucking monster," Steve growls, glaring at the man, and around the room, more than one person edges away from him. Agent Morse, however, doesn't seem intimidated in the least.

"He seemed ready enough to take up arms."

Steve rounds on her, arms crossed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She doesn't even flinch, just meets his glare, head on. "Only that maybe, at this point, it's second nature."
Glancing up at the ceiling, Steve sighs. "I see your point, now see mine. Just because he volunteered to- Look. Bucky knew how to fight before Hydra- hell, before Uncle Sam got his hands on him, okay?" He turns back to Maria. "You spoke with Bucky earlier tonight. What did he say?"

"He was concerned that we were prepared to send Barton in solo, given his present circumstances, and he insisted on going along."

"That's all well and good," the large African American man standing in the group behind May steps forward. "And I'm not trying to be the bad guy, here, but the question remains. Can you be certain Hydra didn't bury some sort of, I don't know, Manchurian Candidate kind of programming in his head?"

"I'm still trying to figure out why they let him just walk away from the Academy." The maybe-British- Irish, maybe- says with a nod in Bobbi's direction. "It all seems a bit slap-dash to me."

"Hunter," Coulson warns, but he's tired. There's no viable heat behind it.

His aids are starting to scramble the edges of everyone's words, and there's a very good chance that they'll fizzle out completely, soon, so he looks at Coulson. "Did I miss the part of this fight where we point out that none of this would be happening if you guys hadn't missed the part where your civilian had already signed on with Hydra?"

"Yes," Steve says, cutting him a halfhearted grin before Coulson gets a chance to do more than tighten his jaw in frustration. "You missed it."

"And as far as his leaving the Academy goes," Tony says to Agent Hunter, AKA Jackass, "I freaked out when I found out that Hydra had him kill my parents. I'm not going to lie, it did cause some tension. We considered the options and put safeguards in place as part of the deal for his release. But it's not like he's been wandering the streets shooting up preschools all year."

Agent Jackass raises his eyebrows in surprise, or at least mock-surprise. "You're seriously defending the person who killed your parents."

"Wow, Hunter. You're really desperate to derail this, aren't you," Tony laughs in disbelief. "I'm defending the man who had less control over his own actions than Dummy- who I programmed when I was blackout-drunk, for those of you who aren't in the know- has." He rolls his eyes; they land on Hunter. "As far as the rest of it goes, seeing as how you're not my therapist, you can either leave it at that or you can bite me."

"Back to the point," Coulson says- he looks ill when he glances at Clint, and he won't look in Steve's direction at all. "We still don't know if he's alive, much less what condition he is in, and, crap." Coulson's eyes go wide as he exchanges glances with Melinda. "Their end game. If Finnegan wasn't Hydra's target, then what were they doing down there?"

Clint's hand goes to his ear, but everything seems to be working fine.

"When it went off the rails, we assumed that it was a play to take out some Avengers," Hill says, her words scattering at the edges. "But there's no way they could've known that Barnes was going to be down there."

"Which doesn't preclude the ----- that someone down there had their act together enough to improvise," Steve looks at Tony.

Coulson nods. "You said Barnes ------- tracking device?"
Clint taps at the battery casing. Oddly enough, it doesn't seem to make either of them work any better.

"Been looking into it. It's not ----mitting," Tony shakes his head down at his tablet, which he turns around to show the room and mimes talking.

Either that or Clint's hearing aids really are cutting out.

"We lost signals on everyone down in the subw--" Hill picks up the thread. "Too much inter--ence. So I'm thinking there's good chance he------ down there."

"Or it took ----- damage, or --------- removed, or-" Tony counts on his fingers, until he gets up to three, but Clint misses the last words completely. It doesn't help him pretend like he doesn't know what they are. Even if he didn't, Steve's rounding on Tony, jabbing a finger into his chest where the arc reactor used to be.

Which is why he misses it when Maria Hill looks at her phone, and starts calling for order.

"Wilson thinks he's got something."
He's awake. He doesn't want to open his eyes.

Clint's dead. Probably the others, too. No witnesses.

He doesn't know. Maybe Steve and Natasha got out. Maybe they just never knew he'd even been there.

But Clint. He'd been right there next to him, unable to put up a fight, and-

"Okay," Ward's saying. "Their transport's been arranged. One hour. How's our guest?"

"Still out of it," the man up in the catwalk says.

"I tripled his dose, so he damned well better be. But keep an eye out, we don't want him complicating the sale."

The grunt from up above is beleaguered enough that it's almost funny. He's having a hard time finding the humor in things at the moment, though.

In one hour, he's going to be sold. Unless he can get out of here. His right wrist is bloody, his left hand's locked up completely from where the restraint's jammed in his wrist, and the man on the catwalk is behind him right now. He'll see any motion he makes.

He has to wait.

He has to not think about the fact that these are one hour away from handing him off to be reprogrammed.

He has to ignore the crick in his neck and not think about how inevitable this all was.

He has to not think about Lucky, trapped in Clint's apartment. Needing food, needing to go out. Maybe doing the dog version of worrying, or maybe not even that, yet.

He has to not think about Clint, full stop.

More than that, though, he has to not hope. No witnesses, Ward had said. There's no rescue coming. Steve and Natasha might be gone- people would've noticed that at least. But his tracker's gone, and anyway, Ward's probably right- Hill's going to wash her hands of this. She's going to have to, in case word gets out down the line. Better to have had the Soldier in enemy hands all this time than to have failed to keep it out of them.

It doesn't matter.

He has to not think, he has to not hope, he just has to wait.

---

"What's that?" He calls back to Hill, smirking as he glances back to see her shouting at him. "I can't hear you."

Truth be told, she- and Coulson and Steve and Van Drier are probably right. He's concussed and not going to be a whole lot of practical help. Which is why he does the responsible thing and goes
down to the basement, pounds on the glass to interrupt Natasha's interrogation session, and calls in a favor.

"I need a ride," He tells her, when she steps out to join him. "Can't drive. Can't hear anything- hearing aid's dead-but they think they found James and you owe me."

She glances back over her shoulder, turns her head away to say something to Agent May, who nods before looking back at their charges. They seem to be writing their life stories. Not that he can blame them.

Then Natasha's nodding at him and gesturing down the hallway, pulling out her phone. She's still typing when they arrive in the garage to find a caravan of support vehicles taking off. Tony, he suspects, is probably finding his own way and will beat them there, but Steve's got to be in one of the vehicles up ahead, along with everyone who's got any actual intel.

Natasha seems to have decided, right off the bat, that his favor warrants an armored truck, and he thinks he should be insulted but mostly, he just appreciates the foresight. She hands him her phone the moment they're seated. You've got it all backwards. You still owe me for Belarus and Vegas.

"Well, then you owe James," he says, and bringing up the track and trace, realizing that it's been months since he's had cause to use the program. Scrolling down the list, he selects James' tracker and Steve's, just in case. "None of this would be happening if you hadn't shoved him into my black hole of a fucking life."

The garage doors open; he'd left his apartment less than ten hours ago; the sun's up now and rush hour's already in full swing. The first blocks are a grueling crawl until Natasha manages to catch up with the rest of the motorcade; the squints in operations hadn't lost any time in clearing their route, at least.

After that, it's a twenty minute ride down back down to Red Hook. It's the quickest he's ever made the trip, but he can see the smoke billowing up from ten blocks away and they're going to be the last to arrive.

The warehouse is a roaring conflagration by the time Natasha pulls in next to the rest of the vehicles, at the far end parking lot. They're closer to the main street and the next parking lot over than they are to the fire; a handful of agents are already heading to the sidewalks to help with crowd control.

He sees Stark and Sam circling overhead, and Natasha going on comms, so he's out of the loop, here. Steve's already striding straight towards the burning warehouse, because of course he is, with Coulson and Mack following hurriedly behind him.

Hunter's hanging back with the two nerds and Bobbi, who at least seems to be busy with something involving her tablet and the street.

He starts walking, too, though he keeps having to check over his shoulder to make sure they're not about to be run over by a firetruck. Three of them are pulling in at the other end of the lot and swinging towards the main entrance; they've got the hoses up and running before they've even cleared twenty yards. Within a minute, most of the front of the building is lost in a cloud of steam.

Steve's shaking his head at the sky, one hand to his ear and the other gesticulating at the building; Tony's suit crests over the top of the building and behind; his armor glinting dully through the steam and smoke. Sam, having no sort of respirator, so far as Clint knows, is staying towards the street.
Natasha swats at his arm, pointing at Steve, who's broken into a run. Any other day, they'd be catching up to him, but instead Natasha's stopping at the front end of one of the firetrucks. Up ahead, there's two firemen blocking Steve's path, pointing back towards some- apparently vocally determined- point of safety.

Natasha steps forward, worried, because even from here, it's clear that Steve's about to make a break for it the moment their backs are turned. And as much as Clint understands the impulse, and thinks that if anyone could survive that, it would be Captain America, he's going to be going in blind.

Before anyone can make a move, though, a thick column of dark gray smoke bursts from the side of the building, spewing out onto the lot.

The firemen are rushing back in to help, and Steve doesn't miss a beat, he just starts running. He doesn't make it far, though, before stopping short.

A man is storming out of the smoke, metal arm hanging limply at his left side, blood dripping down from a handgun gripped in his right. He's holding it low but his finger's over the trigger and he's scanning the parking lot.

And this is where it's all going to go wrong. The fire, the smoke, the people and the flashing lights, there's no telling how he'll react. They don't even know who he is, right now.

But he's alive.

Steve's rushing to intercept him, hands open and up at his sides. He looks like he's shouting. It's weird, his brain tries to tell him, as Natasha shoves him against the truck and out of the path of two firemen, that Steve would be shouting. It's quiet out here. Just a faint hissing noise, nothing more.

Steve's got one careful hand on James' shoulder and seems to be speaking to him as he guides him away from the fire, but beyond putting one foot in front of the other, James isn't responding.

Maybe it's for the best that Steve looks so nervous, that he's not doing anything, really, beyond steering and keeping up what looks like a low monologue. Because nobody's taken the gun away yet.

Natasha goes tense the moment Steve's eyes find hers; in the next, she's moving. Clint can't tell what her plan is, only that she's moving around, slowly flanking James-who goes completely still. Like he's- and Clint's an asshole for thinking it- a toy that's run out of juice.

Or like something dangerous that's about to explode.

Steve and Natasha freeze too, holding their positions warily. The three of them are only about ten feet away, but after a second, Steve edges back slowly, just enough to look again at Natasha.

He recognizes the expression, though it's one that shouldn't even be in Captain America's vocabulary.

_Fuck, I don't know what to do._

James doesn't raise his head, but his red-shot eyes slant left, then right, before moving up to look right at him. Right through him.
It *has* to be James. Right?

James, though, he's never rushed him like that.

An instant later, his vision's whiting out. He's pressed against the firetruck, head pounding where he'd hit it on impact, and James is *hugging* him.

---

Clint's *alive*.

For a moment, that's all he's aware of. But gradually, the rest of it starts to sink in.

Steve's standing at his six; Natasha's next to him, keeping close. The firemen have three hoses blasting the warehouse and-

Clint's alive, and he's wincing but he's not shoving him away just yet. Instead, he's threading his hands underneath his arms and wrapping them around his back and holding on, *tight*. The pulse at his throat is strong but fast, where it's throbbing against the side of his face.

He should look up, step away. They should get clear.

But Clint hasn't let go, yet. And when he does, he'll probably expect him to talk. Knowing that it's coming- dreading it- isn't going to change that.

So against Clint's pulse, he says, "I killed at least seven people and I'm not sorry for it," because he's going to have to tell the others, and it's going to get muddled, and he just needs to say it once, first, as plain as he means it.

And Clint, he can't hear him, so he can't judge.
Chapter 21

For nearly two hours, now, he's been sitting on this examination bench while doctors and Stark and nurses and techs prod at him.

Steve's finally stopped staring at him so worriedly; now he's lounging in the chair by the door instead of sitting, ramrod straight, talking him through his side of the events. How Natasha'd kept the hostages calm, how they'd incapacitated the guards when the sonic arrow had gone off. Finding Clint, not finding him. Sam going out looking with data that had already been an hour old, and how they wouldn't have found him at all if Stark hadn't wired redundancy after redundancy into the tracker.

The rescue mission they'd only half-planned, and which they hadn't needed, seems to be a point that Steve seems to be trying to stop himself from harping on about, and James appreciates it. He's going to have to go give a report soon; all he really wants to do, though, is go home and sleep for about a year.

His neck is sore from the needle jabs, and his side's more sore from the stitches than from the initial laceration itself.

Underneath the bandages, his right hand is shredded from his unsuccessful escape attempts; his left is locked up thanks to his successful one, because while his armor might be nearly indestructible, the inner workings aren't. Even if working the restraint down to the mostly-figurative bone had given him enough slack to get his other hand through, wedging the thin metal between the plates had voided the warranty. Stark thinks that if he's lucky, it'll be a quick fix. If he's not, he's probably looking at a full teardown of his hand.

Stark had been more concerned about the three missing plates in his shoulder. The bullet had wedged itself into one of the joints, and had damaged a bearing underneath. Worse, though, it had provided an easy point of ingress that Ward had exploited to get to the tracker.

"The replacement parts should be done in about three hours," Stark had told him. "Keep it dry until then. No showers, no swimming."

It's distracting, having his arm out of commission like this. Not just the lack of movement- he's lacking rotation in his shoulder and his hand's locked up- but the constant awareness of it all. It's not pain, just the signal of pain, removed from the source. The damage report registers deep in his shoulder as a steady, sparking pulse. Like he's being constantly prompted to report in for repairs.

And, like actual pain, reporting it isn't enough to diminish it. He still has to wait. Idly flipping the loose plate on his wrist takes less energy than pacing the room, but Steve keeps catching him doing it, so he focuses instead the door.

Someone, eventually, is going to come through it with news about Clint. There's been blood in his hair, and he'd been staggering more than walking, on their way up from the parking garage. He's suffering from a concussion at the very least.

But he's alive.

It's only been twelve hours since they were eating spaghetti in Clint's apartment; it might as well have been twelve weeks.

He's late for work, he realizes.
Steve looks nervous when he starts laughing, and no, he can't explain why it's so funny.

His work shirt and cardigan- both emblazoned with an eagle logo that's not nearly as cool as the SHIELD patches on Clint's old jacket- are hanging up on the back of the closet from when he'd last worked two days ago. In a box on a counter next to a desk in a garden-level Brooklyn office, everything that he's supposed to do today is waiting for him. At the front of the office, a short angry woman is probably considering firing him, and he's probably going to have to let her.

He hadn't called. "Sorry I'm late, I had to kill half a dozen people and set a building on fire just to get out" is probably not what she'd meant when she'd told him about excusable absences.

He's makes himself stop laughing, because Steve's looking worried, now.

"I'm fine," he says. "Sorry. Just. Punch drunk, you know?"

"It's been a long night," Steve eventually agrees, and fuck, the fact that he's smiling right now, that he maybe gets it on any level at all, is more than he could've hoped to expect. "Unfortunately," Steve continues, "it's going to be another few hours before you and Clint can go home."

And he'd been wrong. That is more than he'd hoped to expect.

He swallows. Doesn't allow himself to hope. "They're gonna let me leave?"

There's no pause- he's waiting for one- when Steve nods.

"You'll have to debrief, first, but considering everything that's happened, this is all just bumps and bruises. You'll be set by noon. Clint too, as long as they don't find anything weird with his head."

He looks up at this. "What d'you mean?"

"Well, yeah. They're worried about a traumatic head injury so close after the last one."

"When can I see him?"

"In a bit," says the woman- a tech, this time, not a nurse- who's just stepped into the room. Blonde hair, smiling at Steve in a way that's got him wondering if Steve's got her number, 'cause it certainly looks like she's got his.

Not that Steve notices, though. The idiot's smiling down at his phone.

"Natasha says that Clint's being ornery and stupid." Looking up, he shuts the phone off but doesn't put it away, just shoves himself away up from the chair. "Which I take to mean that he's fine. But. Ah. I'm going to go check on them."

He's pretty sure Natasha's got Clint well in hand, but it's not like he wants Steve sitting there while the tech works on him- it'll just put that worried expression back on his face. And speaking of Steve's expressions, the one he's wearing now as he nods to them both and leaves, he's not sure that it's really Clint he's concerned with checking on in the first place.

The tech sees it too, and her smile falters just a bit, though it's back when she boots up her laptop and nods at him.

"Ready for me to take a look at that wrist?"

He is, though he closes his eyes. He knows where he is and what this is, and it's fine, but she's about to uncover a tray full of tools and medical implements. He's not a big fan.
"All right, Clint. We'll let you get some rest," Steve eventually says, squeezing his shoulder before stepping back to follow Natasha out the door.

The two of them have a thing going on. She's supposed to be the world's best super-spy, but here Clint is, dosed to the gills, having not slept in like five years, and even he can see it. She's so fired. Hill's gonna- okay, maybe not Hill, she's not her CO, so maybe-

Coulson appears at the door, and for a minute, it all makes sense. Of course Coulson's going to fire her, he's probably got 817 pages of SHIELD policy on his desk, waiting to-

OH.

"Hey," he says, not particularly wanting to be caught out in his train of thought. Glancing at the clock on the wall, he's startled to find that it's been nearly an hour since Steve and Natasha'd left. He doesn't even know if he's slept or not.

"How's it going?"

Coulson speaks into his phone; for a minute Clint thinks he's got the voice recognition program up and running, but when the screen turns towards him it's just a text message that happens to have voice recognition. The print is smaller, harder to see. Split my team between the tunnels and the warehouse for the cleanup operation.

It's all hovering there in the text entry box, waiting to be sent, but Coulson's backspacing through the whole thing before talking again. Mess was our fault. Now trying to keep out of everyone's hair.

He glances up at the top of the screen, startled to find that his name's already in Coulson's contact list. He wonders which number he's got on there- if he'd managed to get his new number, if he'd had it all along. Either option is irritating.

"So why are you here, then?" It's out before he can stop himself, because given the option to jam his foot in his mouth until his head's firmly up his ass, it's the option he'll always take.

Coulson shrugs. He's got his suit jacket off and his sleeves rolled up and it's really fucking annoying, how good he looks right now.

Going to have to go join them, soon. Wanted to clear the air first.

"What is there to clear up?"

Grimacing embarrassedly, Coulson unfolds a piece of paper and hands it over. Stark Industries letterhead. The ink's barely dried.

Clint. Sorry I couldn't tell you I was alive. The way it happened to me, I thought I'd been injured badly, then sent to Tahiti to recover. What happened instead was that I did die, and Fury brought me back. Implanted memories of Tahiti into my brain to spare me the pain of remembering the agonizing- and lengthy- revitalization process.

I know I could've told you, even when I still thought I'd merely wintered in Tahiti. Thing is, though, I'd already done my part. I'd done some good, bringing the Avengers together, and things were picking up elsewhere. I was completely off the grid, able to take on missions that I wouldn't have been able to, had people known I was alive. I know it's bullshit. I was furious enough when I found out what Fury had done that I'd started thinking how I was going to come and find you and
Natasha, but then SHIELD fell, and things got weird. I couldn't put my team at risk.

He doesn't look up, just stares at the paper. "You talk to Natasha yet?"

Coulson shows him his cell phone a moment later.

A while ago in the waiting room, while the doctors were in here. She's handling it well, but she's angry. Kept saying that she'd forgive me if you did.

"That why you wrote this?"

Partially. Coulson takes the phone back, speaking into it while watching him.

It's a good a time as any to practice his lipreading, especially now that the Dr. Van Drier wants to wait a few weeks before letting him anywhere near the hearing aids again.

It hadn't really occurred to me that I had worried anybody.

"Well that's just stupid," he replies, to his own thoughts and Coulson's words. "Of course we would've wanted to know. Thought I'd gotten you killed along with everyone else. I mean, I know it was Loki, but I remember doing everything all the same."

Coulson nods, staring at his phone like he's hoping words will show up there on their own.

I'm sorry, Clint, his mouth eventually says. The phone doesn't do half as good a job confirming it as his face does.

And yeah. He's still hazy, and maybe it's the painkillers kicking in, but maybe they can go somewhere from here. Loki might've made Clint do the things he'd done, but that doesn't mean Coulson hadn't had valid reasons for doing what he'd done.

And it's not like either of them are James, here. He's been digging his way up through like seventy years' worth of not being in control of his own actions, and all things told, he's doing a better job of it than either of them.

He thinks he should probably tell him how huge that is, one of these days.

Might come out better, though, if he knows James got through last night intact. The urge to get up and go visit him is suddenly strong enough that this conversation here isn't doing much more than delaying it.

"It's cool," he says, focusing again on Coulson because they are, now, even if he'll still have to go over the fine print later. "For what it's worth, I'm really glad you're not dead."

They shake hands, even hug it out for a second, but Coulson's not gripping onto him like he's the only thing that matters. Clint isn't either, for the record. But it's hard not to make the comparison: just a few hours ago, he'd been blinking black spots out of his eyes while James hadn't let go for anything.

He'd muttered something against his neck, and his hair had smelled like smoke, and his shoulder had felt gouged underneath Clint's arm when he'd returned the hug.

He'd really like to know what's going on with him now, sooner rather than later.

Anything else you want to talk about before I go? is already on the phone when Coulson steps
away.

If this were a movie, he could explain that he's been an asshole because he's jealous that Coulson's got a new team, a new family now, and that they seem to matter as much to him as he and Natasha once had. And that he knows that it shouldn't bother him, because it would be so much worse if Coulson didn't care about his new team- except maybe for that blond maybe-Irish Hunter guy, because he's a prick. And Coulson would wince apologetically at first, but he'd laugh at that last part, and they'd be good.

He could tell him that he used to be in love with him, or at least harboring a crush, but the past tense seems cruel, and bringing it up now would feel too much like he's trying to score points on him.

He might kick himself for it later, but not having his foot in his mouth for once, at least he'd be able to.

He shrugs. "Nah. We're good."

And when Dr. Van Drier interrupts a moment later with the latest round of imaging results, and it's time for Coulson to go and there's no impulse jabbing at him to follow after him, Clint thinks, yeah, I think this is gonna be okay.
Chapter 22

His energy is flagging, and he doesn't want to have to go over this more than once. Still, it's surprising when Hill and Steve actually go along with it, calling up Stark to get a variant of Clint's voice recognition program up and running in the conference room. It doesn't take long; the recording itself seems to be part of the SOP; it's just connecting it to the screen that takes a few minutes to set up.

Clint looks exhausted, skin paper thin and scraped raw at his temple, but when he sits down at the other side of the table, he grins, and his first words are, "soon as we're done here, 'Tasha will drive us back to Bed Stuy. Lucky needs to go out, so let's make it quick, huh?"

He's never been so for a plan in his life, and it must show, because Steve's laughing.

Which is probably why it feels so jarring when he hears the words coming out of his own mouth.

"Down on the subway tracks, I was attempting to cover Barton when I was distracted by a decoy. Shot at it, and I don't know if it was that I gave away my exact position, or just gave them the time to take aim, but the next thing I knew, I'd taken a dart to the neck. I woke up on the floor of the warehouse. I didn't know it, yet, but it was at the southwestern edge." He's not sure that it's important, but the more detail he supplies now, the fewer questions Hill will have when he's finished.

"There were four other people on me that I could see. Two were guarding me, the others-- a man named Ward and a woman they were the leaders."

At that, Hill's eyes widen, and as his words scroll out on the screen behind her, she starts typing furiously on her keyboard.

"Do you know him? Or what he wanted?"

He glances at Steve, because sometimes, it helps prompt him, gives him some sort of context, shakes a memory loose Only this time, there's nothing. He doesn't know Ward, but it's clear that they do. He shakes his head.

"Like from before? No ma'am, I didn't really remember him. But as far as what they wanted, it was Steve. They kept dosing me with... ketamine, I think. I overheard Ward saying something about having enough to keep Steve under for a few days. Only their plan changed and they got me instead, so Ward was on the phone, negotiating a sale."

He looks up, remembering suddenly. "Ward knew about two- I don't know if they're just the tanks or full labs- but one of them is in North Korea."

He hopes like hell they're not going to drill him about how he feels about staring down the possibility that he was going to have to go back to deep freeze. Then again, they're probably saving it up for Dr. Gupta.

"All right, so what happened next?"

"I kept waking up and they kept knocking me out. I'm not sure how often. Three or four times, maybe? I started working out of the restraints but I don't think they checked them the last time they hit me. Eventually I got free. One of the guards realized I'd woken up and the other had a syringe, was coming at me, and-"

This is where it gets bad. He hadn't realized how much until now, when he's trying to explain it to a
room full of people who aren't yet disappointed in him.

"I lost it, then. Broke free, went for the guard with the syringe first. Twisted his arm until he dropped it, then I crushed it."

"And after that?"

"I attacked." Attacked was probably too small a word for it. He hasn't been wiped. He knows what he'd done.

He'd snapped the guard's neck, relieving him of his gun, which he'd used to shoot the second guard, exposed on the catwalk. Then he'd gone searching for Ward and the woman. They'd fired at him from a covered position up on the catwalk he couldn't get to without leaving himself open. Drawing them out hadn't worked, but shooting back at them at least kept them pinned down.

He still doesn't know what had caused the initial spark- too much dust near someone's ricochet, probably- but he'd looked up from stripping one of the guards for his clothes to see that something underneath the end of the catwalk had caught just enough to burn. There'd been a large metal canister near the flame, covered in warning stickers.

He hadn't known if it would explode, he'd been more concerned about the odds of the fire going out than he'd been with the possibility of the contents poisoning them all, so he'd taken a shot at it. Nothing had happened, though, until he'd put another bullet through it. A few moments later, the pool of liquid had spread to meet the fire, and he'd rocked on his feet when the heatwave slammed back into him.

The smoke had gone up, though, more than it had gone out. Down on the ground floor, he'd been mostly clear. Ward and the woman hadn't been so lucky; they'd broken cover and ran for the second floor door, arguing with each other: "You promised" and "not now, we need to finish this" and "they'll still pay for his corpse" and "they'll pay more for him alive, help me with this."

The door had been locked, whether by accident or design, and it had slowed them down enough that he'd been able to creep up underneath them without being noticed. After a few moments, Ward had leaned over the catwalk's railing, searching for him through the smoke, but he'd been looking too far afield and had left himself open. Hoisting himself up on the catwalk's crossbeam, he'd grabbed Ward's leg, pulling him off balance and then onto the floor.

Ward had gotten up quickly, dazed, but still trying to fight him when the woman had called out.

"I got it, let's-" the woman had opened fire down on him as soon as she'd noticed what had happened. He'd swung Ward around, using him as a shield, and shot her dead with Ward's gun before leaving the newly dead weight on the floor.

By then, the fire had spread to the shelves lining the wall, burning yellow and orange and white.

He'd tried the doors on the first floor and found them bolted, so, making his way up the stairs to see about getting out that way. The smoke had started stinging his eyes- the fire had spread to the shelves lining the wall- but he'd managed to shoot the man who'd come out the door before shoving past him. Another guard had been approaching as he'd stepped into the carpeted hallway; he'd died with his gun only half drawn.

The guard he'd found by the stairs hadn't even fought him; he'd had his hands raised up, so he'd just knocked him out with one punch.
But he'd left him in the building to die of smoke inhalation all the same.

He tells them all of this.

He doesn't tell them that the only thoughts that hadn't been instinct had been *Clint is dead. They killed Clint. Fuck these guys.*

Once he's gotten through it all, he's exhausted. Steve's jaw is clenched hard enough that he looks at Clint instead, but he's not sure that the scenery's improved. Clint's sitting right across from him, reading everything he's admitted right on the screen. It hurts to look at him, to see that twisted anger on his face.

It's going to be worse when it's aimed directly at him.
Chapter 23

At least Lucky's happy to see him, which makes a nice change from the scenery on the way over. Steve had given them a ride back to Bed Stuy, trying once or twice to make small talk with one guy who couldn't hear and one guy looking hell bent on *not* hearing. As far as he'd been able to tell, James had just stared out the window the whole trip. He hadn't even looked at him, when they'd arrived and gotten out, just nodded in his general direction before trudging up the stairs to his apartment.

He takes Lucky around the block, then feeds him, noting as he does so that Lucky's obviously gotten to the pasta left on the table last night.

Less than twenty four hours ago, they'd been talking about—what, he can't even remember—

The notebook's still on the counter, open to his sixth attempt at explaining himself.

...*What I should've said was that it's cool, that I've been there, and that I'm here if you want to talk.* But they hadn't even gotten around to talking about it, and it's funny, now, how fucking awkward that had been, because that? It's got nothing on this.

Fucking Ward.

He drags his sorry ass over to the couch, intent on crashing the hell out; Lucky takes the other end and is probably about two minutes away from drooling on his foot, but he can't be arsed to move. He's exhausted.

But he's not passing out, either. There are three messages on his phone, all from Katie-Kate, plotting last night's trajectory of events with startling accuracy. *Did you talk to him yet?*

Then, later, *What were you doing in the subway, and this morning, OK seriously WTF Red Hook warehouse fire? TEXT ME ASSHOLE.*

He doesn't know how she found out about everything, but he fires back a response in case she's got her crew all geared up for war.

*Started to then got called in. Come by tomorrow I'll tell you about it, going to sleep now. Sorry if you worried.*

A minute later, his phone vibrates.

*I wasn't worried you were worried :P*

He's not exactly sure what it means.

He scrolls through the news for a while- Captain America and Iron Man feature prominently in the headlines, but the stories are short and vague. Nothing too bad, nothing too interesting. Pepper and Hill have smoothed over worse, plenty of times.

Which is why this fucking *thing* at the back of his head is so irritating.

Last night had sucked. Ward had been set to *sell James*, and it sucks, because that's the only thing that fucking saved him, in the end, because it sure as hell hadn't been thanks to anyone else's efforts. Ward had needed James alive, which had bought him enough time to escape.
Clint had sat through the debrief- even without ears, it had felt like the whole thing had just been one spotlight short of an interrogation- as James had recited chapter and verse. He'd watched it all roll out on the screen, in between glances at James to see what the hell he'd felt about any of it.

His face had been a blank, and everyone else's had only registered predictable amounts of worry, concern, fear and disgust. He'd caught Steve trying to grin at James encouragingly, once, but James had just blinked back down at the table.

And sure, nobody had been laughing, but it's not like this is the first op to ever go sideways, and at the end of the day, there'd been a few bumps and bruises weighed out against a few dozen released hostages, a warehouse fire that hadn't spread, and a threat that had been neutralized. Once James had finished, Hill had nodded, thanked him, said that she'd follow up later. SOP. No big deal.

James, though- and it's fucking stupid that it's just occurring to him now, he'd been shot at and tied up and drugged and he'd known he was going to be sold, and the fact that he'd had the ability to get himself out of there didn't erase that fact.

And so far as he knows, everyone's just glancing over it like it wasn't a big deal. Himself included. James included.

Only, James had stalked out of that warehouse, numb to the world, and miserable. Aww, fuck.

---

He knows his return to Bed Stuy isn't really much more than a stay of execution. Hill had promised that she'd follow up with him later, and there's no doubt in his mind that she's already speaking with Dr. Gupta-and maybe Sam- right now, trying to decide what to do with him.

He's only home for ten minutes before he gets the text from Sam that confirms it. *Get some sleep. We'll be by in the morning.*

Tomorrow, they're going to ask him why he hadn't merely incapacitated the threats, the way Steve had done his. Nobody'd bothered asking, earlier, why he'd killed Ward and the others. They'd already expected it of him.

They won't sell him off, he knows that. But they're not going to let him stay here, either.

He should start packing. He doesn't know what they'll let him take. Not much, probably- and it's not like he even has all that much, or that he needs all of it- but it's going to fall onto Clint to clean up after him when he's gone, and it would be lame to just leave it all.

It occurs to him that if he's packing anyway, he could be gone before they come to move him.

No. They'll send Steve out to chase after him, and it'll be bad, this time, because they know that he should know better than to run, now. He'll have done it deliberately, and it'll go into his file as an enemy action and they'll put him somewhere worse than a cell at the Academy when they find him.

They'd have a harder time of it now, though, than they would if he let them put the tracker back in. His wrist's all sorted, but Stark's people haven't finished manufacturing the replacement plates for his shoulder. As it is, all that's covering it is a thin piece of rubbery plastic taped to the metal.

Steve had incapacitated his threats. He'd killed his. There'd been no confusion, then, no fear. For
that little while, he'd been more clearheaded with a gun in his hand than he'd been in months, and he knows it. And the fact that he'd neglected to mention that, or the people he'd killed in the subway, just goes to show how little he'd cared about any of it.

They have to have noticed his omission by now. They're going to want to keep him in for observation, increase his meds, and maybe they should. Killing people is not a what a healthy person does. It's his programming that's coming to the surface. And while he might be well enough to know that it's an issue, he's obviously not well enough to stop himself from fighting it.

He paces his apartment, looking at things. There's his work clothes- he's not going to need those anymore- and his wallet. He'll have to ditch that, but the cash will be useful. It's stupid to bring along a ceramic mug with the splatter paint all over it just because he got it at the MOMA gift shop on a trip with Steve; it'll just be something to worry about until it breaks.

He's got clothes that fit, though, meant for blending into the city; he hadn't always been able to have more than a change of clothes on him when he'd been on the run last time, and he knows how to use a laundromat now, so they're worth bringing.

At least Hydra'd just frozen him. Hadn't made him spin his wheels like this.

The phone is an issue. The odds are better than good that Stark can track it even with the GPS turned off, but he's going to need it to talk to Clint.

Oh.

Fuck.

Right. Clint. Clint's not going anywhere. He's leaving this place, and Clint's a part of this place.

If he stays, goes back up to the Academy like they tell him to, Steve and Sam will probably let him talk to him sometimes. Eventually. If he runs?

Clint probably wouldn't even answer the phone if he tried calling.

Or maybe that's not even conditional. Clint had barely looked at him during the debrief, and hadn't said anything on the ride back, and. Yeah.

Clint's a good person, the way Steve is. Clint might forgive the killing- he'd been in the tunnel too, he'd been there and known how bad it was. But the fact that he'd kept doing it in the warehouse, when he hadn't had to- that's not going to sit right with him.

At least he hadn't told everyone that he'd gone numb when he'd figured Clint was dead. At least he hadn't made Clint culpable.

Fuck. He had, though.

He'd hugged him out there, in the parking lot, where anyone could see, because he'd been relived. They'd both gotten out, still standing, and things hadn't been okay but there'd been hope. But Steve had been there. He'd seen, and he knows that Bucky Barnes had been bent and maybe he'd known about Clint, too.

He'd just been relieved, that's all. It hadn't meant that Clint had sanctioned what he'd done.

Clint hadn't even known what he'd done, yet. And he'd disapproved, clearly, once he'd found out.
Small fucking mercy, that.

---

He'd managed to doze off for a bit. Lucky's noticed that he's moved and is tap-dancing by the door, clearly intent on taking advantage and obviously not giving a damn about the crick in his neck.

"Seriously?" Lucky sits down, tail thumping against the floor, grinning at him. "All right, fine, I'm coming."

His phone tumbles to the floor and the screen blinks on, telling him that it's 3:48 in the morning. It's fucking gloating at him, so he shoves it in his pocket and rummages for boots and keys.

Lucky doesn't need to go, apparently, he just needs to smell everything. He keeps looking up at Clint like he's wondering why Clint's not down on his hands and knees checking all this great (sometimes literal) shit out right along with him.

Rolling his eyes- he's not looking to wake the neighbors by arguing the point, and his head hadn't been hit that hard- he stretches his neck and looks up. There's too much haze to see more than one or two stars, or satellites, or whatever the hell is up there.

There's a light on upstairs, though. James' apartment.

He looks away. Lets himself be pulled when Lucky yanks on the leash. He's down at the end of the block when he starts wondering why he's even bothering with this much avoidance.

He's crossing the street-just for a change of olfactory scenery, he's not looking for a better angle- on the way back.

Knowing that it's inevitable, he feels like a total creeper before he even glances up again. He makes it quick, like that absolves him of anything, and wishes immediately that he'd resisted the urge.

James is doing the dishes by the sink.

No. He's got his head resting against the cabinet over the sink and his slumped shoulders and arms aren't moving.

He's just standing there.

Aww, shit, no.

Dammit, Clint. You can do better than this.

He twitches Lucky's leash, "C'mon, Lucky."

They head back inside the apartment and he unhooks the dog before staring at his door.

He could go up there.

No. He should go outside, check again. If James has moved, he doesn't need to do anything.

No, that's definitely creeper behavior.

He'll go up there, knock quietly. If James wants to open the door, he'll open the door. If not, no harm, no foul.
Clint doesn't get the chance to knock. He's just coming up off the stairs when the door opens and James steps out, looking miserable, and then looking confusedly at him.

For a moment, James just scowls at him, then signs, [What's up?]

He shrugs back, feeling caught out, like an idiot. "Was out walking Lucky, saw your light was on, figured I'd come check in on you."

Nope. Now he feels like an idiot. James is blinking at him in surprise, which isn't actually making this any less awkward, but he's got his phone in his hand and he's thumbing it on.

*I'm wired. Was just gonna- There's a long pause, and he doesn't know what it means but it feels like James is lying and it's irritating. *go for a walk.*

"Oh. Well. I'll leave you to it."

He waits for a response, but James just glances at the wall for a second. *You want to come along? Or-*

The *or* just hangs there again, as if Clint's supposed to have any idea what to do with it. James, though, doesn't look like he's got the answers either.

"Just got back in, think I'll grab a drink before I turn in again, though. Care to join before you head out?"

Clint must be some sort of turbo-genius, because James nods after deliberating for only a moment, then follows him down the stairs.

"Beer? Whiskey?"

"Yes." Trying not to trip over Lucky, who's happier to see him than any living being has a right to be, he nods so Clint can see. By the time he's sat down, Clint's got three bottles and two glasses and is sitting on the other end of the couch, dodging Lucky's tail with practiced ease.

"So. Where do you go when you're up at four in the morning?" Now that Lucky's settled in, Clint sets his phone on his side, then sets to filling their glasses. "Me, I only ever get tours of other dog's markings."

He's being easy about it. Like today hadn't really happened, or like it had happened to someone else.

"Dunno." He hadn't brought his bag with him- he'd packed it, yes, but he's not sure yet. But his brain's been looping over the same damned thoughts for hours, and he'd needed to at least *move.* He'd thought that maybe, if he'd got to the end of the block, he'd have some sort of epiphany. But Clint's passing him a glass and grinning at him like he hasn't since yesterday.

It's not what he'd left his apartment for, but it's not bad, either. "Just needed to get my head together, you know?"

"I'll bet." Clint sips his drink, leans back against the couch. "How're you doing with everything, anyhow?"
Downing half of his drink in one seems like a good summary answer. Clint huffs out a near-laugh, then downs the rest of his before reaching for the bottle. "We've all been there, man."

Clint holds out the bottle after refilling his own glass, so he shoots the rest back and holds his glass out. Maybe it's a show of solidarity, or maybe Clint's trying to offer up some sort of coping mechanism; it doesn't really matter.

If this conversation's going to go anywhere near where it's probably going to go, the alcohol isn't gonna hurt.

"How're your hands?" Clint asks, after a moment, so he holds them up. The right is scarred over but mostly healed, and the left's been left repaired. Except for the shoulder, which isn't worth getting into.

"How's your head?"

"Pounding. I should probably slow down after this one," he says, like he's just realizing that concussions and alcohol are a bad mix. "You go to town on the rest of the bottle, though, if you want."

"Probably switch to beer after this," he shrugs. He'd skipped his meds today, in favor of enough Ketamine to kill most people easily. Clint's gaze is split between him and his phone, but it's still scrutiny. "Any more weirdness with your ears?"

Clint shrugs. "Got a checkup later this week. Oh, and. Sorry about that. I mean, ah. The flash bomb down there."

"Hey, no apologies. That was the highlight of my day."

"Okay, did you realize you were punning like a dork, or was that an accident?" Clint brandishes his phone, scowling.

"Whichever one makes you happy," he scratches behind Lucky's ear and smirks, though he's not really feeling it.

But his is okay.

It's better than he'd thought it would be.

But it's not going to last. By this time tomorrow, he's going to be gone.

"Hey, what's up?"

He blinks, confused, to find that Clint's looking confused right back at him. "You ghosted out there, man."

He shrugs, deliberating. For a minute, there, he'd forgotten.

"Just. Wondering what happens next."

"What do you mean?"

"Like. They're not going to let me stay here, not after that."

"What're you on about?"
"I fucked up." He sets his glass down, empty on the table. Wants to refill it just to give himself something to do, but grabs the beer instead. It's not to cope. Just to hang onto. "I've been fucked up this whole time. I mean, I knew it. Just not how bad it was."

"What do you mean?"

He's got no idea how to answer that, though.

No, he does. He just doesn't want to. Even though he should- he knows he should.

---

He's been waiting for James to continue on his own steam, and it's given him a minute to think.

It might be nothing- that hesitation out in the hall. But if he's thinking that he can't be here- that they're not going to allow it...

He's run away more than once himself. He leans forward, edges into James' line of sight. "Earlier. Out in the hall. Were you-" It's one thing to admit that you've run away. It's another thing entirely for someone to tell you. "Were you leaving?"

He's hit the mark, evidently, though it's not one of his finest; James looks nervous, and that's not really what he'd been going for.

I wasn't. I was just going for a walk, he says, though obviously there's more to it than he's saying. But Clint's waited for three days on a rooftop in Helsinki; this is nothing. James frowns at the window next to the television. At, not out, and it feels like a necessary distinction

I thought if I got some fresh air, I'd know what to do.

"About what?"

If I went with them when they came for me, they'd be less angry, but I'd be in a cell. If I left on my own, then no cell, but the fallout would be worse.

Okay. He thinks he's going to get locked up. At least he's not assuming they'll be storming down his door to kill him. Clint can work with this.

"Why do you think anyone wants to lock you in a cell?"

Because I killed seven people. In the warehouse

Guilt, then. This, he understands. "And you feel bad about it."

But James shakes his head, eyes wide. That's just it. I know I should, but I don't.

He glances up from his phone, trying not to scowl, but yeah, actually, this might not look so good. "Why not?"

The fact that they're dead doesn't bother me. It's just... It's not what Steve would've done. He would have incapacitated them, but he would have let them live.

Clint closes his eyes, but makes himself open them again. "You know that when we went down into the tunnel, we were green-lit on whatever needed to happen, right?" James nods, but, won't meet his eye, so he has to guess. "Is it an orders thing?"
That would make sense, at least. Even the Winter Soldier, the Asset, whatever, would've had to have parameters.

*Steve wouldn't have given that order.*

"If the choice was getting you out alive, versus keeping your kidnappers safe, you're wrong, man."

This seems to get his attention. *During the debriefing, everyone was angry. Including Steve.*

"One, that's bullshit. I was there, remember? Yes, people were angry, but not at you. It was the situation, it was Ward." He sighs, thinking back to the conference room. James had been zoning out on the table, hadn't been meeting anyone's eyes the whole time, so of course he would've missed it, and he's not sure how he's going to convince him now.

Shit, he should've seen this coming. Could've headed this off once they'd gotten out of the car today, if not before.

"Look, I know a bald eagle dies every time Captain America frowns- and yeah, I think they're off the endangered species list now, but it's like, who wants to risk it, right?" This, at least, gets a smirk, but given their present circumstances, it feels like a lot. "I know you weren't there to see it, when we were trying to figure out how to find you, but Steve ripped Coulson's team a new one when one of their idiots thought you couldn't be trusted." Admitting that last- that it had even come up for discussion, feels like a mistake. And remembering back to his own doubt makes him want to stab himself in the face with something jagged, now. So he slides past it. "And Tony backed him up like I haven't seen him do in months. You scared the hell out of us, man. But not like you're thinking."

James has gone from evasive to skeptical, and maybe a little irritated, but there's a sharpness to his eyes now; he's listening.

"When you got out of there, did you want to start in on the firemen? Murder everyone in the parking lot?"

Abruptly, James shoves himself to his feet, dislodging Lucky along the way. His back is turned as he steps past the coffee table, but his hand's fisted at his side.

*They weren't a threat* appears on the screen.

"Exactly!" Clint feels like he might be shouting- maybe he just feels like it, it's honestly getting hard to tell. "Ward and his psycho girlfriend were going to turn you over to the highest bidder, and they- God, who knows what they would have done to you? Or with you, if they'd figured out how." Setting his beer down, he gets to his feet too, but doesn't move any closer. "You did what you had to do to get out of there. You don't win a war by dying in it."

*They weren't going to kill me. They wanted me alive.*

"No, they only wanted one part of you alive." If he stares hard enough at his phone, he can make the words appear. It's only when James shifts and he glances up that anything does.

*Maybe,* James eventually concedes, and there's a *but* coming, he can tell. Lucky's up too, tail thumping against his leg, excited by the commotion. When Clint looks at his phone again, he realized that he'd missed his reply. *Thing is, though... It wasn't survival, it was revenge.*

He taps James's wrist twice to get his attention. "Revenge?"
Thought you- James half turns, but not all the way. He's grimacing, like it's taking him some effort to get the words out. Thought they killed you.

Jesus.

He's got no idea what to say to that. Thanks? It's okay? Reassuring him that he's not dead seems, well, just fucking stupid.

"If you're looking to win this argument, I've got bad news for you. That's pretty much the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me, and you're not going to hear me say different any time soon."

Yeah, James rubs at his eyes as he mutters, frowning, but it's deliberate now, like he's trying not to smile back. But you're an assassin.

He's sick of reading all this on his phone, but he's not sure why he's tossing it onto the couch until he notices that his hands are free, now. "Told you that from the start." James doesn't shake his hand off of his shoulder, so he maneuvers around and just fucking hugs the guy. "Welcome to the party."
True to Sam's word, he and Dr. Gupta show up first thing in the morning. Sam's brought donuts, and it's impossible to tell what that means, though it has to mean something.

"They're therapeutic," Dr. Gupta insists, when she catches him looking at them. "But let me take a blood sample first."

He sits down at the table while she sticks him with the needle, and watches Sam rummage around the cupboards for coffee cups.

"You talk to Candy down at the shop yet?" Sam asks.

He shakes his head. It just hadn't seemed to matter, with everything else that was going on. He hadn't even thought to start dreading it until now.

"That's cool, I talked to her yesterday morning, when you were in with the doctors. Told her that you breathed in some smoke in a warehouse fire and that you'd be out of commission for a day or two." He scratches his neck and grins guiltily at Dr. Gupta. "I might've let on that you've been moonlighting at a warehouse. Seemed like the easiest thing. But you should check in."

"Right now?" He glances at Dr. Gupta, who's injecting a few drops of drawn blood into her scanner. She nods, smiling up at him. "You can roll down your sleeve. Go ahead."

"Might as well get it off your plate," Sam adds.

"What am I supposed to tell her?"

"That you're doing better and will be in tomorrow."

"What if she wants details, though?" A fire like that would've made the news, with or without Iron Man and Captain America on the scene.

"You were in the warehouse, it started burning, you got out and got treatment," Dr. Gupta points out, putting her gear away and sitting up. "Our people have it on good authority that the news crews did not arrive until after you were on your way back to the tower." She takes the coffee Sam's passing her. "Go ahead and call her, then we will talk."

---

The conversation with his boss isn't so bad, really, though it's more due to her being accustomed to people quitting the job without warning than to any conversational skill on his part. But he's still got a job, when he hangs up the phone, so he'll call it a win.

Turning back to Sam and Dr. Gupta, though, he's not sure what he's going to call this.

"So," Dr. Gupta says, once they're all seated around the kitchen table. "I've read the reports. How are you feeling today?"

"Better than yesterday." It's true, he decides, wondering how untrue it would've been if he hadn't managed to get a few hours of shuteye last night. "Worried, still, I guess."

"About what?"
"I- Clint talked me out of it," he shrugs, gestures at the two of them. "Mostly, but I guess I was kind of still thinking you were coming here to take me back up to the Academy?" Dr. Gupta doesn't respond to the question- he hadn't meant to make it one- and just raises an eyebrow, waiting for more. "I figured, I went off the rails in the warehouse. I didn't handle it right, so..."

"We will address that in a moment," she holds up one finger. "But first, let me assure you. That is not one of the avenues that we are considering."


"Because there is no value in putting you back in a cell just so that you can convince yourself that you deserve punishment. We have to assume that your ordeal will be affecting you negatively for some time. What we need to do is get you accept that, and help you move past it in a healthy manner."

He blinks, looking at Sam, who obliges him with a translation. "If you'd reverted at the first sign of violence, and you'd come out of there guns blazing, we'd be having a very different conversation."

Sam snorts into his coffee and raises an eyebrow. "Actually, from what I remember, I don't think there'd be a whole lot of talking going on. But that's not what happened, okay?"

He nods. "Yeah. Okay."

"All right, then," Dr. Gupta straightens in her chair, her laptop open for notes. "Let's get into it then, shall we? You said that you went off the rails in the warehouse. I take that to mean that there was a point where you felt that you were losing control of yourself. Let's start there."

"After Ward started gloating that Clint was- that they hadn't left any survivors down in the tunnel, I was angry. But kind of clearheaded, too, like..." He sips his coffee, holds it in his mouth until he can remember how to swallow. "I knew I had to get out of there. There wasn't a point where I decided to kill anyone. I just got my hands free, went to disarm the first guard, and snapped his neck before he even got a punch in."

This is it, this is where they're going to realize that they'd been overly optimistic. But they're just looking at him like he hasn't made his point yet.

"...and then I shot the next one. Others shot back, but not until then. I'm the one who started it- or at least escalated it, and it didn't... It didn't bother me at all." Still no response; his stomach's starting to knot up and he wants to set the coffee down, but he's afraid of drawing attention to his mismatched hands. It's stupid. "I didn't wait for help, I didn't incapacitate them. They died, I didn't care, just moved on to the next target. And I know that's messed up."

Dr. Gupta makes no move to agree or disagree. "You've said before, you don't see a definite split between James Barnes and the Winter Soldier. Does that still ring true?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to say some things, and I want you to tell me- honestly- if you agree with me, and why or why not. There are no wrong answers, From there, we will identify the avenues we need to focus on. Does that make sense?"

"Okay."

"You are more worried about not caring about their deaths than you were about causing them."

"Yes." This one's easy to answer, but hard to explain. "If I felt bad about it- I mean, if I felt actual
"You enjoyed killing those people."

"No, I- I just. I didn't think about it at all, that's the problem."

Sam raises his eyebrow and nods, but it's all the response he gets.

"You were responding to a threat to your existence."

"Yes. I mean, no, they were keeping me alive, but..." Clint had said it better. "Clint said that they only wanted one part of me alive, and that they'd just kill off the rest of it."

"You are going to kill everyone in this building."

"No, of course not, I just-" he takes a breath, realizes that Sam's hiding a grin behind his mug. It's fine. "Before, it all seemed just hypothetical. Or, at least more so. Now I know that on some level, it's possible."

"You believe that the choices you made last night mean that you cannot be trusted."

Exactly. There's no point keeping the bitterness out of his voice. "If my first instinct at the sign of trouble is to kill everyone in the room, then no, I can't be, can I?"

"Okay," Dr. Gupta says, not rising to the bait of his agitation. "Thank you, that's good."

"Got one thing wrong, though," Sam mutters, leaning back in his chair. He doesn't want to ask. "Which one?"

"The one where you said it was your first instinct. That's bullshit and we've got proof."

He doesn't follow. Dr. Gupta's head swivels towards Sam as well; it could be that she's just cross that he's deviating from her script.

"What proof? Where?"

"Downstairs. Clint's not dead." He reaches into his bag, drags out his tablet and brings up a file. "Before everything went south- well, before they grabbed you. Down in the tunnel, when Barton was pinned down on the tracks, you went over and put yourself between him and the gunmen."

"That was why I was there. Backup. I was under orders."

"Yeah, no. See, I talked to Hill about it," He scans the report he's brought up. "You orders were to be eyes and ears, not to jump into the fray." Rocking back in his chair, glances back up at him. "But you did. You jumped in, neutralized the threats you could, and kept him from getting shot." Sam's eyes land on him, like he's waiting for him to react; he shrugs, giving up after a few seconds. "So you at least have to allow the possibility that your first instinct isn't always to kill everyone in the room, all right?"

Uncertain- Sam's only got the one data point, after all- he nods, because it's easier than arguing.

---

Phone in hand, Clint knows he's doing a terrible job of hiding the machete behind his back when he opens the door. Thankfully, it's just Sam, and not one of Simone's kids.
Do I even want to know?

"Nothing to worry about. C'mon in, what's up?"

Was up talkin' to our boy up there, and figured I'd drop in before I head back down to DC. Got a minute?

"Sure. C'mon in." Sam steps inside, raising an eyebrow at the mess he's made of the kitchen table, which at the moment gives the appearance that he's about to do a very bad job of robbing a bank, or, now that he's looking at it, an even worse job of breaking into the Academy.

Yeah, no. I definitely don't want to know.

"Just sorting out my gear. Inventory. That sort of thing." Mostly. "Realized last night that I haven't exactly been keeping up with the upkeep since I started stashing most of it over at the tower. Want some coffee?"

Sam's eyes linger on the table, but then he seems to blink himself out of it.

Nah, I'm good, thanks. You're doin' okay? How's your head?

He shrugs. "It's fine. I've had worse." At this point, not that he's going to admit it, he's mostly just hungover. "So what's the verdict? If you came down here to tell me that you're about to drag James back upstate," he gestures at the weapons on the table, "I might need to grab a few things first."

Easy there, Sam's rolling his eyes and shaking his head, but he's smiling like he gets the joke. What the hell is going on with you two and the worrying? He's fine where he is. But. It's kind of why I came down.

"Yeah?"

Yeah, well that and to thank you. Which would go a lot better if you'd put the machete away.

Feeling like an idiot, but only a little, which is good, he tosses it onto the pile. "For what?"

Talking him down. He kind of indicated he hit rough spot last night and it sounds like you got him through it.

He shrugs, feeling embarrassed. "Well, yeah. I mean. Think he just needed to vent, sort some shit out, you know?"

Well, I think it helped, for what it's worth. He was doing a lot better this morning than I'd honestly expected him to be. Though I'd appreciate your not mentioning it.

"No problem, I get it."

Anyway, it's not the only reason I stopped down. Steve wanted me to tell you that he and Hill are already looking into the other end of Ward's intended transaction.

"The buyer?"

Sam nods. Not trying to raise your hackles, but Steve's worried. Hinted at me that I might want to hint at you to keep your eyes open, because now that someone knows that he's out there... Anyway, they're on it.

Fuck. It's so obvious, and the thought hadn't even occurred to him.
"You mind hinting back at Steve to out the pedal to the metal on that one? I just finished up the repairs from the last guy who came through here looking for trouble. I can't put the neighbors through that again."

Sam picks at the velcro on an empty holster; Clint can't even remember what that one had been for. 

**Will do. Though I'm not thinking he needs any more motivation. Last I heard from Natasha, he's been stalking through ops all day, grumbling because nobody's been able to backtrack Ward's call yet. So... yeah.**

"Good thing I decided to do inventory today, huh." He glares at the pile of gear and weapons on the table, considering. Bank-robbing to jailbreaking to weaponizing the building for the second time in a year. Awesome.

F**uck**

No. Freaking out won't help a damned thing. The situation already existed, the only thing that's different is that he knows about it now, and so he's got time to prepare. This is good. There's no reason to be resenting the hell out of Sam just for giving him a heads up. "What did James say about it?"

He regrets the question the moment he sees the sheepish expression crossing Sam's face; he's not going to like the answer. **Steve didn't want to worry him until he had something a little more concrete to work with. He wasn't sure how he'd take it, after yesterday. But you know him better than anyone, so. It's up to you, all right?**

"I'm not going to lie to him."

**Not telling you to. It's just. Given what he's told us, I think he's going to take it hard. And if he thinks he's putting you at risk just by being here, after the way you two have been acting this morning, I'm worried that he's going to disappear. Especially if he thinks for an instant that you're not already aware of it, okay?**

"Okay." He glances around for his coffee mug; he thinks it's in the bathroom next to the ibuprofen that he'd gotten distracted from taking.

Not that over-the-counter anything's going to sort all this out.

Dammit.
Your name is James Buchanan Barnes.

The words are faded, now, and he decides to take the fact that he'd come through the other night without having to re-carve them as a sign that things hadn't been as bad as they'd seemed.

He hadn't blacked out- he'd fallen asleep, sure, but he hadn't blacked out.

He thinks he might've now, though, because he can't remember what he'd been doing for the past five minutes.

Oh.

Right. Scanning in the casework for the Branden-Reiter job. Page after page after page. He should appreciate it more, the mind-numbingness of it all.

His phone vibrates in his pocket like it's got some sort of sympathy for him.

Hey I'm grabbing coffee with Kate after I'm done at the tower, then stopping by the store, need any gullible for tonight?

He blinks, but it doesn't make any more sense.

Got all the stupidity I need, thanks.

Gullible, Clint sends back, and then, after a moment, GRILLABLES. Ducking autocorrect.

He waits for fifteen seconds.

FUCKING ARRRGH I MEANT FUCKING

Checking the scanner- it's still auto-feeding, the machine hasn't jammed- he debates whether or not to react to the text meltdown and eventually sends back, No. Still have brats in the freezer. What's up at the tower?

The machine beeps at him, and he pulls the completed stack out of the tray, brings the scanned document up on the screen and starts the quality control program. It's dull enough, going through the alerts and manually telling the machine that no, that "a" is an "a" and this "a" is a "q." Even with the computer finding all the probable errors in 322 pages of legal briefings, it's going to take him the rest of the afternoon to get it done.

Which is why it would be nice if his brain would stop making connections between Clint and the word "FUCKING," all caps, full stop.

Clint hadn't meant it like that. Far as he can remember, he's never talked about sex at all, and he probably wouldn't be too keen on the path his brain's started heading down. He'd probably be even less fond of what it's doing to him.

It's messed up to be sitting at a computer, one eye on the front counter where Candice-Call-Me-Candy is on the phone arguing with their toner distributor, realizing that yeah, he remembers these sensations: Warm coiling in his gut, muscles going tight, blood pounding.

He's getting hot under the collar over a ducking typo, and his brain's decided to put Clint on display
like he's some sort of object. The crinkles at the corners of his eyes, the curve of a smirk, a shoulder easing back against the back of the couch in a way he's seen a hundred times, before pressing back against the cushions with an urgency he's never seen.

He drags his hand over his face, pinches his ear like it'll distract him; it works, for a second, just until the moment where he starts wondering why he'd thought to do it. Why he's thinking any of this crap in the first place.

It hadn't been a couch, and it hadn't been Clint. The man had probably had a face, but it's not coming to him. Just a flash of an arm thrusting, tugging down the waistband of gray slacks, giving him unfettered access to-

His phone pings and yes, the phone, the office, his life- he picks it up again, eager for the distraction. It's Clint, replying to his last text, finally shoving him back to reality.

_Dr. Van Drier again. Hopefully Stark's got the new hearing aids ready to go. Grabbing coffee with Kate after._

Oh, shit. He'd forgotten. Glancing up, Candy is still on the phone. The QC alert on his screen is blinking at him, wanting to know if the squiggle on the screen is a "2" or a "Z." Clint's somewhere in the city with his phone in his hand and no idea where his head's been the last minute or so.

At least the arousal's gone before it could do any damage. Taking a breath, he lets it out slowly. Loudly enough, apparently, that Candy glances back over her shoulder. He smiles at her, stretching his neck- no need to come over and check for smoke-inhalation side effects, really- and she nods back sympathetically. Quality control is tedious; she's done her fair share.

_Right, _he sends back, feeling like an asshole because this is what's going on with Clint. Not...whatever _that_ had been, just now. _Fingers crossed, then. Stop up after and let me know how it went._

_Will do._

---

He manages to put it out of his head until he's walking home, talking on the phone with Steve, who'd be doing a very good impression of someone who hadn't just been out on a secret dangerous mission, if it weren't for the fact that the man still sounds almost winded as he changes the subject.

"So we're thinking of coming to town this weekend, there's this thing over at MOMA-"

"We?"

"Ah, yeah. Me and Natasha."

"You and Natasha, huh?" He waits, lets the statement hang for a second, waits for Steve to respond to the accusation. All he hears is Steve breathing- and what sounds suspiciously like a shield dragging against the wall as it's hung back in place- and he wants to laugh. "Seriously? How long's that been goin' on for?"

"Dunno. Hasn't exactly been time to take her out on the town yet."

"And you want blow it terribly by trying to drag a third wheel along?"

"No! I'm taking her out to dinner tomorrow night, and... well. It would just be weird to be in the
City all weekend and not stop down. Like Sunday, or something."

There are times when he wishes he could remember Steve from before better; it's usually strongest when Steve's happy. He's got a feeling he could get away with making a bigger deal about this, even if he only knows semi-secondhand about Steve's dismal record with the ladies.

"Well, how about this. You take her out, and if you both feel like coming up for air or something, we could get together Sunday afternoon. From what I recall, I owe you one or two odd-man-outs."

"More like a dozen, Buck," Steve snorts. "But I'm not looking to collect. You could always bring Clint along."

"Huh?" He stops at the corner and waits for the walk signal to change.

"I said, you should bring Clint along."

Snorting, he shakes his head and says, "Like what, a double date kind of thing?" before he can stop himself.

"Yeah."

He's crossed the intersection before his head catches up to Steve's answer. He'd been joking. Okay, half joking, half trying to get some sort of intel that's eluding him, now that he's got it.

"Ah..."

"Bucky? What is it?"

"Nothing, I-" A trio of high school kids bustles past him; the tallest is holding his phone out so they can see something on the screen. "It's not like that. With me and him, I mean."

"Oh."

And now it's awkward.

"Well, if you've got someone else you'd like to bring," Steve says, a little abruptly, "then. Yeah. Or we can just ignore the part where I shoved my foot in my mouth and bring Clint anyway."

"There isn't anyone," he frowns in annoyance at the impulse to ask Steve what had led him to the assumption in the first place. He's the one who'd called it a date, after all. "But I'll ask Clint when I see him tonight."

"Great!" It only sounds a little bit forced. "Let me know how it goes."

"Will do," he says. And then, because he's a glutton for punishment and he knows it's going to be eating at him all day if he doesn't ask. "Ah, Steve? Did you think me and him were..."

Steve's deliberating, he's got to be, given how long it's taking him to answer.

"More than just friends?"

"Yeah."

"Kinda."

And damn it, Steve's going to make him ask. "Why?"
"I guess... You guys are close, right? And. You know, the other day, at the warehouse. You were zoned out completely. You were walking under your own steam but your head was miles away. Didn't snap out of it until you saw him, and, ah... latched onto him like a limpet."

**Oh God.** Mortified, he drops his eyes down to the pavement, not quite fast enough to avoid the curious gaze of the old woman who's passing by. Her eyes swivel away from him quickly enough that she's seen something too real on his face, and he's not sure what to do with that.

"Bucky?"

"I'm here."

"Right. So... am I right in guessing that you're interested?"

*I almost got hard over a goddamn typo, what the hell do you think,* he grumbles internally, irritated enough that for one suicidal second, he thinks he might say it aloud. "Um. Maybe? I don't know. Haven't talked to anyone about it. He doesn't know."

*He doesn't know* isn't the most assured of statements, but it's the closest he's come to saying it- that yeah, apparently Clint Barton's caught his eye- out loud. It should feel more momentous than this. But it doesn't answer anything, either. Doesn't change anything or give him any sort of clue what to do with the knowledge. He's relieved when Steve laughs.

"Hey, well. Ask him about Sunday. How about brunch? You could think of it as a dry run in case you decide you want to ask him out later."

"You won't tell him anything, will you?"

"I'm starting to learn how to keep my trap shut."

"What, starting now?"

"Starting about two minutes ago, and you don't count, okay?"

"Fair enough."

A few minutes later, he's ending the call and waiting to cross over to his block when a delivery truck stops in the intersection in front of him. On the side, in huge rainbow letters, is an ad for Doritos celebrating Gay Pride.

Because of course there fucking is.

---

He can smell the grill going through the open window. Simone and her kids have been up there for at least half an hour, and he'd heard Deke tripping up the stairs a few minutes ago. It's almost 6:45, and there's been no reply to the text he'd sent an hour and a half ago asking about his ETA. No word from Clint at all.

It's not like Clint had given him an exact timeline, or that he doesn't have things to be doing that aren't staring at the phone. And yeah, okay fine. After talking with Steve, the idea of asking him if he wants to come out to brunch with the three of them might be stressing him out more than he'd thought it would.

Irritated with himself, he starts defrosting the brats and listens to the noise drifting through the
windows. He wonders what the odds are that any of the neighbors have heard from him.

His phone finally pings at 6:52, but it's Kate, not Clint, who's messaged him.

*Hi this is Kate- IDK if you have my #. You seen Clint? He stood me up.*

*Haven't seen him*, he sends back, already heading for the door, because *this* kind of worry, he's used to handling. *Checking his apartment.*

Downstairs, he knocks on Clint's door. Lucky starts whining and pawing on the other side; he's probably needed to go out for hours. Which is the excuse he'll use if he finds Clint sleeping on the couch or something- he'd given him a key for exactly this reason.

Still, it feels strange, using it. Lucky bounds out to greet him happily enough- and the dog would sense if something were actually wrong, right? No sign of Clint, though. He's not on the couch, and he's not upstairs. But Lucky's whining now, waiting by the door with his leash in his mouth.

He messages Kate back- *No luck, let me know if you hear from him, I'm taking Lucky out- and attaches the leash, letting the dog lead him towards the stairs.*

Waiting for Lucky to finish painting the tree, he thumbs out another text to Clint. *Hey, Kate just texted me looking for you. Where are you? Taking Lucky-

-he nearly drops his phone when Lucky lunges off down the sidewalk; stumbling to keep up, he finds Clint walking up the sidewalk towards them.*

He's kneeling down to wrestle a little bit with Lucky, but his smile's off.

Something's wrong.
Chapter 26

The text Clint fires to Kate- *Not gonna make it today sorry will explain later* - is as magnanimous as he's capable of being right now. He turns his phone off for the first time in what feels like weeks, because it's either that, or chucking it into the river.

Fuck today. Fuck everything.

When he'd woken up this morning, his only real concern had been the faint hangover he'd been nursing, but that, at least, had been his own damned fault.

Maybe a little bit James', too, because without him, Clint wouldn't have been lying in bed until all hours thinking about stupid shit like the spaghetti and conversation they hadn't finished the other night. Or that he's really got to talk to him about the entire buyer thing, and soon, because apparently everyone else in the known universe was still walking on eggshells around him. Or that hugging- and being hugged by- James was easy-on-the-verge-of-being-fucking-complicated. Or what it meant that, apparently, James had considered him someone worth *avenging*.

And fuck, he needs to get a thesaurus. There's *got* to be a better word for it.

The point is, he'd gotten up this morning, taken a shower, cleared out the cobwebs and he'd thought he'd had his shit together enough to get through the day without it turning into a fucking nightmare. All he had to do was go to the tower for his 11:00 appointment, get his new hearing aids, meet Katie for coffee and head to the store. No big deal.

He'd finished off yesterday's coffee, even picked up around the apartment. He'd put away most of the gear he'd been sorting out yesterday; all that had been left were the odd straps and charge adapters and broken bow strings. He'd excavated his table back down to the notebook that had still been lying open to his apology for acting like an idiot over James telling him that he was into dudes; it had been closed, and stacked neatly on top of the rest of them, because Clint was a fucking adult and they'd already laughed about their- what was it Katie had called it- *Kinsey Scale Freakouts*. When- if- *when* it came up again, it wouldn't be a big deal. Nothing to get weird about.

He'd headed for Manhattan, and texted James from the train. He'd recovered from his minor freudian typo easily enough, all things considered- thankfully James hadn't seemed to think anything of it- and he'd made it to the tower with five minutes to spare.

At 11:05, the wheels on the day's wagon had started feeling a little loose when Van Drier told him that his hearing aids weren't ready. By 11:10, he'd found out why- everyone had gotten called out on a mission. It happened.

At 11:17, though, he'd tried to access the mission report, only to find that he no longer had the clearance.

And by 11:56, the wheels had fallen off the wagon completely, and he's got no option but to walk. So that's what he'd done. Out of the tower, heading west. North along the Hudson, up past Washington Heights to Inwood Hill Park.

He'd meandered for a while, he'd sat for a while. He'd considered texting Nat about half a dozen times but the thought of actually speaking to her still hasn't stopped making him furious, even now.

Eventually, he'd gotten his ass back on the subway and headed back to Bed Stuy.
Which brings him up to now: scratching behind Lucky's ears, looking up at James, who's trying not to look worried on the other end of the leash, and signing, [you okay?]

He shrugs, nods. Right now, he's tired, thirsty, sore, and no closer to having a solution than he'd been this morning. But James is out here walking Lucky because of his dumb ass. He owes him an explanation, at the very least.

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"...and like, I knew better than to get my hopes up, but Tony said he'd have them ready today, only when I got to the tower, Van Drier didn't have them. Said the others got called out on a mission and he didn't want to risk rummaging through the labs on the off chance he might stumble into them."

James blinks, like he's only been half listening, so he hurried to finish it up.

"Anyway. Got through the appointment and the disappointment- Van Drier said he'd call as soon as he got the hearing aids from Tony. I was getting ready to leave when I asked Jarvis for an update on the mission, but it wouldn't tell me anything. Turns out my clearance has been downgraded."

James scowls, rolling his eyes. What the hell, that's ridiculous. I talked to Steve this afternoon. They all got back okay. But how bad does it have to be to not let you know? Clint's got no idea- that's kind of the problem, here- so he shakes his head, but James barely notices. I mean, it's bullshit. Hill didn't have a problem with me tagging along the other night, let alone with letting me know about it in the first place.

"Yeah, well, apparently you're less of a liability than I am," he grumbles, then grimaces because he's pretty sure he's sounding like an asshole here. "I mean. They were backed into a corner. Hill didn't have any better options, then. Today, I guess she did."

He doesn't know why he's defending her right now. He doesn't know why he's defending any of them.

So what happened next?

"Huh? Oh. I sat there being pissed off, and was planning on heading up to Hill's office to, I dunno, go off on her or something. Only I was passing one of the break rooms and saw a bunch of agents talking at a table. They were all leaning in close, like they weren't looking to be overheard, and I got curious. Went over and poured myself some coffee, and hey, what do you know. Turns out there's an advantage to having everyone and their kid sister knowing that you're deaf. They just kept talking."

How do you know?

He holds out his phone, pointing out the range slider running along the left side of the screen. "Usually have it set at five to ten feet, but it goes up to fifty, so... well. I sat down with my back to them and pretended to be enraptured with my email. After a few minutes- one of them was saying 'it's cool, he can't hear us, remember,' they went back to their conversation."

James looks up from the screen to his face and rolls his eyes. You're awfully proud of yourself.

"Not gonna lie, you're not wrong." He's grinning, but the thought of Natasha kicking his ass because it's taken him this long to discover this possibility leads directly into the thought that Natasha might not be someone he can trust anymore.

What is it?
He shrugs, startled by the question. This is the part of the conversation that he'd been worried about at this time yesterday, if only because he hadn't known then how much worse things actually were. But he's had all afternoon to think. He can ease into it.

"They've been trying to track down your, ah... would-be buyer." There's no good way of saying it.

Thankfully, James just raises his eyebrows and shakes his head in surprise. *Shit. I hadn't even thought to be worried about that.*

"Me neither. Um. Full disclosure, Sam told me yesterday, wanted me to tell you. And I know it makes me kind of a hypocrite with all my bitching about clearances here, but I'm sorry I didn't get to it until now." He'd spent all yesterday afternoon dealing with the washing machine in the basement, and though he'd eventually gotten it sorted, it hadn't been an efficient process. But pointing it out now would just be making excuses, and things are weird right now. He doesn't know who gets to be excused for anything.

It feels like James is staring at him for an eternity before he shrugs his left arm. *It's cool. Do they know anything yet?*

"Yeah. Seems like they do. I- well, the phone- overheard the agents talking. At first, it just sounded like they were irritated because they're moving a bunch of teams around in preparation for dealing with the guy- I'm not sure, but I think his name is Winston?" He looks at James, who shakes his head. "Something like that. But they were arguing. They were too far into it for me to really follow, but it sounded like the usual grunts being annoyed by their orders, you know?" He tries for a grin, because he needs to right now, only it's brittle as fuck, and James isn't smiling either.

"Anyway, after a few minutes of their back and forth, one of them said, 'Who gives a shit about the logistics? If we're supposed to be the good guys, then what the hell are we doing going around wiping people's memories?'"
The sound of footsteps in the hallway makes his spine tighten. He knows it's just Aimee, knocking her tires against the wall as she trundles her bike into her apartment. He knows it's nothing.

But up until just a few seconds ago, he'd known that SHIELD could be trusted.

Because they wouldn't do that, they wouldn't unmake someone. They're supposed to be the good guys, and even if they weren't- if they were merely pragmatic, they'd have to know by now that trying to get intel out of someone who can't remember anything was a huge drain on resources. There's no good reason for it.

Anyway, Steve would never allow it. Back when things were bad, after he'd turned himself in and before his brain had knit itself back together, Steve had promised him that they wouldn't do that-

-only, the bitch of it all, being able to recall things that happened and things that were said, is this: Steve had promised him they wouldn't wipe his memories. He hadn't said shit about anyone else's. Maybe it's just not a promise that's extended to people who've never been Bucky Barnes.

Maybe Steve's got no choice.

No. It's insane to even go there. Steve's an idealist compared to people like Hill, but he's never been one to back down from a fight. James has read as much and remembered as much and he knows.

Steve would've gone to the mat over something like this.

Right?

His right arm is prickling, and it's a frustrating, because his left hand is lacking in the fingernails department and so he's left digging his fingers in as best he can until the sensation approximates pain instead. The movement catches Clint's attention; his scowl deepens.

"Itches," he explains- it's the first sound either of them have made in maybe a minute- and Clint nods in recognition even if he doesn't look down at his phone.

He doesn't know what to do with his hand once the irritation subsides, so he leaves it there. Leans against the counter.

Suddenly they're both talking at once.

He cuts off Clint's "I don't know what the fuck is going on," with "Kate messaged me." Waiting for Clint to glance down at his phone, he continues, idiotically. "You should probably text her back soon."

It's true, but it's irrelevant right now. He's sticking his head in the sand and he knows it.

"Yeah," Clint replies. "Guess so."

"I don't know what the fuck we're supposed to do, either," he agrees, once the silence starts lengthening out ahead of them and the only other thing coming to mind- of all the inane things- is brunch. For all his agonizing about the question earlier, it's the least of his problems right now; it's just that at this particular moment, he's not sure being in the same room with Steve's a good idea.

Fucking hell.

They're both dithering, here, like Clint doesn't know what to say next either, and it's annoying. But
see as how Clint's still watching him out of the corner of his eye when he glances over, he figures he might as well read him in on the nonsense his brain's trying to distract him with.

"Talked to Steve earlier- he didn't say anything about it. Mostly we talked about having brunch on Sunday. Him and Natasha want to meet up with us." He grimaces, because not only is he babbling like an idiot instead of focusing on the problem at hand, the "us" had sounded presumptive as hell.

Clint's eyebrows twitch up in surprise, but he's not smiling. "Not sure that's a good idea right now, man."

"Was just thinking the same thing," he nods back, only the agreement's not supposed to make him angrier. Instead, it's just making him sad.

For all the shit that's gone down, or, hell, maybe because of it, it's never been Steve that he's supposed to be doubting. It just doesn't sit right in his stomach.

"I dunno," Clint says, watching Lucky paw at his food bowl- it's in the living room today, halfway underneath the couch because the dog's just weird sometimes. "See, Steve's, like, the best human being on the face of the planet. I can't see him being down with all this...whatever's going on. Might be good to talk to him, see what he knows about it." He doesn't sound particularly enthusiastic, but it's hard to tell sometimes; since he can't hear himself, he's got a tendency to focus on speaking with clarity over emphasis. He's grinning hopefully, though, like he's trying to mean it. Or maybe the smile's got more to do with the way Lucky's tail is wagging as he trots over with his dish in his jaw.

"You really think he doesn't know?"

"He might, he might not," Clint puts his phone down, opening the cabinet to shovel four scoops of dog food into Lucky's dish. Setting it down on the floor, he thumps Lucky's haunches and stands up. "But I didn't get all the answers eavesdropping in the break room, and it's not like I can just bring up the reports anymore- not anything useful. Only way we're going to get any information is if someone decides to let something slip."

"You think he and Natasha are good for it?"

"She's more likely to follow orders than he is." Picking up his phone again, Clint pushes himself towards the fridge and opens it, pulling out two beers and passing one back behind him without looking. Or even asking, James realizes, as he takes it. Straightening, he looks a fraction less angry now; maybe it's just hard to look stressed out with a dog chomping at your feet and a beer in your hand. Clint, catching him looking, shrugs as he twists off the cap. "I mean, she's not blindly obedient. She's just...I dunno, you get used to following kill orders, you get used to a lot, you know?"

"I'll toast to that," he mutters.

"No doubt," Clint clinks his beer against his and drinks. "Anyway. I think if it comes down to it and we ask her flat out about it, she'll tell us what's up."

He doesn't want to ask. "Even if she's been ordered not to?"

"Even if she'd been the one to wipe a guy's brain herself," Clint says, and this time, the emphasis is strong and deliberate. "She doesn't have a lot of time for pride."

"So what, then. You think we should go?"
"Well," Clint deliberates, "yeah. I mean. Running a game on them isn't, like, my favorite idea on the face of the planet, but if everything's locked down above level seven clearance, asking them to confirm or deny over the phone might complicate things even more." He sips his beer, but there's a crease in his forehead that should've smoothed out by now if he's as convinced as he's trying to be.

"What is it?"

Clint shakes his head, smirking humorlessly, and takes another drink before speaking.

"Just thinking," Clint smirks bitterly into his beer, "that worst case scenario, if we get them face to face and surprise them with it, we'll at least have a snowball's chance in hell of telling if they're lying."

"I can't read Natasha for shit."

"I can, but only because we've had like a hundred hours of interrogation resistance training together. And you probably know Steve better than anyone, yeah?"

He opens his mouth to disagree, or at least to ask why Clint seems so sure of it, when the possibility that Clint might be right sideswipes him out of nowhere. Steve's, what, more or less the leader of the Avengers, he's got the respect of several world leaders, there's been dozens of books written about him. But somehow, he still has the time to check in on the phone every two days like he's got nothing better to do.

He's got Natasha, though, apparently. It's a start, right?

And fuck, look at him, sitting here brooding over that situation like he's got a clue, when if there's something to be brooding about, it's the fact that they're having this conversation in the first place. Instead he keeps getting distracted, like he's trying to distance himself from it. If Sam were here, he'd be reminding him to be present, or something like that.

"This sucks," he decides, drinking his beer a quarter of the way down, not even sure, anymore, what this is.

"That it does," Clint agrees, then snorts through his nose. "So where are we going for brunch, anyway? Please don't tell me I'm gonna have to iron a shirt for this."

"You own an iron?"

"I mean, I could go buy one." Clint scratches his chin, as if he's honestly contemplating it. "They come with instructions, right?"

"I'll ask Steve, and be sure to request some place that has crayons to go with the paper placemats."

"Good man," Clint nods, finishing up his beer. "Speaking of food though..."

"Brats are thawed, up in the microwave. Want to head up, see who's up there?"

"Yeah, hang on, though." He drags the change canister off the counter, explaining, "I owe Aimee like three bucks in change because the dryer was cannibalizing coins the other day."

Watching him rummage for quarters, he finishes his beer and tries not to get dragged into an internal debate over whether or not he's going to tell Sam about any of this next week. It's pointless trying to sort it out before he even knows anything, but knowing that isn't enough to kick the topic out of his brain.
The phone vibrating on the table is a jostles his train of thought; he taps Clint's arm to catch his attention.

He's standing awfully fucking close, he realizes, too late to do anything about it. He's close enough that he can see Clint's eyes adjusting to the slight variation in light when he looks up, and all he can do is point at the table and hope for the best.

Whatever the hell that means.

Though he's pretty sure it doesn't include that expression on Clint's face right now.

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He punches K and hits send because throwing the phone across the room will just make things worse. James's concerned scowl gets the message across far more clearly than his signed [what is it?]

"It's Coulson. He's ten minutes out." And is bringing takeout. Which is presumptive as hell, because maybe he'd had plans or didn't want Chinese, and he's pretty sure that letting someone think you're dead for months on end eradicates any rights to drop in unannounced. "Says we need to talk."

He thinks James says something, but he's still switching back over to voice recognition and he misses it. But he looks wary, eyes just a little too wide.

I thought he left town.

"Me too."

James doesn't really reply, just gets this weird blank look on his face for a second before he shrugs.

Huh. Well. That's good.

"I don't know what it is yet," he explains, suddenly sure that the best route to take is to downplay it, though he's not sure why. But he can't even hear James' tone, and 'that's good' can mean anything.

James eases past him to rinse his empty bottle out in the sink, and if there's a little more distance in the movement than he's gotten used to, it's probably because between SHIELD and Coulson, Clint's paranoid as hell right now.

All right, I'll get out of your hair, then, James grins, though it's the one he uses when Simone's kids are wearing on him and he's pretending not to be stressed. Should probably go get dinner sorted out. You want me to leave your brats in the cooler?

"Ah, crap." He rubs a hand over his face. "He's bringing Chinese. Ah. I dunno. See if Deke or somebody wants them?"

Cool, James replies, but his face is neutral. And it's not like Clint doesn't already feel like an asshole- for all their joking around, he knows he's just dumped something shitty on James' lap and is leaving him to stew over it alone- or that he actually wants to spend the evening with Coulson, who's supposed to be long gone, who isn't someone who gets to just drop in on short notice anymore.

"Hey, look," he calls out, watching James head around the corner towards the door. "I'll come find
you when I get rid of him, let you know what's going on." He's half tempted to suggest watching
the Dog Cops episodes he's DVR'd, only it would sound like the lamest consolation prize in the
history of New York.

He can't really see James around the corner without making it obvious that he's trying to, but *Sure
thing, sounds good*, appears on his phone. By the time he's glancing up, the door's falling shut, and
it's just him, his beer, and his dog.

And a suspicion, cementing into knowledge, that he'd just missed something important, there.

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The brats are fine, but he's not in the mood to talk with Deke or Aimee, so he winds up sitting with
his back against the stairwell wall next to Simone, listening to her talk about her kids' grades.
Nobody seems overly concerned about Clint's absence- it's rare that everyone in the building
actually makes it up at the same time- but he braces for the possibility that someone might ask.

Nobody does.

He sticks it out long enough to be polite, then heads downstairs, dragging his feet in the hallway on
his way back to his apartment.

Restless, he turns on the classic rock station on low and tries to muster some sort of enthusiasm for
any of the library books he's been meaning to get to, but he can't concentrate. The history book is
drier than the back cover had made it seem, and he's not in the mood for *Packing for Mars*. As far
as the 900 page Neal Stephenson monstrosity goes, he can only assume that checking it out had
seemed like a good idea at the time.

Apparently, he should've searched the catalog computer for *How to Stop Being Jealous Because
the Guy You're Maybe Interested in is Having Dinner with Someone He Used to be Interested In:
A Guidebook for the Semi-Closeted Elderly*.

It beats worrying about any of the other crises- the warehouse and the mind-wipes and what he's
gonna tell Sam and how he's gonna face Steve- but not by much.

He's had two drinks already, and with Dr. Gupta upping his meds again, he's pretty sure that a third
is unwise. But he's still too awake, too *aware*. The ceiling needs dusting and, okay, well, he's better
at intel-gathering ops than he'd be at brunch anyway. He should really turn the light off in the
bathroom and *God*, could he have been any more transparent, stalking off like that? The radio's too
loud but if he turns it down is he going to hear them in the hallway when Coulson leaves? Worse
yet, is he hear Coulson *not* leaving?

He gets up, turns the radio off and the television on. Dog Cops is on, and he thinks about watching
it but they're like five episodes behind and it would only make things weirder if Clint knew that
he'd gotten ahead next time they got together. After pouring himself a third whiskey because is
brain's still working too well, he changes the channel.

He sputters, diving for the remote to turn up the volume when he sees Steve on the screen.

It takes him a second to realize that it's in black and white- just some documentary. The narrator's
droning over the rolling footage of Dum-Dum, who's pointing off camera and talking to Steve. And
he's- *Bucky's*- in the background, smoking a cigarette, looking irritated about something that
Falsworth's saying. Looking away from the camera, away from everyone.

Nothing comes to him. He's got no idea what he'd heard, or why he would've reacted that way. So
he changes the channel again, finds a documentary about Wyatt Earp and doesn't watch it. Just stares at the screen and tries to sequence every recollection of Falsworth he has. Maybe he'll figure it out.
We've identified Ward's buyer, Coulson says, sliding a photo printout across the table. It's not a mug shot, but it almost never is, anymore- usually, it's five or six security camera screen caps that he's being handed. This time it's a man holding a clipboard and standing in front of a poster advertising food for aging cats. What do you know about Calvin Winslow?

"Nothing at all," Clint says, wondering, not for the first time since they'd sat down, why it is that Coulson'd seen fit to upend his entire evening just for a conversation that they could've had over the phone.

Calvin Winslow is tall, a little on the lanky side. Thick dark hair. The bags under his eyes might be due to the light, and they might not be. He looks friendly enough, though, smiling for the camera. Could be that he's just seen a box full of puppies, or that he's watched a village burn to the ground. There's just no context for it.

You haven't met sky daisy yet, Coulson replies, peering over his takeout to look at the phone's screen and rolling his eyes. Daisy. That's the name of one of my agents, I... Anyhow. Winslow is her father. Long story there, but he's a seriously bad dude.

He glances back at the picture just for a second, to see if he's managed to memorize his features yet, though he knows he's shot on less. "What's his interest in James?"

We don't know. He was a veterinarian when we left him four months ago. But apparently the programming didn't stick.

He waits for more words to appear on the screen, some sort of re-contextualization, or maybe just an explanation. But there's nothing coming, just the word bouncing in his head and latching onto the one definition he's dreading. He looks back at Coulson.

"Programming?"

Ah. Yes. As an alternative to imprisonment or death, his memories were selectively wiped and a new personality was installed.

He sets his fork down before he has a chance to land it in Coulson's eye, because if this is going where he thinks it is...

"By who?" He doesn't look up, just watches the screen.

We did. My team.

He'd been prepared to wheedle the information- okay, some sort of information, not this- out of Steve and Natasha on Sunday, not have it thrust into his face tonight. It takes him a few moments to calm down enough to make sure he's not shouting when he speaks.

"Was this before or after we knew about Hydra's infiltration?"

After. Coulson's grimace tells him everything he needs to know. It takes a moment for his mouth to start moving. We didn't take the decision lightly. I'm no more a fan of brainwashing than you are. But it was a complex situation and there were lives at stake. Believe me when I say that we had no other options.
"Killing him would've been better."

Killing him would've triggered a war that nobody could've won. And I know, it wasn't a solution. Just the least worst option. And since when are you an advocate for killing people?

Without hearing his tone he can't tell if he's joking, so Clint has to look up to see Coulson frowning curiously at him.

"Fuck you," he glares. "What, you thought I was shooting Nerf arrows the whole time I was advocating on your behalf?"

I'm sorry, Clint. I didn't mean it like that.

"Whatever." Honestly, he doesn't really give a shit how he'd meant it. "I gotta ask, though. Did you and Hill just decide, 'hey, you know, Loki and Zola were really onto something with that mind control thing, we should give it a shot'?

No. Fury might've thought so, though I wasn't nearly as enthusiastic about the prospect as you're trying to make me out to be. Hill, Cap and the others, they're furious about it too, I already heard chapter and verse.

"Okay, fine. That's good, because leaving aside the entire 'what the fuck gives you the right to do that to another person' question, which will only end in tears and bloodshed if we don't here, all it did was delay the inevitable, right?"

How do you mean?

"Well, if his programming, or whatever, had stuck, we wouldn't be sitting here eating dumplings, would we? I mean, unless it's just a coincidence. But if that were the case you'd be in here telling me that there's a conspiracy of veterinarians coming after James."

Coulson's shoulders heave, like he's sighing, and he nods.

We don't know exactly what happened, but judging by the company Winslow's been keeping for the past few decades, it's likely he's known about The Winter Soldier for quite some time. And if we allow that Winslow realizes what's happened to himself- the wipe, the false identity, the memories-he might have a particular motivation in that regard that he hadn't had before. We don't know what his plan is, only that he does seem to know about some Hydra resources that we haven't been able to neutralize yet. If he's looking to get his groove back, it could be that he's looking for a subject to test on first.

Either that, Clint thinks, or he's decided that if he's going to go to the trouble of booting up the chair, he might as well get his money's worth.

"So what's the plan, then?" This is safer, he decides, but then 'stick to logistics, not the big questions,' is pretty much the sniper's first mantra.

My team managed to backtrack Ward's call to him and got up on his phone; Winslow knows Barnes is in New York. And yesterday, we received confirmation that he's made arrangements to come to the states. He tossed the phone soon afterwards, though, so either he's just being cautious, which isn't his MO, or he's onto us. My team notified Hill because we needed a favor. She agreed to scramble some agents to Miami. Coulson smirks, leaning back in his chair. Of course, that meant that the trigger had to be pulled on three different field ops that were still in the surveillance stage, so your teammates had a bit of a long day today, but the stage is set.
"He's coming through Miami?"

We managed to track him to Tokyo, and he'll be getting on a freighter heading to Los Angeles day after tomorrow. But he'd searched Miami's ports on his phone previous to sealing the deal, and if he thinks he's being monitored, we want him to think that we've got outdated information.

"I still don't see why I couldn't be read in on this from the start. I mean, I knew Steve and Natasha and everyone were trying to get a bead on the guy."

It's touchy. Had to close down the communication circle as tightly as possible if we were going to minimize chances of leakage. We don't want to risk him thinking better of it.

"Is Winslow smart enough to hack in? How dangerous is he?"

As strong as Rogers, I'd guess. He's smart, but... think Jekyll and Hyde, only Jekyll's murderously insane before he takes the drugs. Coulson scratches his neck. We think the serum he's been taking has given him enhanced healing, but we don't think he's completely invulnerable.

"That's something, at least," he points out, realizing what it is that he should've asked instead. "Um. Does, ah, Daisy know about this?"

She does. When we got wind of his plans she requested to be put on another mission because- and I'm paraphrasing, here- while she doesn't want to kill her father, she doesn't want to run the risk of getting in the way of someone else doing it.

That's cold. Maybe commendable. He doesn't know her, so he can't say. Family's weird. He'd been set to kill Barney once, and-

-and he really doesn't want to think about that right now. Not that anything else on his plate is looking any more appetizing right now.

"So what's got you worried enough to go behind Hill's back to come here and tell me chapter and verse?"

We've got a plan in the works. Contingencies too. But nothing's gained by leaving you and Barnes to be caught out if everything goes sideways.

"You think it's going to?"

No, I'm just mitigating the risk in a way that only minimally undermines Hill's command. Coulson, it turns out, still smirks whenever he knows he's outthought his parameters. But it's not what Clint's asking for, and he's getting tired of having to pull teeth.

"But why, though?"

The smirk's gone, like it had never even been there. Because there's a monster on the loose that wouldn't be if not for me, and hopefully he won't make it, but he's heading your way. Christ, Clint. What the hell else was I supposed to do?
That third drink had been a mistake. He hadn't had any water until it was already too late to stave off the dehydration, and now his skin's itching, his head's pounding.

Every time he's managed to start dozing off, he snaps back awake, sure that there's someone in the apartment or that he's hearing whispered radio communications in the hallway. An hour ago, he'd given up on the bed and moved out to the couch, figuring that having line of sight on the door would help. He doesn't know whether he's giving in to the paranoia, or just proving to himself that there's nothing to worry about. Either way, it doesn't much help.

When he hears footsteps in the hall and a tapping at the door, he thinks he's imagining it. Only attackers don't tend to knock, and he thinks he can see a thin line of shadow moving between the door and the floor. Just in case, though, he shoves himself up off the couch and across the room, unlocking and opening the door in one fast movement. All it really does is make his own head spin.

Clint raises an eyebrow, but it's unenthusiastic. Maybe it's just the overhead lights in the hallway, casting weird shadows across his face as he brings his phone out of stasis.

"Hey James. Sorry I woke you. I gotta tell you something."

"Wasn't sleeping." Not really. Maybe for a minute there, though it's probably just wishful thinking. "Where's Coulson?"

If Clint's shuttering expression is anything to go by, it's the wrong thing to lead with.

"He took off a while ago."

"Oh. Uh. Sorry."

"What for? Him leaving was the highlight of my evening. Just spent the last few hours imagining his face on the bullseye." He holds up his drawing hand, chapped from the bowstring like it always gets when he's been using his light-draw "indoor" recurve.

"I thought you were- I mean..." He doesn't know what he means, to be honest. He's got no idea if he's supposed to mention it or not. It's embarrassing.

His eyes widen a fraction, but there's no telling if he'd struck a nerve, or just surprised him. It's shrugged off dismissively almost immediately.

"Yeah, well, it turns out that line about the only shots you regret are the ones you don't take is a total lie." Clint smirks, easily enough that he's probably being honest. "Dodged a bullet on that one."

Beyond that, he doesn't elaborate.

He does, however, follow James into the kitchen.

"Anyway, here's the thing," Clint digs a piece of paper out of his pocket. "They've identified the guy who Ward was planning on... well, selling you to. His name is Calvin Winslow, AKA Calvin Zabo." Juggling his phone, he unfolds the sheet one handed and holds it out. "You know him?"
He still hates questions like this, even when he's relatively sure of his memories, but there's no point saying so. He stares at the man's eyes and waits for some inkling of recognition, but there's nothing. It's just a man, so far as he can tell, and the name doesn't mean anything. But he notes the details of his face, just in case.

"Not that I know of." One of these days, he thinks he might just get that tattooed on his forehead, save everyone the trouble of asking. Unsure of what he's supposed to do with the picture now, he hands it back.

"Huh. Well. Looks like even after everything, he's still interested. Coulson and Hill've got intel that he's making his way to New York. They've got a plan to head him off and everything, but. Yeah. Figured you should know."

"I should leave," he says, signing it as well because it seems important that Clint's looking at him instead of his phone right now. His signing is sloppy, but it's either enough or he's reading his lips, because he shakes his head vehemently before James can even finish.

"No," Clint glares. "He's not due to dock in California for another few days, and when he does, Coulson's people and Steve's are going to be waiting for him. If he makes it past them, we'll at least hear about it."

If this Calvin fella can make it past Iron Man and the rest of them, they've got bigger problems, anyway, James figures.

"And if we jackrabbit now, we only increase the odds that he'll realize we're onto him. He'll change his plans, and we'll be back at square one." Rolling his neck, Clint fixes him with a stern look. "We're not going to gain anything by not knowing where you are."

"Okay."

"And ah... there's something else. Turns out it was Coulson- or, I dunno, his team, that's been messing around with people's brains."

Fuck.

That would explain why Clint had been picturing Coulson on his practice target, then. At least maybe part of it.

"What happened?"

"They went up against Winslow before, and for some dumb-ass reason decided that erasing his memories and releasing him into the general populace was a good idea." It's hard to tell if it's Clint's usual monotone he's hearing, or disappointment. "Only it didn't stick and now he's apparently got access to some spooky-ass resources, a bone to pick, and an interest in you."

"Did Steve know about it? The plan to wipe him, I mean."

"No." Clint shakes his head. "He only found out about it today, and apparently he's pissed as hell. But hey, silver lining, at least if Steve's still Steve, you know? Should make brunch a lot less awkward."

He nods back, though Clint looks resigned, more than he does certain. He's got no idea what to do with this information- he's not even sure how angry he's supposed to be, and so far, that seems to be the thing that's irritating him most. Well, that and the fact that Clint doesn't seem to be faring any better. Anger or frustration would make sense; instead, he just looks bummed out.
Watching his own words roll out on the phone's screen, he asks, "Hey, what's up?"

Apparently it's a loaded question, given how many expressions flit across Clint's face before he finally answers. "I dunno. It's just. Yeah, I know it could've been worse, like if Steve and Hill were secretly running around brainwashing people. But I got up this morning thinking that today was gonna be a good day. Get up, get my hearing aids, grab coffee. Grill and chill, you know? Instead there's some psychotic asshole coming after you, and Coulson showing up with Chinese, and-" he cuts himself off with a tight-lipped smile; it's fake. "Today was just disappointing. On pretty much every level available."

He wonders what would happen if he tried hugging him, if it would fix anything. He doesn't know that it would, but the impulse is there. "If it's any consolation, grilling kinda sucked. You didn't miss anything."

"Yeah, well. Still wish I'd told Coulson to fuck off instead. Sorry I bailed."

"You'd just have gone nuts wondering what he would've told you."

"Probably, but..." Clint trails off, apparently finding the kitchen sink suddenly fascinating. "Anyway, I'm gonna crash the hell out. Wanna come down tomorrow, watch TV and ignore the hell out of this shit for a while? Got like a month's worth of Dog Cops burning a hole in the DVR."

"Sounds good."

"Awesome," Clint gives him a thumbs up and a smile- this one looks genuine- before heading for the door. "See you tomorrow, man."

"See you."

---

It's almost five in the morning and Clint should be sleeping, not staring at the ceiling thinking about the notebook in the kitchen, the half-finished conversation about why he'd acted like a jackass when James had told him he was into guys.

He'd never gotten the details; there's been too much going on. The subway and Ward. Worrying about SHIELD and brainwashing. Dealing with Coulson and now, possibly, Winslow.

Also, you're a chickenshit.

But alone, with Lucky snoring at his feet and the cracks where they always are on the ceiling, he's coming back to the question again. Was it James who was into guys, or was it James Buchanan Barnes who had been?

It's not a fair question. But there aren't any, really, and he'd gone over enough of them when he'd been shooting at the wall. What's he going to say, "You're into dudes, I'm into dudes, let's bang?"

And God, for a second there, when he'd gone up to fill him in on the night's bad news- and when James had brought up the bad idea of leaving, again- he'd thought about bringing it up anyway. Thankfully he'd been too tired to come up with anything remotely resembling a segue into that particular line of conversation.

He's probably just overreacting to James killing Ward. Revenge, he's called it. Over him. At least that's what he'd said.
The thing is, Clint's never been that guy- never been the kind of person anyone would go to arms or take vengeance for. Nat might hold a grudge, go in a little heavier ordered during the counterattack, but that's all he's been able to come up with.

And really, what it boils down to is this. They've been living in each others pockets for months, now, that's all. Doesn't mean it has to mean anything.

Even if he wants it to.

Fuck, he needs to *sleep.*
Chapter 30

It's twelve thirty and even though his head's all cloudy from bad sleep and a self-inflicted lack of caffeine, Clint's already rescheduled with Kate to meet for lunch on Tuesday, walked Lucky, and gone on a beer-bread-and-coffee filters run. So far, he's managed to be about ten times as productive as he'd planned on being, and now he's got no intention of leaving the apartment for the rest of the day. The city can burn, for all he cares.

James seems to be on board with the entire hibernation plan, when he shows up, probably because he looks like absolute hell. He's changed into jeans, but he's still wearing the same sweatshirt he'd been wearing when Clint had knocked on his door at ass-o'clock in the morning. He hasn't bothered to shave, brush his hair, or put shoes on. More tellingly, the first words out of his mouth are please tell me you have coffee.

"Workin' on it. You hungry?"

James shakes his head with a scowl, screwing his eyes shut. On the bright side, I remember what hangovers feel like. Sam'll be thrilled.

"How bad?"

He opens one eye and... pouts? No. Clint'll go with sneers, allow him some shred of dignity here. Turns out that three whiskeys and no water while on medication, and then not going to sleep until sunrise, is a stupid idea.

He tries not to laugh, but it's failing already so he turns away to get the poor bastard some water. "Shit, dude, get thee to the couch. You need aspirin or anything?" James shakes his head, so he shoves the glass into his hand and waves him towards the living room. "Sit down, I'll bring the coffee in a minute."

---

Per last night's agreement, talking about anything that's not Dog Cops is off limits, not that their conversation's anything more than flipping off the television whenever Officer Rudy shows up on screen. Rudy's a fucking idiot. Nobody in their right mind would strike a deal with a lawyer that shady just to get information, missing sister or not.

An hour and a half later, they're halfway through the second episode when Clint contemplates getting up to refill his coffee. Only James, in his drowsing sprawl, is slumped against his arm and would probably topple over completely if he stood up.

So he doesn't move. Tries halfheartedly, for a while, to focus on the dialog flashing across the bottom of the screen, mostly ends up sneaking glances at James.

The man can pull off the five o'clock shadow thing, which is irritating and not something that Clint's at all jealous about, except for the fact that whenever he goes two days without shaving, he winds up looking like he doesn't know how to feed himself properly. On James, though, it just makes him look older. Or. Not as young? He'd been like 24, maybe 25 when he'd fallen off that train.

He'd been older than Steve by about a year, if he's remembering right. But Steve hadn't been thawed out between freezes. And it's not like either of them are really aging, as far as anyone's been
able to tell. But it's not like James looks like some kid fresh out of school. Well, maybe a grad student in philosophy, or some obscure anthropology shit.

And it's not like he can just ask "hey, how old are you?" without it becoming one hell of a complicated question. Maybe it's the kind of thing you're supposed to be able to see in people's eyes, or something, 'cause of all the crap they've seen and lived through, but it's not like Clint's got any means of comparison. He's seen some pictures of Bucky, back in the day, but he'd been distracted by how fucking weird he'd looked with short hair. And it's not like he can tell right now, with him crashed out like this.

Which is a little troubling. He knows that James' metabolism is such that getting drunk's not really a viable possibility, but he also knows that he's on nearly Banner-strength meds. And that usually, James keeps a pretty close eye on that whole thing.

It's just one instance. It's not a pattern yet. Given everything else, it's not the top of the worry pile. Sure, James might've fucked up a bit last night, and he- or better yet, Sam- should probably talk to him about it later. But James is also human, and shit happens.

Besides. Big picture here. James has gone from needing to carve James Buchanan Barnes into his own freakin' arm, to being able to remember who that had been in the first place. He probably knows himself now as much as anyone does. And this time last year? He hadn't even existed. He'd been kicked out of his own head for decades, totally powerless, terrifing the world, and had barely started clawing his way back to figuring all that shit out.

But one year later, and he's... Shit, he's been taking his meds, talking with Sam when he's supposed to. Going to work every day. Saving idiots in subway tunnels. Learning sign language and surviving kidnapping attempts. Walking Lucky when Clint's being an idiot and becoming friends with Steve again. He's gone from being terrified by the very idea of being in the same building as Simone's children, to eating dinner on the roof with them.

This week alone- Ward, the warehouse, the tunnel, thinking that he was going to get locked up again, the rest of it- would've been enough to drive a lesser man straight into a padded cell. And now there's Winslow. There's a madman crossing the planet just to get to Bucky Barnes, intent on sacrificing James to get the Winter Soldier. So yeah. James might be shaken- it would be weirder if he weren't. And he might've had one drink too many, and he might not be quite done thinking that his best move is to disappear, but he's dealing, maybe better than Clint is.

He knows that Coulson's people and Steve's people are working on it. But plans go south, and while he'll grudgingly accept that Coulson's heart's in the right place, he doesn't trust him anymore. He's not even sure that he likes him at all, anymore. Showing up out of the blue like he's got the right to bring in takeout, saying that it's because he cared, and somehow thinking that gives him a free pass, that everything's supposed to be okay. As if Clint hadn't just started getting over it.

As if that made up for Coulson's careless stupidity.

Plans go sideways all the time, but Coulson had pretty much guaranteed it, this time around. Worse, though, he'd crossed the same bad lines Loki and Zola had done. He'd decided that the act of going into someone's head and changing them into something more preferable was fine. That violating someone like that was justifiable, as long as you had your reasons.

And it's not like it's really Clint's place to say shit. He's made bad choices. He's killed people, and orders or not, he's done it often enough to know that it hadn't always been for the best reasons.

This time around, though, if it comes down to it and he's got to take someone out, he thinks he'll
have a pretty damned good reason to. Because despite everything, James fucking Barnes is crashed out next to him, with one bare foot dangling over the other arm of the couch and the other buried in Lucky's fur underneath the coffee table. Even with Winslow bearing down on the Western seaboard and all this other shit, he's passed out, safe as houses.

On Clint's couch.

He doesn't even want to wake him up just to go get coffee, so it's a given that he sure as hell doesn't want Winslow getting his creepy fucking hands on him. So yeah. Here he sits. Idly contemplating how he'll kill James' enemies, and trying not to move.

And all things told, this here, right now, not looking past this room or further out than the next five minutes, everything's all right. At this exact moment in time, things look okay.

As long as he stays still, everything's fine.
Chapter 31

When he opens his eyes, the headache's finally gone, but his leg's asleep. More troubling is the fact that not only is he sprawled all over Clint's couch, he's practically *lying* on Clint.

Who's awake, prodding his phone and smirking at him as he shoves himself up. "You feelin' better?"

He nods, rubs the sleep and hopefully some of the mortification off of his face. "What did I miss?"

"Not much. Turned it off a while ago."

He hadn't even noticed that the television was off. But the light's changed, it's got to be the middle of the afternoon.

"How long?"

Something crosses Clint's face that he can't quite catch from this angle. "Hour or two."

_Oh God_. He's an idiot. Clint's going to think- Whatever. "Sorry."

"You looked like you needed it." Clint shrugs, dropping the phone on the couch and fingerspelling [BRB] as he stands.

Lucky stirs, tail first and then the rest of him, but he doesn't follow, just yawns and lies down again.

Stretching, he tries to figure out what to say because he's pretty sure that things just got weird, and it's up to him to make them un-weird. Maybe just suggesting that they go back to watching from where they'd left off? Definitely not asking Clint what he's been doing for the last few hours. Now that he's awake, maybe he should actually get moving. Go back to his own place. Make food. Something.

Despite their agreement to ignore the whole Winslow situation, he should probably find out if there'd been any developments. There probably aren't, otherwise Clint would've woken him. But they've been slacking all day. Despite Clint's assurances about the week's lead time they've supposedly got, they ned to get a plan together at the very least.

He's digging his phone out of his pocket, opening a text from Sam, when he notices Lucky's tail going still and his head snapping up.

In the next instant, the dog's shoving against his legs, trying to get out from under the coffee table. And then he's off like a shot towards the door, barking.

"Lucky, chill out," he groans, getting to his feet. Once he's standing, though, he's *alert* like he hasn't been since the warehouse.

It's probably just kids making noise in the hall, but the dog's used to that. If he yells for Clint, it won't do any good, but he can hear the sink running; he'll be out in a second. Possibly wandering into something bad and completely unprepared.

But Clint's a quick thinker, and Lucky's not. If the front door gets kicked open, Lucky's going to be the first obvious target, so he dives after the dog, catching him by the collar just he hears the knock
on the door.

Attackers- ones that are worth worrying about- don't tend to knock. Checking the peep hole, he opens the door just as Lucky tries to wedge himself between him and the certain danger that is Tony Stark.

"Barnes, Hey!" Stark's smiling, but he seems surprised to see him. "How's it-" Lucky cuts him off from finishing the question, jumping excitedly and nearly knocking him over.

"What the hell? Lucky, chill." He grabs the collar again to manhandle Lucky out of the way so Stark can come in. This time, when he lets go, the dog seems to finally understand that this isn't a crisis, and trots back off towards the couch.

He looks up to find Stark looking at him appraisingly.

"Good to see you, man. Is Legolas around?"

As if on cue- because of course he'd missed all the commotion- Clint comes out of the bathroom, yawning. His eyes narrow when he looks at the couch, and he's visibly startled when he finally notices them standing in the kitchen.

"Tony, hey!" he says, leaning over the couch to grab his phone. "How goes it? Want some coffee?"

"Good, and thanks, but I'm good. Meeting Rhodey in twenty." Maybe it's just that he's so wired right now, but James is pretty sure he's the only one to notice the way Stark glances from Clint to him and back again before answering. Pulling a plastic case out of his pocket, he flips open the catch and holds it out.

James barely gets a look before Clint swoops in, grabbing one of the devices and jamming it into his ear. The second seems to take a little bit more finagling, but after a moment he stops, drags his thumb up along the underside, and raises his eyebrows.

"Well, somebody say something, or these are gonna be fuckin' pointless."

Stark laughs, leaning in to examine the fit. "They working okay?"

Clint's hand jerks back up towards his ear and he works a control that's too small to see from here. "Yeah. Loud and clear, man, shit." He's grinning like an idiot, it's kind of infectious. "I thought it was gonna take a few days?"

Stark scoffs. "For mere mortals, maybe, but this is me we're talking about, here. And it's amazing what you can get done when you've got the Black Widow lurking outside your lab as motivation."

"That bad?"

"She was filing her nails. It was terrifying."

Stark laughs- it sounds different, now, but James can't put his finger on it- and grabs Stark, dragging him into a hug. "Seriously, man. Thank. You."

"No sweat. I've got R&D cranking out spares this time, they should be good to go in a day or two. So feel free to tell Hill to put you back on the need-to-know list and tell the Red Menace to stand down."

"Sure thing," Clint grins back at Stark, happier than he's been in- shit, in a while. It's a little hard to
watch- *God* he's being pathetic, here. But then Clint releases Stark, and glances over at him, still smiling, and it's not so bad.

Stark's got that appraising look on his face again, but shakes it off. "Oh. And, while I'm here. Did you hear the one about the brainwashed veterinarian?"

Sobering, Clint's attention snaps back to Stark. "Coulson came over last night and filled me in."

Stark nods. "Thought he might've. That's good, then. So far, Winslow seems to be sticking to the plan. Just talk to Hill as soon as you can, it's weird not having you in the loop."

"Will do."

"Cool," Stark straightens, digs his keys out of his pocket. "Well in that case, I'll let you guys get back to your weekend." He signs a V at Clint, and pauses to nod at James. "Good to see you."

"You too."

Stark looks like he wants to say more but is thinking better of it, instead giving a salute as he leaves.

In his wake, the apartment seems quieter than before. He must not be the only one realizing it, because when he looks over at Clint, he finds him staring back expectantly.

"Say something, man."

"Like what?"

"I dunno," Clint snorts, smiling. *Anything, just start talking.*
"Okay. So, worst case scenario, he shows up and kicks down the door and we're in the apartment with Lucky... and Simone's kids, for some reason."

Clint's sat through mission briefings before. He's spent hours and hours talking through every last detail. Entries, drop zones, and extraction points. It's the kind of thing that had bored the hell out of him, before, when Coulson had been calling the shots. He'd take it all in, sure, but it wasn't like this.

James is talking about the merits of the south side fire escape as compared to the one that's accessible directly from Clint's window. "Better line of sight on the street, less chance that it'll draw fire across any windows," he says, drawing the finger of his right hand across the rough plan they've drawn of the building. There are four apartments on this floor alone that are too easily accessible.

Clint nods- his own voice is loud in his head and he ought to have acclimated by now. "So we draw him out, then. But the hallway's a bottleneck."

"There are two of us. I'll keep him busy there, you slip out on the eastern escape and swing over onto the southern." James leans back into the couch, smiling easily like he knows he's right. "Easier for you to cover if you're not in close quarters."

He's got a point, but they're not done. They're still only on the second scenario and there are at least six likely points of contact that Clint can think of without taxing himself.

"Okay," he says. "Sounds good. But what if Winslow, I dunno, parachutes onto the roof or something?"

He's got a few ideas, but right now he'd rather listen to James, even though he's rolling his eyes at him.

James' voice, as he describes the best way to make it into the building undetected, is a little less nasal than he'd remembered it being, but maybe he hadn't noticed; Tony's party had been loud and James and Steve had been playing up their accents and probably shouting. It had sounded great, then. But this is better. Quieter.

He can make out the almost-sounds James' arm makes whenever he shifts, like he's more real, or something. He can hear him breathing, the way it changes when he's not-quite laughing. And they're doing a lot more of that than he'd thought they'd be doing, considering the topic.

It's not that they don't both know that Winslow's a serious threat- they'd only really managed to ignore the entire topic for a few hours, after all. But they also know that the odds are good that this whole discussion will be for nought, and that The Avengers will take care of things before they become an issue.

But the fact remains, neither of them are the type to bet their collective luck against the eventuality.

"Yeah," James' tone is skeptical; he's apparently not liking his idea about directing things out to the open street, even if it does mean they've got more room to maneuver. "But there's a greater risk of someone coming in that way and complicating things. Never mind the attention it'll draw, so I'll lead him through to the back."
"That alley's nothing but blind corners, man."

"Means he'll have to get in close, less chance of stray bullets." His grin is a little too casual for Clint's liking, or at least it should be. But that's just it, he's calm. There's no strain in his voice, and Clint can tell, now.

Still.

"You're way too calm with this whole being-the-bait thing, you know that, right?"

"I gotta choice? Anyway, I heal fast."

"Fair point."

"You hungry?"

"I could eat." Honestly, he's starving, but something occurs to him. "Your tracker's up and running, right?"

"Yeah," James shrugs. "Won't need it, though. You'll be right there, covering from the fire escape, or closing off the alley." The confidence with which he says it- as if it's a foregone conclusion- should be enough to knot Clint's stomach. But it's kind of exhilarating, too.

Which leads them to scenario seven, maybe eight. He's losing count. "What if he shows up when I'm not here?" And, hot on its heels, eight as well. "Or when you're not?"

"Run like hell and get word out. Wing it."

That's what he'd been thinking, too. The thought of food leads him to the pizza and wings shop down the street, which in turn gives him an idea that might fill in the gaps in their first few plans. "Down the block. That old parking ramp, we lead him there. You want to order a pizza?"

"Sounds good. You talking about the condemned one? With the yellow pillars?"

"It's close. Relatively bombproof." Clint twirls the pen in his hands once, then sets it down and looks up. "What do you think, one with everything but the fish?"

James glares at him. "Also no pineapple."

---

Clint gets grease on their admittedly hastily drawn plan of the building, but it's fine, they've got the general strokes. James now knows that the doors in the basement, though heavy, won't lock, so there's no pinning Winslow down there if it comes down to it. Anyway, the goal is to get him away from the building as quickly as possible, not trapping him inside or up top.

The park down the way is their third best option, with the old train yard coming in second if only because while it's unpopulated, there are just too many places to hide. Ideally, they'll lead him to the parking garage.

"We should make sure nobody's camped out there." Clint leans across the table to snag another slice. According to him, it's a six story drop, eight counting the sub-levels, but James has never been in there. "Check out that elevator door, see if we can't figure out how to get it open at the top. Hm. Probably need to keep it shut until we need it, otherwise the city'll have our hides for handbags, but it could come in handy."
"Want to set up a cache?"

Clint considers it. "Dunno how we'd secure it. Want to go scope it out when we're done here? Might figure something out. Gonna need to walk Lucky in a bit anyway."

"Sounds good."

---

It's a nice night, all things considered. A little chilly, but not so much to keep everyone off the streets. Just enough that his gloves and Clint's wool hat don't make anyone look twice. The music rattling form the car parked halfway up the block is annoying as hell, but Clint seems to be enjoying it. The sun's gone down already, though it's not dark yet, and there are plenty of people around.

Once Lucky's found a suitable patch of grass, it's a quick dodge around the corner to the stairwell, which is boarded shut, not that it matters. At this level on this side, the wall to the garage is only a few feet high; even Lucky can make the jump.

He keeps expecting Clint to pull his phone out; he's gotten so used to it that when he eventually does, he finds himself waiting for him to speak, and has to step quickly to catch up with him it becomes evident that he's simply turning on the flashlight and heading in.

He follows, wondering just what the hell they're doing here. The walk over had given him some time to think. They've been talking as if they'll be able to control a situation before they have all the details. And totally ignoring one detail that's glaring right in their face.

If Winslow's coming, he's going to come looking in Bed Stuy, and he's not going to find a base, or a battlefield, he's going to find an apartment building full of civilians. They'll become complications, they'll be at risk. There are too many ways it could go down, there's no controlling it.

And fuck, if things got bad, what the hell would that do to Clint? Like it or not, this is his home they're talking about here. His friends, his neighbors, that would all get fucked up.

All on account of him.

He has to keep reminding himself that they're just backup plans for backup plans. The only reason they'd even started in on them in the first place was that he'd been too nervous at the prospect of Clint being able to hear him to talk about anything else.

It'll be fine. Stupid, though, to get all worked up over it.

The floors are slanted gently as they make their way up, checking the walls, doorways, and cement blockades as they go. Mostly what James is noticing is the noise. Traffic on the street and the rustling of wind- strewn garbage in the odd corner. Lucky's claws on the pavement, their own footsteps, and Clint humming to himself. It might be an old habit returning. It might be a new one, he doesn't know.

He's only been hearing again for a few hours. He's totally at ease, like they're not walking through a rotted-out, condemned parking garage trying to find a home-field advantage. He's acting like this is the most fun he's had all week.

Which means that he should've been more prepared than he is, because when Clint smiles at him as they check the next stairwell, it's like the wind's being forced down his throat so hard that he can't breathe. He steps aside- not as much as he could- when Clint shoulders past him back out onto
the garage floor.

Catching up to him, he makes himself ask, just to get his head back in the game. "You seein' anything that looks like anything?"

"Pretty sure someone was living here for a while, but not lately." Clint shines the light down at the corner he's inspecting. There's some wadded up fabric- a coat or pants or a small blanket, matted by rain and dirt.

Somewhere in the world, there might be another piece of unintelligible fabric left rotting in another corner. Something he might've left when he'd been, what- running? Hiding? Whatever he'd been and whatever he'd been doing before he'd turned himself in. Stolen clothes, abandoned corners that were never as quiet and isolated as he'd hoped.

That. That right there is what his life had looked like before he'd gotten here.

The doorway to the stairs had been propped open on the second level, but the door's stuck shut on the third. Getting the elevator door wedged open is a possibility- it easily budges an inch when he tries it, but there's no sense in risking it getting stuck open, so he leaves it. Besides, if they're going to need to shove anyone down an elevator shaft, it's not the highest available drop.

It's not until they make it up to the fourth level that they find out exactly why the parking ramp had been condemned. The floor's not sloped, here, it's sagging, concrete cracked and wilting- gone completely in places- and cordoned off with plywood and yellow tape.

"So," he says, after walking the perimeter. On this side of the tape, the floor feels stable, but there's really no telling. "Not so bombproof, then." Which could come in handy, though it'll open up a whole new host of problems: getting explosives probably means having to talk to Hill or Coulson or someone, and there's the entire matter of getting clear of the blast themselves.

"The supports don't look fucked, just the floor. Let's head up top and see what we can see." Twitching Lucky's leash, Clint starts walking again. The fifth level opens up to the sky, becoming the roof, and though there's no clean line of sight to the windows of Clint's apartment, it's a straight shot to the roof of the building.

Clint's noticing it too, but he looks unhappy as he stares down the block at his building, Lucky sitting down next to his feet.

"What's up?"

"I've got an idea."

"A bad one?"

"No. Might actually be a good one, depending." His voice hasn't reverted to his monotone, he's just talking quietly as he looks back at him apologetically. "How committed to being the bait are you?"

---

Well this sucks. Fucking murderous veterinarian starts coming for James and the best idea you can come up with is to put him at risk, alone. Nice work, asshole.

He knows he can make the shot, just like he knows that James can defend himself if need be. He shouldn't have to, is the thing, and it's completely fucked up that the most developed plan Clint's got is to leave him hanging, out in the wind.
But his tenants can't go through another siege again. Aimee and Deke's occasional bragging war stories about last time to the contrary, it's just wrong to even contemplate bringing all this shit down on their heads. It was close, last time- it hadn't even been a win. Barney had died. And it's one thing when it's trained fighters going down. Still horrible and awful but when it all boils down to it, at least they signed on for the fight. It's another thing entirely when it's friends and family. And that line between friends and fighters? Doesn't really exist with James.

He doesn't even get the chance to start explaining, though, when James glances past his shoulder down the block and guesses the plan.

"If I can lead him up here, can you make the shot from the roof?"

God, he's already thought it, but hearing it said aloud is the worst.

He shakes his head. "Never mind. It's a bad idea. We'll think of something else."

Fuck this plan. It's a backup plan anyway. As if Steve and Tony need backups for their backups from the likes of him.

How the hell did they even get onto this topic? Weren't they supposed to be ignoring it? He'd called a freaking embargo on the whole topic last night.

James seems to be considering it anyway. "It'll keep the fight away from Simone's kids."

"There's a lot that can go wrong in the space of a block." He looks down at Lucky, whose tail starts thumping against the pavement. "And I'm not going to be able to see you when you're inside the building."

"It won't take long to make it up here. I know where I'm going. And he'll be expecting me to lie in wait inside. Once he's inside, he'll have to look around, and that'll slow him down."

"Yeah, but.."

"But nothing." James ducks into his field of vision, scowling. "One. Leaving aside the fact that we both know it's not going to come down to this, you know it's the most solid plan we've got. Two. We already agreed that I'm okay being the bait, here." When he doesn't react, James taps him on the wrist, twice. "And hell, at the end of the day, it's me bringing all this shit down on you and yours anyway. If we were being really practical about this, I'd be taking off tonight, getting as clear as I can."

He doesn't mean to twitch back as hard as he can, but he's getting pissed off, here. And now so is James, from the looks of it. Great.

"You're not the one bringing all this shit," he says, because he's not sure how many more times he can win that particular argument. "It's all on Winslow, okay?"

"Doesn't change anything, though, does it?" James sighs. "Look. I'm not setting out to get myself killed here. But if a fight's got to go down, it's better if it happens here. We've got the lay of the land. And that's if it even comes down to it." He sounds like he's trying to be hopeful, which is something, at least.

"I know, it's just. Look. You know that I suck at making plans, yeah?" He'd rarely had to. That had always been Coulson or Steve's department. Sure, he can improvise with the best of them, but he needs to know what he's up against, needs to see it. "You saw as much down in the tunnels."
"I've seen worse. You've seen worse. We're not dead."

"Yeah, but." He's right, but that doesn't change anything. "I dunno, man. This entire situation, it's literally just too close to home." Realizing what he's said, he looks up sharply. "And this isn't an invitation to start off on that entire leaving argument again, but the way."

"Why not? I mean, I can't hide out forever, and the only way to really make sure that your neighbors don't get anywhere near this is if Winslow's looking for me elsewhere."

"And the way I see it, I-" Fuck. What's he supposed to say that he hasn't said already? That if James leaves, he's going to be a worried mess, worse than he is now? That the idea of not being able to have his back is fucking awful? And damn it, he shouldn't have even started talking, because James is waiting for him to finish, and Clint can hear him listening now. "Your being gone doesn't preclude him looking for you here anyway. And if he does, I'm going to need backup."

"And the way I see it, I don't want to put you and everyone else through that!" James throws out his arms, then drops them down to his sides, shaking his head, and it's all Clint can do to move past the fact that he knows what James sounds like when he's angry, now.

"Fine."

"Okay."

For a long time, neither of them speak, which is probably for the best. They'd both been getting loud, he can tell that now. He's not the only frustrated one up here, but he's getting exhausted, and the wind's picking up. It's fucking cold up here.

James is glaring down the empty row of parking spaces, eyes fixed, apparently, on the point where the concrete wall ends. He's frowning, but it's hard to tell whether he's thinking, or if he's not quite gotten around to it.

Clint tugs his hat down over his ears. "Look. I'm sorry. Didn't mean to go all..." he waves his hand vaguely, but it catches James' eye. "Whatever. I just don't want you to leave. Thought having a plan would help my case."

James blinks back at him, quirks a grin. "I don't actually want to leave, if it helps. But yeah. Backup plan. That's all this is, right?"

"Yeah."

"Shouldn't we be planning how we'll get to California to help the others out, if shit's going to go sideways?"

Clint stops, for once, to think about the words coming out of his mouth before he actually says them. "I thought about that. Worst case scenario, Winslow makes it past them, I'm not liking the idea of dragging you out to him."

"But you said that Coulson's dealt with him before."

"At first, but then they dropped the ball, in a truly spectacular fashion."

"Agreed. But if they could manage, there's no reason to believe that the Avengers can't, right?"

"Right."
"So really..."

"We're standing out here freezing our asses off for nothing," Clint realizes, feeling like an idiot. He knows that, he just. They've been going off the rails, here. Whatever. "Sorry I dragged you out here."

"Don't apologize. It's a nice night."

It would be if it weren't freezing.

Take everything else out of the equation and they're just standing here, alone but for the dog, with a view of Brooklyn that's just a little off from what he's used to seeing from his own roof down the block. They're good. He's pretty sure that James- standing there in his jacket, smiling against the wind as he tries to get his hair out of his eyes- isn't about to leave, and yeah, Clint's been freaking out for nothing.

He could kiss him right now, he thinks, which pretty much ruins everything.

"What's wrong?" Of course James notices, frowning back at him, too suddenly concerned.

"I'm cold. Should probably head back."

"Okay." He takes a few steps, glancing down to dodge Lucky, who's back on his feet, and they fall into step, making their way back into the garage

"Sorry about that," James eventually says, quietly, once they've moved past the sagging hole in the floor.

"About what, the floor?"

His eyes widen, like he's surprised he'd been heard. "No, I mean. Up there. Arguing." He shrugs. "Dragging you into all of this."

"You didn't drag me, I was already... but yeah. Didn't mean to shout. But hey, had to put the hearing aids through their paces anyway, you know?"

That's how it had started.

He'd told James to start talking, back in the apartment, and James had shrugged, and they'd been left with the elephant in the room. And it's not like they'd had anything else to talk about.

Nothing Clint knows how to talk about, anyway.

For a minute, all he can hear is the traffic outside and the echoes of their footsteps gritting against the floor. They're passing the corner they'd stopped in before when he notices James glaring at the discarded used-to-be clothing, lost in thought.

"What's up?"

James shakes his head, eyes snapping front as they walk. But after a minute, he sighs, hands thrust down into his coat pockets. "Look. Just. Promise me you'll let me know if the cost/benefit isn't working out anymore."

"What?" But James won't look at him and it's leaving Clint's brain to wander through some pretty fucking troubling territory. Worse, he's pretty sure he's not even lost, here. Not at all. "Don't worry about that. Ain't gonna happen."
Because after all this? He's still thinking like that? It would be insulting, if James wasn't looking so out of it right now.

"James." He can't see his face, so he stops, grabbing him by the arm. His left. It doesn't give, but neither does Clint, and now they're just standing here, halfway down the second floor, with Lucky tugging confusedly on his leash before sitting.

"These problems, we're dealing with them. You're not one of the problems- not some thing that I'm handling, okay?" God, he's going to wind up embarrassing them both, here. But fuck it. It's dark enough in here that it might be better to get it out of the way while neither of them can make out the finer details. "I'm not kicking you to the curb because shit's getting weird." Still not looking at him, James nods, but it's better than nothing. "And besides. In case you haven't noticed, the one thing I'm really freaking out about is the thought of you fucking off somewhere else. Not sure what the benefit would be, not interested in the cost."

They're standing close, but it's not like before. A few minutes ago, he'd been thinking about kissing him, now he's thinking about crushing him into something small that he can shove underneath his jacket and not lose, and that's way too much fucked-up shit to be playing out on the surface right now. But just his luck, James is finally looking at him.

And nodding, like he's taken a kick to the head, and that's not the reaction Clint's looking for- he doesn't know the reaction he's looking for.

"Okay."

"Okay." Relieved, he lets go of James just long enough to pull him into a hug. "Seriously. Don't worry about it."

"Sorry." James' arm is uncomfortable pressed against his side like this, but he can feel- and hear- him laugh, so he doesn't really give a shit. "Just figured. All this crap, I had to offer, you know?"

He snorts, stepping back. "Like what, letting me down easy?"

"Had to be easy for one of us, yeah?"

"Yeah, well, too late for me on that front," Clint says, because he's only able to think about his words before saying them once a day and he's already used up his allotment.

Shit. James is staring at him, James- with his insanely good night vision, is watching him realize that he'd pretty much just gone all in on something he hadn't meant to admit. And it's taken him long enough to rewind what he'd said that he knows he should already be laughing it off, making a joke about it right now, only-

-only he's not blind, and James' expression is just as surprised, like something's just hit too fucking close.

"Look, man. Ah, sorry, I-" What. Didn't mean it? Didn't mean to say it? Wasn't paying attention to what he was saying? He's too mortified to think, here, fuck. He should-

"Same here." James blurts, wincing. "For what it's worth."

And now it's Clint's turn to be gobsmacked. "Oh."
Running for the ledge and throwing himself over won't actually solve anything.

He hadn't meant to say it- hadn't meant to say anything, it's just. Clint had been freaking out and it had been impulse to try and make it better. He hadn't even been sure of what either of them had been admitting. He does now, though, at least he thinks he does. And that's the bitch of it.

Because he might be out of practice, but he's pretty sure spouting off declarations like that- regardless of who spoke first- aren't supposed to happen in condemned parking garages while planning for inbound murdering kidnappers.

And he's pretty sure they're not supposed to be staring at each other like this, like they're both regretting saying it.

"Um. Just to clarify," Clint says. "Are you... are we talking about the same thing here?"

"I think so?" He's pretty sure, though, that at least one of them ought to be able to say it. Only now it's hitting him that he could be wrong- so wrong- here, and that he's just blown up whatever friendship they've got going here.

Clint rubs a hand over his face, muttering. "Christ, Barton." When he looks up, though, there's a certainty set into his face that James doesn't know what to do with. "Are we both talking about how much it would suck if, ah... we wound up having to think about which one of us gets let down easy?"

Honestly, he can't even parse that out right now. He's got no clue. He's still contemplating that hole in the floor. The only reason he isn't running for it is that the certainty on Clint's face is already cracking at the seams.

His throat's tight, it's like those first few weeks at the academy where he had to speak more than three words in a row. "Maybe more along the lines of, ah... 'I like you a lot and have no idea how much is too much?'"

Clint's eyes go wide, and he lets out a breath, relaxing slightly. Maybe leaning forward a little, maybe that's just him getting his hopes up. "Yeah? Cool. Just for the record, same for me. Er. I like you a lot, too."

*Now what?* Neither of them ask, but it's got to be what they're both thinking. Clint's standing there, knuckles paling around Lucky's leash, while he's standing frozen, unable to move.

And yeah, he's thought about kissing Clint. More than once. He's also clamped down on that thought every time it occurred to him. But he'd kind of figured that the next time he kissed someone- easier to keep it vague, *safer*- it would just sort of happen. They'd be watching TV or coming home from having drinks or something. They'd be calm. Happy, at least.

It wouldn't be like this, both of them stuck in this awful, staring, awkward *freeze*.

Only Clint's gaze is darting between his mouth and his eyes, and there's something jolting in that; when he shifts towards him- not even a full step- it's a lifeline being thrown out.

It's going to happen, *shit*. His skin's too tight and he's not sure he's been breathing but they're toe-to-toe and Clint's trying to smile and he looks nervous, but he's *trying*.

"For what it's worth, all that worrying I've been doing? This is why."

Another imperceptible lean, and Clint's kissing him. Chapped lips, stubble, too quick, so he catches
Clint by the hips—shit that might be too much, he doesn’t know—and holds him there.

And kisses him back.
They wind up with their foreheads pressed together, too close for him to see James. It's warm, the back of James' neck, underneath all his hair, but that's not the only reason Clint can't move his hands.

When he pulls back- because it's going to have to happen, they can't stand here like this forever- they're going to have to uproot themselves from this spot and this moment and move on to the next one somehow.

"I, ah..." He's still got James by the shoulders; thinks about releasing them but doesn't want the distance. Squeezes them instead and feels James shadow the move on his left hip as he pulls back just enough to look at him. "I've got no idea what I'm supposed to say, here."

"Me neither."

"You good?"

"Yeah." James blinks back at him, a little dazed, and he smiles. "You?"

"Very."

Another smile in response. And James is looking at his mouth again, leaning in, when Lucky sneezes, jolting on the leash. In the moment it takes him to look down at the dog and look up again, James' grin has gone a little bit more rigid, his eyes a bit more wide. Clint should say something, here. He sucks at smooth, but he should at least be able to come up with something encouraging.

So what comes out instead is, "It's getting late. We should head back, yeah?"

James nods, looking relieved- at what, Clint's not sure- but his shoulder brushes against his, pressing a little closer than usual. They're good, he thinks, as they make their way back down towards the ground level.

It's fine. Only, a lot can happen in the space of a block. A few minutes ago, he'd had been worried about Winslow, and by the time they've made it five yards, there's a shitty little part of himself that would give anything to have the street erupt into a war zone. All that's on offer, though, is a few cars going by, a woman talking into her cell phone on the other side of the street, and the sounds of their own footsteps. He starts scuffing his toe on the sidewalk every few steps, just for the distraction.

The problem with being able to hear is that you know when it's quiet. Up until a few hours ago there wouldn't have been any awkwardness at all, walking like this, not saying anything.

Yeah, like that's the issue, here.

Goddamn it.

They're both staring at Lucky a lot more than usual. It's easy; they're all going the same direction, after all, and Lucky's walking ahead of them; it's a logical focal point. Even if it's just easier than looking to his left, where James is keeping pace.

It's just nerves, he tries to tell himself, while thinking furiously of what he's going to say when they
get to the door. But there are just too many questions running through his head instead. Are you sure and Why? and Seriously?

It seems to take a very long time to make it back to the building, but eventually, they're on the stoop, they're past it and inside, and they're halfway up the stairs and Clint's brain is still locked, frozen.

If he makes a sound, it's going to be the wrong one, it's going to send everything toppling down to shit, God.

"Um," James sighs, and Clint's heart just stops, for a second, certain that this is it- that letting down easy they've been talking about. There's the rueful smile- because Clint's an asshole and has been leaving James to worry this whole time, and fuck kissing him like that had been a bad idea.

"I don't. Ah. I don't know what I'm supposed to do now."

"Yeah," Clint says, because this, he can agree with. He understands. "Same here. Ah. I'm sorry? I mean. Not for kissing you, I mean, or-" He sighs. "I get that it wasn't the, ah. Most... the best, ah, setting."

"It's cool," James takes a deep breath, fidgeting his hair out of his collar. "Was kind of out of nowhere."

"Yeah," he agrees, readily enough, because otherwise he runs the risk of saying no, it's not and it's just too soon to go there- hey, at least he's not going to make it even more awkward by saying that he's been thinking about it for a while when James is so surprised by it.

And anyway, James isn't mistaken. Not really.

He hadn't been ready, he realizes- too fucking late- to kiss him. Or for James to kiss him back. But they're still standing here, and it's not the end of the world, it's just time for him to get his shit together.

Because he's got such a great track record in that department.

James, at least, seems to have recovered enough to edge back into his space with a grin that's more brave than it is confident, eyes barely darting down to Lucky who's sitting next to Clint's feet, thumping his tail on the floor.

"So if I, ah, kissed you good night, would that be cool?"

This time, it's not out of nowhere. Maybe that's all the difference. This time, he's aware of it, like he hadn't been paying attention before. There's a flash of James's left wrist between his sleeve and the glove he's wearing, as he reaches up to grab his shoulder. His own weight shifting forward, into his space those last few inches. Stubble and chapped lips and a mouth that's starting to relax against his own; the way James' mouth mirrors his own when he starts grinning even before pulling away.

This time, he thinks he's going to start giggling like an idiot.

But it beats the hell out of last time.
Chapter 34

"You're backsliding," Dr. Gupta tells him, leaning over the table as she stirs her coffee, her spoon making a steady ringing sound against the cup.

"We're going to have to inform the powers that be," Sam shrugs, rubbing his neck. He looks more disappointed in the situation than in him; it's something, at least. "You've made a lot of progress, but..."

"It will ultimately be Hill's call, as far as your current arrangement goes." Looking across the table at him, she's still stirring her coffee. The mug's too heavy to be ringing out like that; it sounds like a wet finger circling the top of a crystal wine glass.

"But why? I thought it was okay now?"

"It is. But you are supposed to be focusing on your own recovery. Now is not the time for you to start complicating your recovery by introducing a relationship into the equation. Especially one as potentially volatile as this."

"Volatile?"

The humming note finally pauses as she sets the spoon down on the napkin. "My concern is that you've become infatuated with someone who is, essentially, your primary touchstone to the current world. Any entanglement will cause you to put yourself at mental and emotional risk."

"But. You can't know that."

"We've seen it before, man." Sam offers up a humorless half-grin. "And Stockholm Syndrome isn't entirely out of the question, here."

"It's not like that-" Dr. Gupta's laptop is suddenly on the table. "Subject has shown signs of stress when questioned about his priorities," she says to herself as she types. He can't see her from this angle, not lying down like this, but the light on the ceiling is bright enough that he wants to close his eyes anyway.

"You were doing so good, man," Sam says, dragging his chair back from the table as he gets up; he only catches the hint of movement, just outside his peripheral vision. But even that's getting closed off. The blinders are coming down, the contact points pressing into his temples.

There's no pain, yet. Just the expectation of it as the lights get brighter behind his eyelids. And Dr. Gupta keeps typing, keeps talking. "It is my expectation that the subject will, having already accessed parts of himself deemed problematic, continue to chip away at the barriers which have been so carefully developed through our treatment regimen."

"Need anything from the fridge?" Sam asks. He's got the door opened; cool air is spilling out across the floor.

The typing pauses and Gupta calls out, "No thank you, Sam. Just be sure that there's room."

He blinks and the keystrokes have continued. "Next recommended steps for treatment will be to preserve him, temporarily, in a state where he can not unravel further. We will move the tank to a secure facility before bringing him out for further treatment. Fortunately, the technology recovered
by Phil Coulson's team is close to hand and accessing it should cause no unacceptable delays."

That ringing sound is back again. It's the charges warming up.

At least they're going to wipe him and shut him down before freezing him, this time.

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He wakes up, sweating, heart pounding, already halfway out of bed before the darkness of his room registers. He listens for several heartbeats, trying to determine what woke him.

It's been weeks since he's had a nightmare.

Heading out into the kitchen, he tries to remember what it had been about. But for a flash of bright lab lights and cold air against his skin, it's gone.

The usual, then, probably. Labs and Hydra and the tank. Not even worth chasing down.

Banishing it from his head, he turns on the light- it's four thirty in the morning. Still far too early to be up, but not so early that making a pot of coffee and reading, or something, is out of the question.

By the time it's made, though, the idea of reaching for a mug is just too much to deal with. Suddenly exhausted, he sits down at the kitchen table, rubbing at his face, before shooting up out of his seat and hurrying to the living room.

On the couch, he might actually manage to get back to sleep.

---

It's bullshit o'clock in the morning and Clint's brain's been in this stupid fucking loop for hours, now. Excited and happy and terrified and worried, back to giddy again, even though they're both grown-ass men and giddy shouldn't be a descriptive that goes anywhere near them.

But shit, what the hell is he doing?

*I think I fucked up, Nat.*

His thumb hovers over the send button for a long while.

God, that's just pathetic. He's not looking for someone to tell him it's going to be okay, he needs to know how to make it okay.

Interrupting her date night with Steve isn't going to help. And, oh, crap, they've all got that brunch thing tomorrow.

He could cancel.

But then he'd need to explain why to everyone, including James.

He deletes the message, stares hard at the screen to make sure it's gone, before throwing the phone onto the counter.

He could message Katie. Other than the texts this morning- and those didn't really count- it's been a while since they've actually caught up. Maybe he could just work his way towards it. God knows she'd jump at the chance to tell him how she thinks things should go. It would be right up her nosy little alley. He could just wind her up and watch her go, let her suggestions on how to fix things all
roll over him and maybe when they were finished he'd have some semblance of a plan.

Only it would be Kate's, and her plans turn to shit more often than not anyway. Besides. Then she'd know- as if she doesn't already- exactly how much of a moron he is.

It'll keep, he decides, until they grab lunch on Tuesday. Maybe he'll have it sorted out by then.

Grabbing the bottle- no company, no need for bothering with a glass- he turns on the television in the vague hopes that something will come on to distract him. But his brain's replaying every moment of the parking garage in slow motion. The full play-by-play.

The argument they'd nearly had. The assumptions he'd made. The terrified way James had looked at him.

James had grabbed on, though, that first time, and he'd kissed back. And for a few seconds everything had been great- amazingly so. For everything that came afterwards, he'd kissed back. And he'd seemed happy about it the second time in the stairwell, too.

Of course he had. The guy's decades out of his comfort zone, he'd been playing along. Hadn't wanted to offend him, or something- of course he hadn't. It's not like James has a lot of social ties, or friends, or whatever.

And Clint had just taken advantage of it. *Real* fucking nice.

*God*, he should've apologized, or asked him out on a date or something first- *Christ* he doesn't even know which direction he should've gone, there.

He should go up there. It's not super late yet. James is probably still up. Maybe he's spinning his wheels, too. Maybe he hasn't quite gotten around to deciding that Clint's a complete fucking loser; maybe he's decided all that and worse.

Either way, he's probably not eagerly anticipating Clint fucking Barton pounding down his door and demanding answers without having any to offer in exchange.

*Fuck.*

One way or another, things'll have to look better in the morning, right?
Chapter 35

It's bright when he half-opens his eyes, and for an instant, there's not a thought in his head.

And then he smells burnt coffee coming from the kitchen and a dozen smack into him all at once. He's on the couch, not in bed- some bullshit nightmare. Too much light in the living room for him not to be massively late. Kissing Clint last night. Brunch now, or thereabouts.

Launching himself up off the couch and in the direction of his room, he dives for his phone. Steve's *See you in an hour* is waiting on the message screen. He'd sent it forty-five minutes ago, so James crashes through his morning routine. Shower, shave, clothes, the rest of it; he's trying to keep one ear open in case the phone rings because he knows he's cutting it close.

Instead, as he's finally getting around to turning the coffee pot off, it's the door he hears.

Clint's on the other side when he opens it. He looks like he's trying to not look nervous.

"Hey."

"Hey," he says, torn between rushing back into the apartment for his boots, or staying right where he is and smiling at Clint like an idiot. He's too wired, he's realizing suddenly. Especially when Clint's shuttered down so hard it's impossible to tell what kind of mood he's in. "How's it going?"

"Good. You?"

"Good. Sorry- I overslept."

"It's cool. I'm running late too, so..." Clint blinks, frowning, finally shaking his head while glaring at the coat rack.

He's steeling himself, James realizes with a rock in his gut, for the obvious. "Um. About last night..."

This was always a possibility. He'd worried about it enough last night, cold light of day and all that.

"You gonna let me down easy?" He smiles, because if he was being shredded from the inside out right now, there'd be no point letting on.

Clint falters, squinting up at him. "Did you want me to?"

"No." At that, Clint seems to go boneless, but he's not falling, just crowding him against the still-open door in his relief. He tastes like toothpaste and coffee- and it's going to be far too easy to get distracted. It's already happening.

He pulls back, just enough to see Clint properly again.

"We should probably talk about it, though." At Clint's apprehension- crap, his brain's just not keeping up, here- he raises his hands. "Good talking. Promise." His phone is buzzing in his pocket, but he ignores it "Just. Took me a minute. Is taking a minute- to wrap my head around all this, you know?"

"You and me both," Clint says, before he's cut off by loud, tinny music. It's his phone; this the first time James has ever heard the ringtone, and it's playing some horrible-
When Captain America throws his mighty shield-

-it's the theme song to that godawful TV show they made about Steve back in the day. Thankfully it's cut off before it has the chance to take root in his head, as Clint reads the message.

"They're downstairs," he confirms, looking back up at him. "Talk after brunch, then?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. But. Just so we're on the same page. Do we tell them, or not?"

He'd been wondering about that- there's a part of him that's been dreading the whole topic, since he woke up. But he's in no shape to bring it up, at least not until they've sorted things out.

"Not yet," he says, relieved when Clint's answering smirk is conspiratorial, not wary, but he's careful to add, "want to keep you to myself for a bit."

"My thoughts exactly," Clint says, stepping into the hallway so James can close and lock the door. "And it would be bad form to steal their thunder."

"What do you mean?"

"Steve and Natasha. They're... well, I think they're dating now."

He blinks, heading down the stairs towards the front door. Natasha's car is parked at the curb; both of them are inside. "Shit. I totally forgot."

"Eh," Clint laughs, "you were distracted."

"Can you blame me?" And, just because he can- because he's wired right now and it's making him stupid- as he's opening the door, he winks at Clint.

Tilting his head, obviously so Steve and Natasha can't see, Clint talks out of the side of his mouth. "This is going to be the longest. Brunch. Ever."
Chapter 36

Don't look at him. Keep your eyes on Natasha. Not that much, she's going to start wondering why you're staring. Look at Steve instead. He's the one who's talking, now.

Focus.

They're not being cagey about the fact that they spent the night together, but they're not saying anything about it, either. They'd expect people to wonder. Any awkwardness could be chalked up to that, no problem.

It's fine.

Steve's rattling on about the art exhibit they went to yesterday, and James is nodding along, digging into his eggs, left hand tucked underneath the table even though this booth is so cramped-honestly, it would be a tight fit with just the supersoldiers, here- that the waitress isn't going to see anything anyway. James knee is pressed against his- quit looking down like you can see it through the table. Don't look, Natasha could-

-Natasha is staring again. She already knows. So much for keeping this close for a while. She's washing her food down with her coffee, her eyes are scanning everyone. As Steve finishes describing some insane chair-lamp monstrosity- it sounds like it looks like one of those angler fish that live deep in the ocean, utterly horrific- that was on show in the modern design gallery she opens her mouth to speak, and this is it-

"You guys should check it out sometime. Beats the hell out of that godawful portrait museum where we got stuck waiting for Vanko."

He huffs out a laugh that's hopefully less surprised sounding than he'd meant it. That London op had been terrible. They'd waited for their target every day, open to close, for three days. Getting increasingly twitchy because while hiding in plain sight was one thing, waiting in plain sight when there were rooms full of serious and disapproving eyes staring back at them from every goddamn angle had been another matter entirely.

Next to him, James nods into his food, and now Steve's looking at him, before sharing a glance with Natasha.

Fuck, his relief had been premature. It's a meaningful glance- one of those are you seeing what I'm seeing? with an answering yes, follow my lead.

He's expecting it to be Natasha, but it's Steve who asks.

"So," he looks at James, then him, then James again, "what's new with you two?"

"How's Bed Stuy treating you?" Natasha adds, because she's better at conversations than Steve is. Knows how to soften the blow, keep people from tensing up and shutting down too soon. They're handling them.

"It's good," James shrugs.

"Same old, same old." Clint's shrug might've mirrored James' too much, but it would be weirder if he hadn't added it.
James is fiddling with his toast- Clint risks a look now, just a quick one, to find him apparently completely at ease, but his leg is tensed sternly against Clint's, now. Not that Natasha can see it.

Steve looks puzzled, though, and a little concerned. "You're sure?"

"Well," Clint leans forward, ostensibly so he doesn't have to speak so loudly, but mostly to drag their attention off James. "Apart from the SHIELD-brainwashed psychopath heading this way, yeah."

At once, both Natasha and Steve seem to relax, glancing at each other. It's not until Natasha nods that he gets it.

"Eat your damned breakfast, Clint," her eyes dart down to his mostly-full plate.

"We've got the situation under control," Steve adds, helpfully. "Wasn't sure what you'd heard."

Oh.

This. That whole thing just now? Not about him and James, then.

"Glad to hear it," James says, after a second- Clint can feel him relaxing. "Gotta admit, it's been a concern."

He's got the thread; he can do this. "Coulson wasn't much help." It's probably the most deliberately active part he's actually taken in the conversation since they'd sat down.

"You heard about that?"

"Was at the tower the other day. Picked it up on the phone." Buttering his toast- it's sourdough, it turns out, and it's awesome. "And then, night before last, the man himself showed up on my doorstep to... I don't know, warn me or something." He knows he's talking with his mouth full- Natasha's fault, for the record. "Wound up telling me everything."

Natasha's looking at him like she's worried, now, and- aw hell, of course she is.

She'd been the one to tell him that Coulson'd been dead. She knows better than most people how badly he'd taken it, she'd been one of the very few to know why, and she'd been there when he'd found out the truth.

"Huh." Shoving her expression down, she shakes her head, busies herself with her fork. "So how did that go?"

James' leg muscles tighten again, his knee twitching away. Above the table, though, he's just sipping his coffee.

"Fucking screw him, is how it went," Clint grumbles, easing back so his knee tapping James' could be read as accidental if James wants. "If he'd handled the situation in the first place, instead of going all-" they're in public, here, so he lowers his voice- "mad scientist mind-games, we wouldn't be in this mess."

Steve cuts him a rueful grin. "Yeah. This entire thing is complicated. But. We still need to work with him."

"On the plus side," James sneers. "That's going to be clear on the other side of the country, right?" Clint blanks his face as Steve blinks in surprised confusion. If it's James' words or their vehemence
that he's reacting to, Clint can't tell.

"You met him?"


The waitress chooses this moment to come by to refill their coffees, leaving Clint to worry about the meaning behind James' tone while they all smile up benignly as their cups are filled.

As soon as she's gone, though, Steve's attention snaps back to James. "Bucky?"

James shrugs, dumping too much sugar and milk into his coffee to answer, which is odd. He always drinks it black when he's at Clint's. Maybe he should start think about keeping supplies on hand.

"Thought you were in on it with him, at first. The entire... head thing. Wasn't until Coulson showed up that we learned otherwise."

Apparently James is one of the only people who can put that wounded and disappointed expression on Steve's face and not totally crumble.

"Seriously?" Steve recovers fast, though, which is a relief for Clint, at least. "I didn't even know he was alive, much less still working, back then. If I had, it wouldn't have happened, all right?"

"But you're still okay with working with him."

"One. His people have dealt with this... situation before. We need their resources and intel, or this won't work. And two, okay, yes. I get it. He messed up. A few different ways. But he's not one to make the same mistake twice, and he's a good guy, trust me."

Steve's defense seems to be enough for James, who just sighs. "You're sure?"

"I am."

Hell, Clint could've told James that. Him, Natasha, Tony, Bruce. Hell, Thor too, probably. Pretty much everyone he knows comes with big flashing warning labels in that department.

"All right." James nods, sips his pale coffee before blinking, somewhat shamefacedly, up at Clint and Natasha. Her eyes are wide, and his own face must look wary as well. "Sorry. Just. When you're not in the loop, you get things piecemeal."

Steve nods, then looks over at him. "Could make that a hell of a lot easier if you'd just get that paperwork in, Clint."

"For my security clearance?"

"Well, that and your field clearance. We know you're up for it, whenever you want. Might make things easier on your end if you weren't out in the wind."

Aww, brunch. This was not how today was supposed to go.

Only Steve's looking at him hopefully. Natasha's trying not to smirk, which works better than smirking actually does. James, though, he's just watching Clint like he's got something he wants to ask but is shelving it for later.

"I'm starting to get that," he says, smiling because right now, it's just easier to placate them than get
into all of the reasons why that's a terrible idea. "I'll think about it, okay?"

Natasha grins, not like she's already won, because they'd gone too many rounds on this for her to count her win too early. But she knows as well as he does that it's been a while since they've talked about it. And things have changed.

Hell, who knows? Maybe it's time.

---

He manages to hang onto the question until Steve and Natasha are pulling from the curb.

"That. Before. They're talking about you going back on with the Avengers, aren't they?"

Clint smirks, but he could be just glaring against the sunlight. "That they are." He turns to glance at him before nodding at the building.

Following him up to his apartment- it's ridiculous that he'd been dreading- slash-anticipating this moment, when he'd be waiting for Clint to unlock the door, listening to Lucky tap dancing on the other side. It hadn't occurred to him that there'd be something he'd be more concerned about when the time actually came.

Clint's indoor recurve is still leaning against the television where it had been yesterday; the target on the wall is still a mess of holes more than anything.

"So you're thinking about it?"

"I hadn't been. Not in a while." Clint shakes his head, easing himself onto one of the stools at the counter. His mouth twitches up at the corners.

"Hadn't been an option."

He nods. "Because of your ears?"

"That, and a few other things before that. Was kind of a mess after New York, got benched. Wasn't really wanting to know what the shrinks thought, at first. Then everything went to hell with SHIELD. Stark got Hill set up running things the way they've been doing, and I was grandfathered in on the security clearance front because, well, it's not like they could go into my brain and take it away, you know?" Clint stops short, his face falling. "Shit. Sorry, I mean--"

He shakes his head, rolling his eyes. "Don't worry about it. But what happened next?"

Everything went to hell here," Clint shrugs. "Kazi, Barney, my ears and the rest of it. It's only the past few months that things have settled out, you know?"

He nods, looks around the cluttered apartment, then taps at their greasy plan of the building spread out on the counter between them, every ingress and egress and blind corner marked. "This is settled?"

"So to speak."

"Do you want to go back?"

Clint shrugs, squints up at him even though his eyesight is probably not failing him. "I dunno. You think I should?"

"You're asking me."
Apparently not getting the irony, Clint shrugs. "Yeah, why not?"

He resists the urge to roll his eyes. "Kind of new to this entire decision making process for me, much less anyone else."

"Actually, that reminds me- you want me to keep unexpired milk and sugar around for coffee? You're over often enough."

"Huh?"

"At the cafe. You put milk and sugar in your coffee. And you always get those ridiculous latte things when you go out"

The deflection is a little obvious, but he seems honestly curious. And if there's a reason he doesn't want to get into it, so be it.

"No, the coffee's fine here." Clint still looks concerned- seriously, about coffee. "Doesn't need it. It's everywhere else it tastes wrong."

"I know," Clint agrees. "I'm the one who makes it. But even I can admit that it's total sludge." A look of dawning realization spreads across his face. "Is this one of those old-timey things? Like you and Steve hate bananas and grew up during the depression or whatever?"

Honestly, for a guy who drinks straight from the pot whenever reaching into the cabinet for a mug is just a bridge too far, Clint's putting far too much thought into this.

"Sure? I dunno. Never thought about it. But consider the question dropped, sheesh."

Clint blinks and sits up. "Huh? Oh! No. That wasn't what that was about. Was just wondering from the cafe, is all. Signing back on with Steve and the rest isn't, like, some big deal or anything."

"Really?"

At least this time, he seems to seriously consider it. "Actually, no. It's not." He snorts. "Guess it's just been a while since it's come up, that's all."

"When was the last time?"

"Like a year ago?"

"And you said no."

"No, I said fuck no, chased Natasha out of my apartment, and then drank half a case of beer in the bathtub."

"You planning on doing that again?"

"It's a little early for that, and the shower actually works now, it kind of ruins the whole aesthetic." Clint deadpans. He does stop to think, though. It's a good minute before he continues. "I dunno. I mean. On the one hand, it would simplify things, not having to pretend not to know about things like Winslow creepin' up on us."

"True."

"But then on the other hand," Clint sounds much less sure of himself now, "there's the fact that the time I was brought in on anything, I wound up blinding you and leaving you to fight your way out
of a warehouse full of kidnappers."

"Sure, but-"

"It was on fire."

"For all I know, I was the one who started it."

Clint is unimpressed. "Still..."

"Still nothing. None of that was on you." He'd planned on talking to Clint this afternoon, and he'd been nervous about it, but it was still supposed to be going a lot differently than this. "Don't worry about it. Shit will continue to go sideways whether you're there or not."

At least this gets a laugh. "True." Clint scratches at his ear, rolls his neck, and looks at him. "So you think I should do it, then."

"Like I said. I'm not up to deciding for other people yet. I'm just saying that I think you can, if you want to."

Clint doesn't seem to have anything to say to that. And James almost wishes he would, because if that's the end of this particular conversation, then they're probably both thinking about the other conversation.

And it's not that he's worried about it. He just has no idea where to start.
Chapter 37

There's a ticking noise in the corner of the kitchen, and Clint has to search out the sound to see that no, there's not a bomb about to go off, it's just the clock on the wall. It's still set about nine minutes too fast, same as it's been for like six months now.

And the seconds are dragging on. He's not sure how to segue from "should I re-enlist" to "so, this entire me-and-you thing, howsaboutit?"

It should be simple. The basics are already out there. They hang out all the time already, shit, James already has a key to his place. It's just the terms that need to be set, and he's got no idea where to start with that kind of conversation. Like, he's pretty sure they should be half-drunk or something- just enough to stumble into the topic sideways- but it's only one thirty in the afternoon.

James is leaning over the plans they'd drawn- the pizza-sauce stained sheet depicting the third floor, Clint realizes, is the monthly summary from the utilities company that he's got to parse out and send to the tenants by the end of the week. James is idly lining up the paper to the sheet that has the basement plotted out, edge to edge; he looks far too intent on the task for it to be anything other than nerves.

"Hey," Clint says, standing up, and James pushes himself from the counter as Clint steps around it and towards him. It had been the right move, if his grin is anything to go by. Twisting, James stands up to meet him.

By the time Clint's hand find James' side, James already has his right arm up over his shoulder.

This is the least nervous he's been, kissing him, and he doesn't even notice it until James is pulling back to smirk.

"So. That conversation."

"Yeah," James nods, opening his mouth like he's about to start in on it. But then it snaps shut and he heaves out an irritated huff. "I have no idea what I'm doing." Whether he means in general, or right now, it's impossible- and hell, pretty pointless- to guess.

"Well, me neither. So at least there's that." The kitchen is a step up from a rotted-out parking garage, but it still feels ridiculous. It's a start. "Want to head into the living room?"

Of course, once they're in there, heading for the couch, then there's the entire matter of where to sit. Off at the end might be off-putting. Sitting in the middle might be too presumptuous, but it's far better than the armchair on the other side of the television, so he goes with it.

James wedges himself in next to him, sitting sideways. It's good, even if his knee is digging into the side of Clint's leg a little bit.

God, should they be holding hands or something? That's just weird. This would be way easier if one of them would just start, already.

"So what do you need me to know?" He asks, after a minute or so of awkward grins and eye contact that's barely more than a sustained volley of glancing blows.

"The last time I even went on a date would've been decades before you were born, and I don't remember it. I'm out of practice."
"The last time I was on a date I'm pretty sure both parties wish I'd never been born," Clint counters, hoping that it sounds funny rather than pathetic. At James' raised eyebrows, he shrugs. "We got drunk, rolled into bed. Toast and hangovers in the morning, said we'd call, neither of us did."

"You were okay with that?"

"With him? Yeah. Don't think either of us had in mind anything more than one night." Great. Now he sounds like a sleazy asshole. "Um. That's not what I'm thinking, here, though."

James nods, watching his left hand scratch at the scars on his arm. "Me too." Looking up, he frowns. "I mean. I don't know about, you know. Sex." He looks mortified the moment the word's out of his mouth, and when he meets Clint's eye, it's probably accidental. Though it's not like Clint's not also a little more at ease when James goes back to staring at the plates at the base of his left thumb. "I mean. I know about it. Just not... like, when."

"How do you mean?"

He shrugs, shaking his head, grinning bitterly. "More like, I'm kind of fucking in the head." Even though he's talking slowly, everything comes out on the exhale. "And on meds, and it's all still kind of messed up? There are... side effects. Like even if I went off them- and I don't know when I can-"

"Hey," Clint brings his arm up, resting it across the back of the couch so that he can reach James' left shoulder. "Been there. It's cool. Don't have to rush anything, all right? I know how it goes"

"I've kind of been into you for a while now. Wasn't planning on bringing it up anytime soon. Or possibly ever, because- and hey, you should know this about me, in case you haven't figured it out already, and it's fine if you haven't, because it's only been recently that I've caught onto the fact- but."
He remembers to breathe, finally. "I can be kind of a self-sabotaging idiot sometimes."

James gives him an unimpressed look, which is sweet, but it's only because Clint's failing to get his point across. "I mean. I figured I'd just keep my mouth shut and it would never happen anyway. Now we're sitting here and it's good. Like, this, right here? Is already better than I'd hoped for. Even if this entire conversation has me wanting to claw my eyes out because I'm starting to have flashbacks to my old shrink's office."

"You and me both. Sorry."

"Speaking of that, though. I mean, your meds, your sessions and everything. Did they give you the "Don't date, just focus on yourself for now" lecture?"

Suddenly, James looks like he's thinking about vomiting.

"Sure. Maybe... six months ago?" He twists his mouth shut, like he's trying to chase down some irritable memory that he's not quite reaching. "Wasn't much of a lecture, though. Just kind of a recommendation thing." His expression smooths out as he shrugs; he looks almost content. "It was vague."

Whatever had spooked him, it seems to have passed, but that doesn't cancel out the fact that something had spooked him in the first place.

"What's up?"

James shrugs, leaving Clint to guess blindly.
"Okay... um, hold up, I gotta ask. I mean, I know we started talking about it, but..." he gestures back at the kitchen. Whether James figures out he's referring to the pile of notebooks, or to the specific notebook in question, is anybody's guess. "How do you feel about the whole homosexuality thing?"

Rolling his eyes, James leans back against the arm of the couch. "It's all the rage now. There's chips advertising it and everything."

"Dude."

"No. Sorry. I guess... It's weird, like... I was like this back before the war. Things were different. I mean, you didn't talk about it, but there was a system. You knew where to go, knew what to look for. You knew what to avoid if you didn't want to get caught. I'm not sure, but I think it might've almost made it easier? But. I dunno. A lot of this, I just read up on, I don't even know how much I actually remember from being there."

"So, like, is it that you're not sure how it all works now?"

"That's part of it," he replies, like he's trying it out for size and doesn't like the cut, and he smirks. "There's that- like the general, 'okay, it's allowed now, everyone go out and be proud just watch out for the- who are those church people?"

"West Baptist?"

"Yeah," James shrugs. "Or whoever. But there's that, and it's one thing. And then there's all this weird shit with the shrinks and the drugs and living here because SHIELD didn't know what to do with me. So, I guess, if it's going to be an issue there?"

Clint nods. Truthfully, he's got no idea himself. It's not like he hasn't been worried that the next time he goes in and talks to Hill he's going to get a lecture about complicating James' recovery plan or something. Then again, it's not like lectures from up the chain have ever done all that much good anyway.

"I don't think it will be. If it is- it'll probably just be some eye-gougingly awkward conversations- but we'll sort it out. Deal?"

James nods, not looking particularly convinced, but he shifts over when Clint tugs on his shoulder. It's more comfortable this way anyhow, even despite James' metal arm. Alerted by the movement, Lucky looks up from his spot in the sun next to the window, but loses interest when it's clear they're not getting up.

Incrementally, James starts to relax, which hopefully means that the hard part of the conversation is over. And Clint really hopes it is, because as far as Rules for Being Gay in the 21st Century goes, he's having a hard time figuring out what still needs to be said, and what just might be patronizing as hell.

"I think I dreamed about that last night," James says, eventually, voice quiet, but he glances over. "Not a big deal, I just didn't remember it until now."

Well, shit. Considering everything that's been going on, it's not that much of a surprise. "What was it?"

"Uncomfortable conversation about this turning into the usual electroshock and freezer routine." He shrugs, or maybe he's just shifting; his shoulder's not digging in so much any more. "Got up, made coffee, fell asleep again before it was done. Think I was just overdue."
There's nothing much to say to that, so he nods. Then forgets to say anything for a few more minutes, and the silence stretches out. It's quieter than the street last night had been—when he'd started freaking out himself—but it's bearable.

Hell, it's kinda nice. But as the minutes drag on, he starts thinking about the bills on the counter that need sorting out, and debating whether the calls he's got to make should be put off another day.

After about ten minutes, the taps James twice on the arm to get his attention.

"Yeah?"

"You maybe want to go out tonight? Like dinner and a movie or something?"

"You asking me out on a date?"

"Yeah. Preferably someplace with steak. You pick the movie."

"Awesome. Yes." Grinning, James sits up, sliding his left arm around Clint's back, and kisses him. "In that case, though, I think I'm gonna head out," he squints, because it turns out that kissing someone repeatedly makes leaving kind of a production. "Grab a paper and look for showtimes."

"You do that," he says, catching him by the hips before he can get too far away, and kissing him again. He doesn't tell him that he's grinning like a dork the entire time, but he's not going to get up to look in the mirror himself anytime soon, either.
Chapter 38

James doesn't need the caffeine, and his phone could tell him everything he needs to know showtime-wise, but he's too twitchy to sit around his apartment, so he walks down to the coffee shop and buys a paper and a latte at the counter.

And winds up ignoring both after five minutes, in favor of picking up his phone anyway and googling *how to act* and *what to wear on a date* because he has No. Goddamn. Clue.

Most of what he's finding is meant for sixteen year olds. When he starts referring to ages in the search, he starts getting things about dating after a divorce, or dating with kids, and he starts getting results that involve discounts to restaurants for AARP members; he has to look up the organization because it's something that Steve's joked about once or twice.

This isn't getting him anywhere.

When he looks up, two hours have gone by, and he's planned sieges on well-defended bunkers in less than half of that. His coffee is cold and the cafe probably needs their table back.

And besides. He should probably be getting cleaned up, start figuring out what to wear.

Showering and not showing up in day-old clothes had seemed, after all, to be the few things that all his sources had agreed upon. He needs to go shopping.

---

"Hey Maria, it's Clint. Sorry for calling you on the weekend."

"No such thing," she says. "Good to hear from you. Or hear you, or whatever. Did Tony stop by yet?"

"Yeah, he did, yesterday," Clint blinks at the ceiling. It doesn't feel like he's making a mistake, here. "I think it might be time to get back in the game. One condition, though. Out in the field is one thing, but I'm not going anywhere near the barracks. I keep my own place."

"No worries there, Fury's reign of Shitty Housing Installations and Evil Lame Dormitories has finally come to an end." She laughs, and it's the first time he's caught her sounding like, well, *herself*, since New York. "This is great- you're serious?"

"Yeah. You running the same deal? Psych, physical, signatures for days?"

"Still the same drill, but we'll fast-track what we can. Hang on, I need to remote in." In the background, he can hear typing, and after a few moments, she's back on the line. "Could take care of both of them tomorrow, though. Mondays are usually nightmarish but looking at the calendars, all the required personnel will be on hand. And it's not like you're going to need the grand tour, after all. Everything pans out, we could have you ready to go as early as Wednesday."

"That's great," he says, maybe a bit too forcefully.
Hill must hear it too, beaux the next words out of her mouth are, "Clint, are you sure about this? Why the change of heart?"

"Got caught up on Dog Cops," he says, glibly. He's talking to Maria, after all. It's not like she doesn't know him well enough to expect him to at least try dodging the question, and besides. It's one thing to sign back up again; explaining it is another matter entirely. "Then I got bored."

"Know how that goes," she replies. "So. Does it work if I set you up at HR at 10 tomorrow?"

"HR?"

"Yeah. It's what happens when your organization sells out to Stark Industries. Welcome to the world of government contracting."

Last time he'd signed on, he'd been in a borrowed office, with two undercover agents guarding the broken windows for a ten minute conversation with Fury, Coulson, and two Off-The-Record Generals, and he can't imagine it had been too different for Hill. "This is gonna be weird, isn't it?"

"Yeah, well. Weird's what we're here for, isn't it?"

"Guess so."

---

Maybe he should've paid closer attention when James had rattled off the list of movie options. Maybe he should've connected it to the trailers he'd seen. But he'd been too nervous about the fact that James had actually showed up- not that he'd honestly thought he wouldn't, much- freshly showered and wearing a black t-shirt, underneath a dark gray button-up, underneath a black cardigan that looked newer than the two he rotated whenever he went to work. The jeans seemed suspiciously new, too. A little tighter than Clint had been used to seeing.

He'd looked like a million bucks.

By comparison, Clint had rated his own getup at a buck fifty. At least he'd showered and shaved. The tweed vest- tailored to fit in Paris while Coulson and Natasha rifled through the files in an upstairs office- was the nicest piece of clothing he owned, and more importantly, it covered up the burn marks he'd singed into the back of his shirt.

Once James had arrived, the burnt fabric smell had suddenly been thick in the air. Hoping to get him out of there before he could notice- and subsequently realize that Clint was a freaking moron- he'd hurried them both out of the apartment, nerves spiking, palms sweating, not even kissing him hello until they were halfway down the stairs.

So he hadn't really been paying close attention when James had held out the list of showtimes. He'd just gone with the one that worked best with the dinner reservations he'd made.

Now, though, they're sitting in the dark, watching a man firing off quips while he's getting tortured by the evil asshole who's trying to trigger a mutation that will turn him into a super soldier. It doesn't help that Clint already knows, from the opening scene, that Wade Wilson will get through it just fine.

And it really doesn't help that he's been oblivious to what he's watching until he's turning his head and opening his mouth, intent on asking James, "Did you crack jokes like that?"

James is just glaring up at the screen with an angry expression on his face. His mouth's a tight line,
and his right hand's a fist on his lap; his left is buried in the seat, down against his side. He doesn't tear his eyes away from the movie, doesn't give Clint the chance to ask if he wants to leave.

Because if Clint wants to ask, he has to let on that he's noticing, and out here- out in the world, in a theater that's packed to the gills with people- he's not sure how to play it.

So he turns back to the screen. Tries to watch James out of the corner of his eye. He only starts incrementally relaxing when James starts laughing again, some twenty minutes later. It feels forced, at first, but it's an effort and it doesn't take much for Clint to relax enough to join in. Eventually, Wade Wilson gets the bad guy, gets reunited with his estranged fiancee, and everything's okay.

Even so, James is quick to get to his feet the instant the credits start rolling. It's hard to tell in the dark theater, especially with the screen going red as a cartoon Deadpool starts frolicking around the actors' names, but James still looks pale.

"Gotta hit the can. Meet you out front," he says, heading quickly down the aisle and almost rushing towards the exit. When Clint next spots him coming out of the theater, he's smiling again, only there are a few dark spots on his collar where he hadn't managed to catch the water in time.

"You good?"

James gives him a deliberately confused look and shrugs. "Yeah. Starved though."

Okay, given the circumstances, out here like this on what's supposed to be a date, maybe right now isn't the time to press.

"Restaurant's a block down," he says, wondering if maybe they should head back, order a pizza, try this again some other night. "Think you'll make it?"

"Should be able to stop myself from cannibalizing anyone en route," James smirks, glancing up and down the street. "Lead the way."

---

_Barnes, you're a fucking idiot._

He's wracking his brain as the hostess seats them in a booth along the wall, trying to come up with something to talk about that isn't the fact that isn't the same old, tired, elephant in the room. Across the table, Clint doesn't seem to be faring any better with his own attempts.

It's not awkward, yet, but it's going to head that way fairly quickly. None of what he'd read on those stupid websites is proving useful. It would help, he figures, if he could remember what they'd said. Maybe getting him to the store to find something to wear had been the beginning and end of their usefulness. But he can't help wanting to trade it in, now.

_Calm down. It's not as if he doesn't know what's up with you._

"Sorry about that. At the theater, I mean."

"It's cool," Clint glances up from the beer list, before passing it across to him. "I mean, I'm the one who forgot that I'd seen the trailer. Just got distracted earlier." He sounds apologetic, fidgeting with his napkin. "Would've mentioned it, otherwise."
"Yeah, well. I'm capable of reading reviews. Just. Didn't."

The waitress- her clothes, hair, and makeup all intimidatingly perfect- comes to take their drink orders with a polite disinterest. Once she's gone, Clint leans across the table slightly and raises a serious-looking eyebrow at him.

"Aside from that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you enjoy the play?"

"What?" His laughter is nervous, until he catches the joke. "Actually, I think I kind of liked it."

"Yeah?"

Clint's relief is palpable enough that he's tempted to apologize again, but he swallows the urge. Too many apologies on the first date, that's all that'll get remembered, after all.

Fucking internet.

"Yeah. I dunno. It's hard to explain, but Clint's not interrupting, just listening, so he's going to have to try. Deadpool and his girlfriend- they had this entire banter thing going on a few times that was all about whose skeletons in the closet were the most terrifying. Only it was played for laughs- and it's obvious, or at least likely that both characters were playing it up for dramatic effect. But it was weirdly real. And there had been parts of it that reminded him of Clint, and he's not sure he's not just disassociating.

He's pretty sure the entire internet would veto mentioning that on a first date, though. Even if it is with Clint.

"I guess. Hell. He makes traumatized insanity look fun, you know?" A frown crosses Clint's face for a minute; this time he is about to interrupt. "I mean, it's not like- You know how there are movies about doctors and lawyers, and when you're watching it you're totally into what they're doing, only you know damned well that when the movies done, you don't want to go to all that school or do that job or, really, be in the same room as anything they're talking about?" Clint's nodding. "Kinda like that."

"Did you think it was believable?"

Their beers arrive, which gives him a few seconds too long to overthink the question. At least they're not sitting here in awkward silence. "Dunno if that was the point of it." It had felt believable enough for a minute or two, there, not that he wants to dwell on it. "You?"

It's Clint's turn to shrug. "Hell, who knows. All's I got for reference for that kind of thing is, like, me and you." There's an almost undetectable pause before he amends, "and Natasha. And Tony, Steve and Banner, too, probably, though I haven't asked."

"True."

"One thing, though?"

"What's that?"

"Please don't tell Steve I took you to that."

"It was my idea," he smirks back.

"Fine. You gonna tell him?"
"Hell no." He takes a sip of his beer and looks down at his menu. "Might tell Sam, though. I bet he'll laugh his ass off."

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"...and so, yeah. I was stuck in a goddamned telephone cable, or power line or some shit, hanging upside down, and, you know, those cables are tough as hell, and the one pole was still standing, just the other one that had fallen down. So there was enough slack that I wound up fucking bouncing -"

Oh god, it's not funny- none of this is funny, they've been sitting here talking about ridiculous ops they've been on for like half an hour now. He'd thought he'd won with the Budapest story, or even the Philadelphia op, but James is on a roll.

"-like I was bungee jumping, or something. And these dudes, they just kept coming at me. Couldn't land a shot for shit but one of 'em got smart and started trying to come at me with an ax. But whenever he got close the cable would snap me back up and out of the way. Not sure which of us looked more like we were losing at Whack-A-Mole, but..." James shakes his head, swiping his hair out of his face.

"I swear to god, when my handler showed up, along with the unit I was supposed to be clearing the way for, they were laughing so hard as they put down cover fire that their shots were going all over the place. Managed to take out the combatants, and, I dunno, either the line finally had enough or one of their damned-fool shots caught the cable, and I fell on my ass. Like, flat on my ass, just sitting there, legs splayed out and confused as hell." He blinks, eyes open comically wide as he drops his arms to his sides and mimes looking around.

"Holy shit, that sounds like something I'd do," Clint's rubbing at his eyes, still laughing as he glances around at the other customers. Thankfully, the restaurant's emptied out quite a bit, but that just means that the stragglers who are left can probably hear them. Which could be bad, actually, now that he thinks about it. Keeping his voice low, he leans across the table. "Remind me- how did we even start talking about this?"

"Deadpool shooting through three guys with one bullet," James follows suit, talking quietly now. "You said you could top it."

"Could and have," Clint reminds him with a grin. "With an arrow." And a bow he'd called Excalibur, because it tended to plant arrows so deeply into their targets that removing them had been a complete nightmare.

Leaning back in the booth, James isn't laughing anymore, though the smile hasn't left his face as he shakes his head.

"What?"

"I hadn't thought about Dallas in decades. And I'm pretty sure I'm going to hell for laughing about it now. I mean, there weren't even any survivors and I'm sitting here-"

"Yeah, well, there wouldn't be," Clint interrupts, deliberately, because it doesn't take a genius to see that this is about to go from ops-based one-upmanship to whose-life-is-more-fucked-upmanship. But if there's anything that Deadpool and his girlfriend have taught him, there's never not a time for inappropriate humor. "If everyone had the Keystone Cops theme running through their head every time your name popped up, I'm pretty sure it would've destroyed your rep."
There's a spark, and a smirk, and Clint's move has worked. "At least I had a rep."

"I was a secret agent. No rep is my rep."

"You keep telling yourself that, Agent. I'm sure nobody at that bachelorette party got any video."

Clint manages to hold out for a minute, then gives in. "They did, but, like I said. Secret agent. I 'accidentally' knocked her cell phone into the pool when Natasha gave the distract-and-clear-out signal."

"That's a shame."

"It's really, really not. The world is not ready for shaky cell phone footage of anyone doing a strip routine to Def Fucking Leppard." He thinks about it for a minute. "But hell, who knows. Maybe I should have Tony trawl the internet. Could come in handy next time we need to distract some bad guys. Or, you know, make them bleed from their eyes or ears."

James nods, the corner of his mouth quirking up in confusion. "We?"

"Ah, yeah." Crap, he'd meant to segue into it. "I talked to Hill today."

"About signing back up?"

He nods. "I'm going in tomorrow for paperwork and evals. It's gonna suck."

"If it's any consolation, I'm going to be scanning documents and filing things all day tomorrow."

James shrugs, and finishes chewing. "When do you go into the field?"

"Hill said maybe Wednesday, though I can't imagine it going that quick, you know? I'm ten kinds of out of shape. Probably going to blow the physical. And I don't know what kind of weird delays the whole deaf situation's going to bring into the equation." He taps his left hearing aid twice for emphasis, and, partially, to stop himself from saying anything more. Because yeah, he'd done it, he'd made the call. Now all he has to do is make the cut, and none of that, he realizes, is what he really wants to be talking about. It's the same old shit that got dredged up every week during therapy, before he'd quit going. He's bored with it.

---

Given how much he'd worried about it- and how he'd made an idiot of himself in the theater- the night's gone surprisingly well. Neither of them particularly feel like dessert, but they opt against taking a cab in favor of walking back to the building. It'll take half an hour, and it's kind of cold out, but that, apparently, is all the excuse Clint needs to grab his right hand as they're walking.

His other is shoved into the pocket of his jacket, and he doesn't seem like he's shivering all that much, and for three blocks, James drives himself nuts trying to read into it. If it's just something that Clint tends to do, or if he's testing James, somehow, it's impossible to tell without asking.

Besides, apparently debating paint choices for the hallway is turning out to be a conversation that he's surprisingly comfortable engaging in.

"Not blue," Clint says, shaking his head as if James had suggested it. "When you've got your lights out, and the hall light is still on, it looks like there's a UFO landing in the hallway." He sounds like he's speaking from experience, but whether it's dealing with light creeping in from under the door, or from actually being abducted by aliens, it's hard to say.
"What about, I dunno. Tan or something?" It wouldn't be that much darker than the worn yellowed paint that Clint's itching to replace.

"It already looks like people've been chain smoking out there for three decades."

"You could just go with white."

"Yeah," Clint shrugs, laughing. "Shit. Date one and I'm halfway to having you pick out paint samples. I'm sorry."

"Well, I do kind of already live there, so. It's not so weird." Clint slows down a bit, which is telling, and he's taking in a survey of the street in once glance, which is even more so. James, therefore, isn't much surprised by the kiss.

He's just surprised by how nervous he is, returning it. Out here. In the open. With cars driving by and people walking past and everything. But his pulse is in his throat, and even though he knows better, there's a part of him that wants to warn Clint that this is dangerous.

There's a part of him half-hoping that someone decides to make something of it just so he can flip them off. Someone wants to shout at them over it, so fucking what? It's not like either of them are all that easy to beat in a fight.

It's weirdly exhilarating, though he doesn't get the chance to mention it to Clint, because they're walking again. Afterwards, though, he finds himself having to fight the urge to check back over his shoulder.

It's fine. Nobody says anything. The only yelling that's happening is between the lady leaning out over her balcony to shout at someone who's getting out of their car a block ahead. Nobody gives a shit about the likes of them.

He doesn't realize how hard he's squeezing Clint's hand until they reach the corner, and Clint, whose gone back to idly weighing the pros and cons of bright purple and blood red hallways, squeezes back. He's looking across the street at the walk signal, but his mouth curves just a little, catching James in the peripheral.

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It's late by the time they make it back to their block, and it's damned cold, so getting inside and upstairs is a priority. The only thing is, it's weird, now. For months, wandering in and out of each other's apartments at any given hour had been a non-issue.

Now, though, they're on a date. There would be implications if he invited James inside. And, well. He'd be all for it, honestly. If James was. They wouldn't have to do anything. But he doesn't know how to bring it up without putting either of them on the spot. He's been babbling for blocks about painting the damned hallway, though whether he's just distracting himself or buying time, even he can't say.

James is the one who, once they're reaching Clint's floor, catches his hand again and pulls him to a stop.

"I had a good night tonight."

"Me too," Clint says, trying to be low key. "You wanna come in for a nightcap?"

"Had my three beers for the night," James mouth twists in a self-deprecating grin. "And I have to
work in the morning."

"Me too." The fact that he's startled by the idea sets him on edge. He'd honestly forgotten, and that can't be a good sign. "For like, the first time in years."

James smirks. "Remember to pack a lunch. And you should iron a shirt or something. Just try not to burn a hole in it this time."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Clint blinks back, knowing full well he's not fooling anyone, and leans in.

And sure, they've kissed a few times already today, but not like this. It starts off simple and quick enough, like the one they'd shared out in the street. But now James is stumbling back carefully, letting Clint lean him up against the wall, mouth hot enough on his own that Clint has to be careful not to press too much or too close, even though James' arms are tight enough around him that there's really nowhere he could go.

Not that he wants to. He's just starting to get worked up, here, and if he goes where his head's thinking about going, it might just fuck this up, badly.

"Call me when you're done," James is flushed when Clint pulls away. "I'm done at three. Can pull dinner together, or something, for when you get back." His eyes drop suddenly, like he's thinking he's assumed something, and hell, maybe he is. But Clint's not complaining, and he's not hell bent on letting him lose his nerve.

"Sounds awesome," he says, pressing in for another kiss; this time he's the one who's got to catch his breath, afterwards. Inside his apartment, he can hear Lucky nosing at the door. "I gotta go walk Lucky, and should probably turn in, let you do the same. Unless you want to help scoop dog shit."

James' nose wrinkles as he pushes himself away from the wall, shaking his hair back over his shoulder; it's getting long now, Clint realizes. He's not sure why he hadn't noticed before.

"Thanks for the offer, but..."

"Yeah."

"All right. Heading up now. Good night, Clint."

"G'night," he manages to grin back, before James is kissing him again. And thank God for that, because Clint had been opening his mouth on an "I love you," and wouldn't have even realized it until he'd said it.

And yeah, he thinks, watching James disappear up the stairs a minute later. He might be heading down that road. Might already be well on his way.

He just.

If he's going to say it, he needs to get it right.
Chapter 39

James is shutting the shower off when he hears his phone ringing in the next room, so he makes his way quickly— if gingerly, as if a few water droplets would destroy everything, here— into the living room to glance at his phone.

There are two messages, the first from Candice, asking him if he wants to come in early because the shop's shorthanded. The second is from Sam, and reads, *I'm in town. Want to grab coffee after work?*

Sure—*I'm done at 4,* he sends back, but it's not until he's pulling his cardigan on that he notices the knot of worry that the invitation's caused. He picks at it on the way to work, trying to figure out if something's happened to throw Sam off of their routine. They're not scheduled for another face-to-face for another week, regardless of whether or not Sam's in town in town, and while he can allow that they might be friends, now, Sam hasn't really suggested going out since the first few weeks after he'd arrived here. And those trips had been more about integrating with the world at large than anything else.

Shaking rain out of his hair as he steps into the shop, he remembers that Clint's at the tower today. That's something that's different. It might be related. It might not be.

But worrying about what Sam does and doesn't know isn't what Candice is paying him for. There's a huge job that's come in—some tech startup is realizing that a flashy website isn't necessarily enough to wow prospective investors—and there's work to be done.

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Clint's been through this before. He'd already passed it when he'd originally joined on with Coulson and Fury, but that doesn't mean anything as he's following the doctor's lead and applying the biometrics sensors to his arm.

The first part of the MMPI psych eval is 500 statements long—*do you agree or disagree with the following statements.* Yes or no answers only. Sometimes they repeat themselves, or they're rephrased. He already knows, even before the panel explains to him that the repetition is only there only to capture nuance. They're not meant to trip anyone up.

He hadn't entirely believed them last time they'd explained it, either.

Apart from the technician left monitoring from the computer on the other side of the glass—there to keep an eye on the machine, she's promised him, not his responses—he's alone in the room when the questions being to pop up on the screen.

*I do not read every editorial in the newspaper everyday.*

"Yes."

*My hands and feet are usually warm enough.*

"Yes." But what the hell?

*I work under a great deal of tension.*

"Yes," he smirks, glancing away from the computer screen to the lie detector he's connected to. He
tenses his arm deliberately and wonders if it's being recorded somewhere.  

At times I feel like swearing.

"Yes." Case in point: now. Right here.

My father was a good man.

"No." Somewhere in the system, a flag's probably going up, reading DADDY ISSUES in bright neon letters so the shrinks at his follow-up appointment can find it easily.

I have had very peculiar and strange experiences.

Shooting arrows at aliens counts, right? "Yes."

I do not always tell the truth.

"No. Wait yes- shit-" but the next question is already spooling up on the screen.

I get angry sometimes.

"Yes." Fucking obviously.

During one period when I was a youngster I engaged in petty thievery.

"Yes," he says, even if not starving hadn't seemed at all petty at the time.

Most of them are easy, or completely innocuous - I would like to be a singer, or I enjoy competitive sports- but they're only there to lull him into a false sense of complacency, because every so often, there's a question on the screen that's got him wondering if his hesitation in replying is being recorded, right along with his answer.

I have had periods of days, weeks, or months when I couldn't take care of things because I couldn't get going.

Yes, fucking obviously, but he thinks he's done with that now, and he'd really like them to know that. "...Yes."

Evil spirits possess me at times.

So far, just the once, which everyone knows about, but this is a standard issue MMPI that nobody's bothered tweaking in ten years, and he doesn't know whether or not it's going to count against him. "Yes." Fucking Loki. "Just once though," he adds, feeling like an idiot, now, since it's not being recorded anyway.

Once in a while I think of things too bad to talk about.

Probably as much as the next guy, he figures. What's too bad to talk about, here? Being possessed by alien demons and killing people? Trying to fill in the gaps between what Natasha's actually told him about the Red Room? Barney getting killed? "Yes."

My sex life is satisfactory.

...It's nonexistent, actually. But it's not a problem, just- fuck it. He's not going to get into an argument about semantics with a goddamned machine. "Yes."
I have often had to take orders from someone who did not know as much as I did.

Agreement might imply that he thinks that Hill and Coulson are idiots. But if he says no he'd be lying about the assholes he'd been working for before joining up with SHIELD. He's not sure which one to go with. "Yes."

I am very strongly attracted by members of my own sex.

He can't remember what he'd said last time around- he thinks he might've said yes, but it had been a long time ago; had he been out then? Had he trusted Coulson and Fury that much, those first days? If he hadn't been, would he have lied or- screw it. "Yes," he says, irritated because the phrasing makes it sound like Stark and Banner and every male on the planet is going to have start watching out for his advances. Fucking hell.

Some of the statements are more about clinging to hope than even knowing for sure. *I am capable of maintaining a long-term romantic relationship.* Fuck, how the hell would he even know? Just because he hasn't- not really, not in years, doesn't mean he's not capable, right?

When he replies in the affirmative, even to his own ears, he just sounds like he's defending himself.

*I believe that people are intrinsically good.*

"Yes."

*I do not read every editorial in the newspaper."

"Yes."

*I believe people are out to get me."

"No." Most days, anyway. Except, when, you know. They actually are. Not in general, though.

*I find it hard to keep my mind on a task or job..."

He's holding out fine, so far. But he's only half an hour in, and there are a few hundred questions left to go, and that's not even counting the follow-up with Dr. Gupta.

"No."

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Clint's got twenty minutes before he's due to report to Dr. Gupta's borrowed office, so he heads towards the mess, catching snatches of conversation between agents as they scurry down the hallways. He wonders how long it's going to take before it starts sounding familiar again.

He's been glancing through office windows all morning, running between appointments, but beyond a glimpse of Natasha heading into the elevator on the other end of the hallway, he hasn't seen her, Stark, or Steve all day. Sam's in town, and apparently running late for something down in Ops Control, clapping him on the back with a grin, as he passes him in the hallway.

In the cafeteria, perusing the coffee selection, feeling at a loss. It's gotten a lot more complicated and varied since Stark took over; hopefully that means it isn't still horrible. Someone is calling his name.

Turning around, he sees Banner waving, grinning as he weaves his way through the tables towards him.
"Long time, no see," Banner says, though it's only been about a week. But Banner looks like he's been through the wars. He's smiling though. Seems content, if a little worn out.

"Good to see you, man," he says as they shake hands. "Where've you been?"

"Water crisis down in Wakanda." Banner frowns as he peruses the tea options set up on the counter. "Crap- it's really only been two weeks, hasn't it?"

"Long ones?"

"Guess so." Banner shakes his head in disbelief "What're you doing here today?"

"You haven't heard?"

His eyes widen, probably imagining some new fresh hell. "Just got in half an hour ago."

"No worries. I'm signing back up. Here today for the evals."

"Really? That's great!" Pouring himself some hot water from the machine, he glances back over his shoulder. "Got time to catch up for a bit or do they have you running somewhere?"

"I got a few minutes," he says, opting for the closest non-decaf to hand and hoping for the best.

It's surprisingly amazing, when he gets around to trying it.

"One of the perks of corporate sponsorship, I guess," Banner shrugs when he comments on it, and they sit down at the nearest table. "So. What else did I miss?"

"I've been out of here longer than anyone, but... Okay. You know about Winslow?"

"Yeah. Last I heard there's an entire workstation in Ops Control that's been tasked to nothing but that since the ambush. Any movement there?"

Ambush. He supposes that's what that fucking mess in the subway and warehouse would've been, if he'd had any sort of distance. "Not so much. All's I know is that they're keeping an eye on it. I guess everyone's gonna be heading out as soon as they get the signal."

"You coming along?"

"Dunno," he admits. "Still waiting to see what my orders are going to be. It's all kind of up in the air and depending on whether I get cleared in the first place." This, he realizes, might be the only chance he's had in weeks to talk about anything that doesn't revolve around his own shit, and it's suddenly an opportunity he doesn't want to miss. "What about you, what's new?"

"Like I said, been working on a project on the northern border of Wakanda. There was a dam failure three months ago and, as you can imagine, the skirmishes over what was left were making things... a little tense. They got it together enough to begin updating the dam itself, but there was a problem with the water filtration." He shrugs, eyes moving to the entrance where Natasha and Hill are walking past. "By the time we got there, most of the fighting had died down- most of the more aggressive types had left for greener pastures, sometimes literally, so we were able to get the new system installed and up and running within a few days. Stayed on with the WC's aide agency to help at one of the clinics, but they had it under control." His mouth quirks. "More or less. After that, I figured I'd come poke my head back in and see what's happening here."

Jesus, Clint thinks. He's barely been off the block for months, and Banner's out there de-escalating
"war zones, solving water crises, all sorts of shit. "You gonna stick around for a while, this time around?"

"I think so. For a few weeks, at least. I know Winslow's still inbound, so, you know," he gestures a vague question, "who'd want to miss *that* bit of fun? After that, we'll see."

Objectively, Clint can admit that this- having coffee with a zen master who can turn into a rage monster- would probably be considered a peculiar and strange experience. Maybe if it didn't feel so comfortably familiar.

"What's up with you? You're looking good these days."

"Yeah, well. Got the new hearing aids in," he rocks his head to the side and away so Banner can see. "So that's been kind of huge."

Maybe it's because he's been in his head all morning- all those stupid yes/no questions- but he notices himself admitting it, now. That the hearing aids helped, that losing his hearing had maybe gotten under his skin a little. His balance being off had been worse- or the worst that he'd admit to. But he's adapted, and he can hear now, and things are good.

"I'll bet," Banner nods, and it's hard not to notice the slight shift in his tone, the tinge of concern. "How's James doing? Is he around?"

"He's at work," Clint says, resisting the urge to check the time because it's not like Banner really needs his exact coordinates. "Doing good, though, all things considered."

*He's staying,* he wants to say. *Even though there's a violent asshole who'd have most people on the run, and he's survived a date with me and not run screaming.*

It's Banner, he realizes, that has him contemplating telling him everything. Because, now that this thing with James has had a little time to sink in a little, or maybe to solidify, he's kind of thinking it would be okay, really, if he told someone about it. And Banner, zen master that he is, he wouldn't overreact, wouldn't draw attention.

Or maybe it's just that right now's really the first time he's looked up from his own bullshit long enough to realize that the world's still spinning.
Chapter 40

It's too loud in the coffee shop to talk without shouting over the noise, so Sam's idea to walk down to the park is a good one, even though the temperature feels like it's dropped a good ten degrees. At least the rain's let up.

"Probably gonna freeze tonight," Sam agrees, handing James his cup so he can dig his gloves out of his pockets. "Might as well walk while we still can, yeah?"

Despite James' concerns, Sam doesn't launch right into it the moment they set to walking, instead catching him up on the tower gossip.

"...so yeah. Stark's out at this engineering summit all week, and Pepper's using his absence as an opportunity to hold meetings with every single department, because it's easier to run them when- and I quote- 'he's not there herniating himself trying to derail everything.'" Sam glances at him while they wait for the walk signal. "She and Hill even set up a-" he draws quotation marks in the air with his fingers, "long overdue training on the communications system down in ops, in case one of us has to take point from the tower for some reason."

"How'd that go?"

"Fine." He's rolling his eyes, though, indicating that it had been excruciating. "Steve was being more Steve than usual."

"Impatient?"

"Like the rest of the world really needs to do its homework right the first time for once, know what I mean?"

"Sounds like him." Only he'd seen him this weekend, and he'd been fine. "Why?"

"Everyone's getting tired of waiting on that Winslow dude." Reaching the other side of the street, Sam brightens. "I saw Clint for a minute. He was on his way to meet with Dr. Gupta."

"How's he holding up?"

Sam shrugs "Looked kind of frazzled. But good, I think." There's an open bench a few yards away, not so close to the playground that they'll have to worry about being run over by strollers. "You talk to him at all about his coming back?"

It's something in the tone of Sam's voice that he's getting used to. Switching gears from friendly conversation to assessment of everything that James could possibly say. He figures he has until they sit down to formulate a reply.

"Yeah. Told me last night."

"And what do you think of his decision?"

Now it's his turn to shrug. It's not like he hadn't planned on bringing up the subject of Clint. They're only barely on the topic- and Sam doesn't even know what the topic really is- and it's making him tense. "It's good." Sam doesn't reply, so he adds, "seems like it's been a long time coming."

"Might take some time getting used to it, him not being around."
Sam's fishing, and it's irritating. But it's not his fault.

*Sam's* not the one sitting on this...news, this situation, whatever, trying to figure out if bringing it up is even a good idea. Clint had been on board with keeping things between them for the time being, and while he'd probably get it- Sam's his shrink, after all- they hadn't talked explicitly about making any exceptions.

"Six hours in and I'm not a gibbering mess," he finally replies, only realizing he'd been starting to zone out when Sam raises a deliberate eyebrow at him, obviously hearing something interesting in his tone.

Sam's already heard all about everything he'd done as the Winter Soldier, and not once has he thrown it back in his face. And this thing with Clint, it's small potatoes by comparison. Hell, Sam had been the first one- back before it mattered, back before he was anywhere near thinking about it in any sort of personal sense- to tell him that being bent didn't carry the same stigma it once had.

They'd been talking about something he'd seen in the news, at the time. Just catching him up on current events, gay marriage and all of that. But he's realizing the context now. It hadn't been meant an endorsement, hadn't been permission.

Sam's good people, though- the fact that he has to remind himself of this is troubling. *Sam's* not the one contemplating holding out on him, after all. Ever since sitting down, they've been on the record, and it's a little late- and honestly, probably a bad sign- to be deliberating it now.

And this is it. He's going to tell him. And he's going to have to tell Clint, tonight, that he's done so.

"James? What's up?"

The invitation, it turns out, doesn't make it any easier to start.

"There's something I should tell you. Probably should've told you a while ago." Okay, he's committed to this line of conversation. Even if he chickens out now, Sam'll bring it up later. Maybe that would be for the best; it would give him time to talk with Clint about it, first. He'd have a chance to minimize any damage he's about to cause.

"I'm gay."

Sam nods at him, smiles a bit, though he's still listening, still waiting. He's not surprised, then. But he's also not saying so- maybe that's something.

Fuck. He should've checked- and he knows that asking now reeks of the kind of deflection that Sam hasn't had to warn him about in months. But he has to ask.

"Everything I tell you, it's need to know, right?"

"Totally," Sam confirms; he half expects him to launch into his often-repeated explanation of the exact terms and conditions- *harm to yourself or others* always figures heavily- but Sam doesn't. He's still waiting patiently. Even glancing away as he sips his coffee to give him a few extra seconds to figure out how to proceed.

It's a practiced move, but it does help.

"So. Yeah. And. I've started seeing... someone." He wonders if Sam's going to assume he's distancing himself, here. If there are any allowances made for him to try protecting someone else's privacy.
Sam's trying not to smirk, watching him twist himself into knots out of the corner of his eye. But he schools his features before turning to look directly at him. "You're doing good, James. What else do you want to tell me?"

"I guess," he grimaces, "more like ask you?" He hates the way his voice sounds; the coffee doesn't do too much to rinse the feeling down.

"Shoot."

"I need to know if it's allowed. Like. I know in general, for most people, it's fine. Just. Terms of my release, and all."

"That's not one of the conditions. At the outset, your doctors wanted to make sure you were focusing on your own well-being, and getting into a relationship at that stage can be a complicating factor," Sam explains. "But you've been your own person for a while, now. If you think you're ready, well. You're the expert."

The thought occurs to him - then what are you here for? But he manages to keep it behind his teeth. Sam seems to sense something in his hesitation to respond, though. "Do you want to tell me about them?"

"Him?"

"Yeah."

"I'm not sure how much I can," he admits, after spinning the question through his head a few times. "I mean, I know him. Just. Not sure..."

"If it helps, I'll remind you. Anything you say is just between you and me. That includes topics that involve other people, and topics that are other people."

He nods. He knows that. But it's one hell of a precipice he's looking over, and it takes him a minute to edge up to it.

"It's Clint."

He's been staring at the ground; now it's imperative that he looks up, gets a read on Sam's reaction.

His eyebrows are raised, slightly, as if he's just heard that there's a bad traffic jam on his route home. Either he's even better at training his expressions than James had given him credit for, or-

-or he's let on, somehow, given Sam some clue that he was interested, maybe long before he'd even admitted it to himself, and-

"James, relax. It's cool." Sam sits up, resting his elbows on his knees as he looks at him. "You can tell me more, if you want. If you're not comfortable with that, we can work back around to it next time."

"I know."

"So what's up?"

"I have no idea what I'm supposed to-" actually, he does. He sips his coffee- it's getting cold- and takes a breath. "First off, are there going to be any repercussions?"

"No. Like I said-"
"But you didn't know it was Clint."

"Doesn't change anything. I mean. I'm surprised- and happy for you both, by the way- but." His smile's still there, but it's gone serious. "You were concerned about if you were allowed to get involved in a relationship."

He nods, but he's not really following him, yet.

"Is this- are you asking about repercussions for Clint or for you?"

"I. He's just getting started with the Avengers again, and there's the entire...conditional release thing."

"You don't have to worry about that," Sam shakes his head, then stops. "But you are. Which means... Is it all right if I ask you some questions?"

Resisting the urge to look at anywhere but him, he nods.

"Okay, good. Thanks." Sam drums his fingers on his mostly-empty paper cup as he looks at him; it's taking him a minute, apparently, to work out what he needs to ask. Maybe not a whole minute, though. Just long enough that it's startling when he speaks again.

"So. Clint, huh?"

"Yeah." He nods, trying to get a sense of Sam's thoughts from his raised eyebrows. The answering nod is easy and relaxed, but it's not contagious.

Which is probably just as well, seeing as how the next question out of Sam's mouth is, "why him?"

It's not even how long's this been going on, which he'd been half-expecting. It's not even do you think that's a good idea, the question he'd been trying not to worry about since the text this morning.

Which only means that he's got no arguments prepared, no defenses ready to volley back. Because it's not an attack. It's just a question.

Why Clint?

He's got no idea how to even start. Thinks it might've been better if Sam had started with one of the other two.

"I dunno," he shrugs, looking out across the park at the traffic crawling by on the street. Rush hour is just getting started. "Does it matter?"

Sam pulls a face and shrugs. "To you, I'm guessing. I mean, it's why we're sittin' here, right?"

He can concede the point, but it's not getting him anywhere.

"How about this. Try talking me through it. What was it that you first liked about him?"

"I dunno."

"Well, what was the first thing you noticed about him?"

"He seemed nice."
"That's it?"

"I dunno, he was wearing a ski cap? It's not like I took one look at him and thought- yeah, okay."
He rolls his eyes as he shakes his head, but Sam's not impressed.

It's irritating to realize that if he were well, Sam probably wouldn't even be asking the question.

If he were well, though, he wouldn't still be needing prescription refills, and Sam wouldn't have to be asking him anything in the first place.

He should be able to answer this. But right now, he's more concerned with the minutes ticking by without a reply than he is in actually stringing one together.

The first thing he liked about him. Crap.

He's got plenty of them- he knows he likes him, he's just never analyzed it. Thankfully, after a few grating moments, Sam seems to take pity on him.

"I'm not trying to lead you, here. But it seems like you could use a nudge. Is that cool?"

He nods, because Sam could shove him into traffic right now, and even that would be an improvement.

"You were circumspect, bringing his name up, which makes me think that you're wanting to keep his trust. So. Easy question. Do you trust him?"

"I do, yeah." It's an easy answer, he thinks, until Sam's lack of response indicates that he's waiting for him to flesh it out. "I had everyone's word that he was cool, but... I dunno. Fits and starts, it just started to happen. It wasn't like everyone else."

"Are you saying you don't- or didn't- trust anyone else?"

"God, no." He wouldn't be sitting here pouring his heart out if that were true. "I mean. At first, it might've been just Steve, and the rest of y'all were only there on his good graces." He smirks, because he's joking, but only half way.

"He wasn't afraid of me?" It's probably telling, to someone like Sam, that he'd made it into a question when he hadn't meant to. "I mean. At first, I was being chaperoned all the time. And even when I was released, I know I was still being. You know, Supervised. But it never really seemed like he was treating that part of it as a job. Like, he was real. Had his own stuff- had a life going on, and problems to deal with that have nothing to do with me."

"And that's a good thing?"

It's not, really. Not the way he said it.

"He doesn't. He's never had, like, expectations that I would be one way or the other."

"How do you mean?"

"When I got out of the Academy, I still wasn't even sure what my name was."

Sam nods. "I remember."

"There was Steve, who- I dunno- wanted me to be Bucky Barnes again when I wasn't, and there was this whole push to make sure that I wasn't the Asset, obviously. But it was like this entire
either-or situation. With Steve and Stark and the others, every interaction boiled down to the things I've done, who I used to be, or what I was supposed to do next. And when I met Clint, just. I dunno. He just let me figure it out and went along with it."

He frowns, not sure that he's liking the next thought his brain's seen fit to supply him with. Definitely not sure that he's liking the idea of admitting it.

But this isn't a burning building filled with people who he's trying to kill- who are trying to kill him. It's not a firefight, it's just a conversation. "I mean. Sometimes I wonder if that's a problem."

"Like what's a problem?"

"Like I just fell for the first regular person I met, or that this is all some kind of Stockholm Syndrome type thing." He gestures at Sam. "Cause I know- I know that's got to be how it looks. And I don't think that's it, but sitting here now, I'm wondering if I just latched onto him because he happened to be part of the, I dunno, context of the moment or something."

"Context of the moment?"

"I'm not sure how much of this is me liking him, or me liking everything he represents. Getting up to make whatever breakfast you want, walking the dog, watching television. Normal human things."

"Let's chase that down in a minute, yeah? It's great that you recognize this, and that you worked it out on your own. But you were heading in a good direction, there, and getting off track now, I'm worried about losing the thread. What about Clint do you like?"

"He's funny. Brave, even if he's usually walking around thinking that he's more of a fuckup than he is and, I dunno, tries to compensate for it. He's like Steve that way, kind of." Sam's looking at him like he's saying something important, there, but Steve's not the point of this. "I mean, he knocks himself out trying to help, even when he knows it's going to blow up in his face. He's honest and doesn't try to protect me-" He breaks off, because that's not true- that's a glaring lie, honestly, given the entire Winslow situation.

"What is it?"

He grimaces, but honestly, he's kind of relieved. He's finally got evidence of what he's saying, here. "When Hill called him in to help out on the subway, even though he was benched, he jumped right in and did what he could. There was a guy who could hear everything from a mile away, and Clint, he's deaf, he knew full well that he was probably going to get his ass kicked, and he went in anyway." Noticing, distractedly, that he's started shredding the cardboard jacket from his coffee cup, he pauses. Waits, in case Sam needs to ask a question; all he does is nod. Which is good, because apparently, somehow, finally, his brain's caught up with the conversation; now all he wants to do is power through it, get to the end.

"He's good at cheering me up when I'm being a miserable bastard," he says, surprising himself with how easily it slips out, and with the weird jolt of something- pride, he thinks- when the next thought comes. "And when he's being a miserable bastard, he lets me try to help, and-"

He cuts himself off, because now that he's on a roll, he's not thinking about the reasons for the two of them having this particular conversation. Which means he's risking saying something off the cuff that's going to send this all crashing down on his head. Sam's a friend, but he still needs to be careful.
"What is it?"

He sighs. Can't think of a way to rephrase it that'll sound less pathetic or manipulative or whatever it is that's stopping him short. "I think... There's a selfish part of me that likes him because somehow, for some fucking reason, I seem to make him happy."

There it is. Apparently he's strategic and self-serving. There's a part of him that knows that he's found the right hoops to jump through in order to get by.

"What's wrong with that?"

He's going to have to admit it.

"A year ago I was killing people for Hydra. They conditioned me to behave a certain way. If this is a part of that- I mean, I'm not saying I'm regressing into the Winter Soldier, or anything. But. He. I survived by doing what his handlers expected of me."

"Are you telling me that dating Clint is what's expected of you?"

"No, just." Fuck, he doesn't know. For as clear as his thoughts had been a moment ago, they're kicking up all sorts of river muck right now. "I mean. What if I'm wrong? Like- Clint, he's doing okay, let's be like that- walking the dog and ordering takeout because I forgot to go to the grocery store for the third time this week- and everything will be fine."

"What's fine, here?"

"Me being better."

To his credit, Sam's quiet a long moment.

"Do you think that there's, like... a formula, or a program or whatever- step A leads to step B, and jumping through them in the right order equates to being comfortable in your own skin?"

It's a trick question; they'd talked about it before, in their sessions. "No. I mean. Recovery's not linear, I know that."

"Okay, then. Are you holding Clint up as a shining example of what being better-" he's making those air quotes again- "represents?"

"I didn't think so. But." Fuck, saying it out loud's going to make it a hell of a lot more true than it had been. "Maybe?"

"Why is that?"

"I dunno," he bites back, irritated with himself now, same as every time Sam's nudged him too much. "Because he's awesome?"

Instead of snarling back, though, Sam's just grinning. "I thought so."

There's a joke, here, apparently, but he's got the dawning suspicion that it's him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"This whole thing. You could've just led with "because he's awesome," and that would've been the end of it."

"So why didn't you let me?"
"I gave you the opportunity, man. It just took you a minute to get there. You were the one that was all worried that you were doing it for the right reasons. Which is, you know. A good thing."

Though he's failing to see how. It's all right for Sam to be glib about it. It's not Sam's entire situation that's riding on the line here.

"Listen, James. You know we've only been sitting here for like thirty minutes, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"And it's just you and me. There's nobody waiting with a clipboard ticking off boxes that'll add up to your being free to leave, locked back up at the Academy, or going home to find out that Clint's being questioned by Hill for the choices he's made regarding you." He looks like he wants to crack a joke, and James would be okay with that, because it's got to be better than whatever he's schooling himself to say instead.

"Better's always gonna be a work in progress. At some point- maybe you're not quite there, yet- every worry you have in your life isn't going to tie back to whether or not you're good enough, or allowed to be who you are. You do realize that this entire thing- you going to Bed Stuy, was more of a try-it-and-see-what-happens than anything else, right?"

"Yes, but-"

"Hold up." Sam raises a forestalling hand. "Have you gone on any killing sprees lately? Razed any villages you forgot to mention?"

"No."

"Okay, then. What I think you need to work on now is this. Start letting go of all that. You're already out in the world. You've been here the whole time, and I know there's been some rough patches, but you're rocking it, and nobody's saying otherwise. You're allowed to be proud of that, man. Does that make sense?"

He nods.

"Do you think you want to try that?"

He goes to bury his smile in his cup before realizing that it's empty- it's been empty- and it's shredded. It seems a little pathetic, trying to hide behind it.

---

"It's unlocked!" Clint calls out, so James lets himself in to be tackled by Lucky for a minute before even getting around to looking into the living room, where he can see Clint's feet propped up on the arm of the couch.

"There's beer in the fridge," Clint says, sounding distracted. "Grab me one too?"

It doesn't bode well, but he keeps it out of his tone. "So? How'd it go?"

"I'm on active duty as of 0700 Wednesday morning," Clint says, poking his head up over the couch to blink at him. And, okay, something is going on, here. Because the early hour shouldn't be enough to have him looking so beaten, not when he's obviously just gotten back in the game.

With a final scratch of Lucky's ears, he gets up, opens the fridge to find an untouched six pack. The
fact that Clint hasn't felt any need to start drinking already has to be a good sign, right? Beers in hand, he makes his way towards the living room. "What's up?"

"Just," Clint shrugs, stretching as he sits up, making room on the couch. "Spent all day in rooms picking my brain apart."

He snorts. "Been there. So what was it? Here there be monsters?"

"No." Clint twists the cap off, glancing at him with raised eyebrows. He's not so miserable, then, if he's down for showing off.

"Stairwell," he decides, looking over his shoulder. "Then the counter."

"Nothing but net," Clint confirms, snapping the cap. It falls out of sight when it ricochets off the stairs, but he hears it bounce, and then hit the trash can.

James has been getting the hang of it- not to the point where he can bank ricochets, but enough that he can send his own cap to the waste bin from here if he tries, but he's already fidgeting with it, pressing the edges of it against the palm of his hand to leave a jagged circle. Might as well hang onto it for a minute.

"So. What's up?"

Sipping his beer, Clint shrugs, though already his mood seems to be improving. "Just in my head too much."

"Dr. Gupta will do that to you."

"I know, right? The evals were a drag, but they were fine. I'm going in for a range test tomorrow and Steve and Hill are gonna brief me afterwards, so it's not that big a deal, but man. Walking down the halls today, overhearing everyone talking like they always do. Barely used to notice it, even when it was, like, literal world-ending heavy shit. But now it's a bunch of stuff that I don't have any context for, you know?"

He raises one eyebrow and smirks. "No idea what you're talking about."

"Fuck off," Clint grins, reaching one arm out to tug him in closer. "How was your day?"

"It was all right. Got slammed at work, so I went in an hour and a half early. Sam was in town so we met up."

"How'd that go?"

"It was fine." He's pretty sure Clint can feel him tensing up, though. "Um. Is it okay if I talk to him about you?"

Clint shrugs. "Probably be weirder if you didn't."

"Okay. Good." Fuck, though. He should've checked with him first. They'd said they'd be keeping it quiet. He hadn't even asked him.

He sips his beer, letting himself pretend, for just a few seconds, that he's just imagining how still Clint's gotten.

"You already told him, didn't you."
"Um. Yeah." He's turning to apologize when he realizes that Clint's beaming, like James outing him was the best thing that's happened all day.

"Don't worry about it. I came really close to telling Banner, earlier. If it makes you feel any better."

"Why didn't you?"

"Well, I figure that's a conversation we'd be having at some point, but we haven't had it yet," he says, wincing a little as he grins reassuringly. "Sam, that's different. You're supposed to be telling him shit, so don't worry about it." Pausing with his beer halfway to his mouth, he asks, tellingly, "What did he say?"

"Mazel tov." he shrugs, and Clint just nods, unsurprised, and drums his fingers on James' shoulder. "You hungry?"

"Starved but lazy."

"Soup and sandwiches?"

"Sounds good." Clint rolls his shoulders, but James catches him on his way to sitting up, and kisses him hello. It's after seven by the time they finally make it off the couch.

---

Four hours later, James is standing braced against the bathroom sink, toothbrush still in his mouth, staring at the bottle in the medicine cabinet.

He should be reaching for it, shaking one pill out and downing it with water. Same as he did this morning, and yesterday, and the days and weeks before that. The water's already in the glass on the edge of the sink.

He uses it to rinse out the toothpaste instead. Blinks at himself in the mirror as he slides the door shut, shuts out the bathroom light, and heads to bed.
Chapter 41

All things told, James is feeling pretty good when he wakes up, but he makes himself take stock as he gets the coffee going. No aches, no pains. No seizures, headaches, or dizziness. He's not disassociating, screaming blue murder, or having suicidal ideations. He's not hungry- he usually isn't, first thing in the morning- but he's also not nauseas. Just a little tired. As far as he can tell, he hadn't even had any nightmares.

He's not an idiot, though. He knows damned well what he's doing, and why, and he knows that honestly, it's probably just too soon to tell. The drugs from yesterday morning are probably still in his system. So when the thought inevitably occurs to him to skip his morning dosage as well- to really give his experiment the time to do its thing- he shakes it off, just like he'd told himself he would.

Washing his meds down with coffee, he reaches into the shower to get the water going, and gets undressed while waiting for it to warm up. His name on his arm is itching; when he moves to scratch it he notices that the skin around the base of his left arm feels tight as well. Dry skin, or dried sweat. Nothing more. There are no new bruises or cuts in his reflection, not that he'd been expecting them. But the hickey Clint had half-jokingly sucked into his collarbone is gone already.

He wouldn't have minded if it had stuck around for a while.

There's also no red mark- again, why would there be?- where Clint's hand had burned a touch into his side. It hadn't been intentional, but...

He'd been trying, last night. Trying to get into it. Trying to focus on how fucking nice Clint had felt, splayed out against him on the couch, and how he'd sounded. Trying to get past the stupid thing in his head that had been hell-bent on ignoring all of it, and trying not to let on in case it didn't happen at all.

He'd been trying to move his arm from where it had gotten wedged against the back of the couch and his shirt had ridden up. He hadn't really realized, though, until Clint's fingers, calloused and hot, had brushed against the bare skin above his hip.

Almost.

Small and inconsequential, the touch had slammed into him, jolting his core and stealing his breath, and for a few moments, kissing Clint felt the way he knew it was supposed to feel.

He hadn't gotten hard, but he'd thought, maybe. Maybe interest and want was enough to tip the balance. Maybe he could get there, and-

But grabbing onto that particular hope had been enough to pulverize it. Eventually, Clint- skin flushed, hair sticking up at all angles- had pushed himself up against the back of the couch, canted his hips away from where they'd been a steady warm presence against his own, and blinked at him. "You know if we keep on like this, I'm gonna embarrass myself."

He'd shrugged it off at the time, even though he'd half suspected Clint was simply giving him an out. Besides, they'd still needed to get dinner together. And Lucky'd still needed walking. It hadn't been until he'd been on his way upstairs a few hours later that, while their plans for the night had really been about food, TV and hanging out, it would've been nice to have other options.

He'd deliberated for an hour. Googled a few things. Decided vehemently against calling Sam the
moment the idea occurred to him. And he'd begun his experiment.

Now, though stepping into the shower, he can't help wondering if Clint had decided to take care of the situation after he'd left. Had he eased his jeans open right there on the couch? Or had he gone up to bed? Maybe he'd taken himself into the shower.

He's picturing it all too well- he realizes belatedly that he's trying to, again, like he'd been doing last night. Only right now Clint's not within arm's reach. There's nothing to countermand the fantasy- not even, he realizes, a little guiltily, Clint.

He can't help thinking of the feeling of Clint's back muscles shifting under his hands. The way he'd hummed, content, when James had dragged his mouth along the back of his jaw. His laughter when the hearing aids got in the way, and the sweat behind his ear when he'd let James remove them. Pinning Clint down, then the weight of him when the tables got turned.

Maybe he just needs some practice. Time to warm up to the idea. Hell, even talking in complete sentences had been something he'd needed to learn. Maybe this is just another one of those things. And now, with his meds not yet kicking in, might be the best time to start.

His left arm is braced on the wall- it'll warm up in a moment, as soon as he puts it under the spray, but he doesn't want distracting reminders in his field of vision right now.

God, the light in here is still terrible, even with the sunlight coming in through the frosted glass of the window. His skin looks too thin- looks blue- nothing at all like Clint's warmth. He looks dead.

Closing his eyes, he slides his hand down over himself. Tries to feel it, tries not to rush. The water's hot, now, enough that when he turns, putting his shoulder into it all at once the metal heats up fast, almost burning against the remains of his shoulder. It's not enough like the warmth that had coursed through him when Clint had touched him, but it's a start.

Wrapping his fingers around his dick, he squeezes, a few times. It's worked sometimes before, the few times he's tried. His left hand, tracing lightly over his hip, isn't really building any interest either, but it's not hurting anything. Instead, he thinks about Clint's breath catching between kisses, and the wet heat of his mouth buried against the collar of his shirt.

This time, Clint's not moving away. There's the same drag of his thigh along the inside of his own, only this time, instead of moving away, he's repeating it.

He tries to replay the sensation in his head as he slides his fingers loosely up and down, for what feels like several minutes.

Nothing. He's off balance, though. He feels himself wavering on the edge, but it's fading. He's hearing his own breathing, now. He widens his stance to regain his footing and tries to chase down the imagined sensation of Clint's legs filling the space there, his hips pressed against his own, grinding against him.

His eyes jolt open at the tumbling noise- the half-empty shampoo bottle is rolling back and forth along the tub floor at his feet. Like it's some kind of reminder that he's got other things he should be doing.

Just as well. It's not like this was working anyway.

---

Tuesday, Clint spends all morning in an office with Hill and Steve, getting briefed on half a dozen
ongoing concerns.

The first four have to do with the usual suspects— at least that much hadn't changed since his last debriefing. As far as Hydra went, they've taken care of all the low hanging fruit. The remaining operatives, sleepers, agents and sympathizers were the smarter, better-prepared ones. Add to that all the footage— New York, Sokovia, DC— from the past few years, and the new group had a very large and very scared, and therefore very driven population of interested candidates to choose from. Which meant that it was a buyers' market. They could afford to be picky. Getting agents in undercover was proving more difficult than ever.

A surge in mineral pricing— which Hill and Steve take forever to explain, boils down to this: a new buyer had entered the vibranium market and was deliberately paying eight to ten times market value. Billions of dollars in the past three weeks— none of it was going to the miners working on the extraction, of course— and all of it completely untraceable. This was leading to another surge of unrest in Wakanda, and outright militarization in Ethiopia. Ops Control is monitoring those situations; Stark is trying to locate the buyers. The rest of them can expect to be called in to action within the next few days, barring an unlikely de-escalation.

Clint isn't surprised about any of this; situations like these are always happening somewhere, and honestly, he'd gone out into the field on ops with less info than he's getting now. Still, his head's beginning to spin. He almost misses the glance Steve shoots Maria.

"Okay," she says, finally closing the map on the screen and bringing up the file directory. Unfortunately, it's just to bring up another map. "And here's what we're pretty sure you're most curious about. Calvin Winslow."

It's not a map— well, it is, but it's tracking live. Satellite coverage, then, though there's nothing familiar in the landscape.

"That's the NYK2 Vega," Hill says. "Built in 2006. Nothing unusual about it; we believe all of their records and filings to be up to date."

This is quickly verging into territory that he's pretty sure he has no practical reason for knowing. "Why's that matter?"

"Because if it wasn't, the authorities could board it, take a look around. But it's all on the up and up so our hands are tied on that front."

"You've got a satellite tasked to cover it, though?" That must've taken some work. "How?"

"Tony's network has given us almost 100 percent coverage since the ship set sail."

"Oh. Yeah." Weird thing to forget, that one of your friends, after nearly being sucked into a black hole, had funded an entire armada of alien-seeking satellites. Re-tasking them probably hadn't taken him more than a few minutes.

"Anyway, so far, they're sticking to their itinerary. They haven't made contact with any other vessels and we anticipate that they'll be arriving at port in four days."

He's about to ask a question when the light in the corner of the room starts flashing. Hill's the first one on comms.

"Ops, this is Hill, what's the situation?"

"The Pentagon is under attack by their own killer robot. They're in over their heads."
"As usual," Hill glances up at Steve, and then at him, gesturing at the door as she switches channels. "All right, Avengers assemble. Ops Con, you're relaying all updates through Quinjet 3. Wheels up in five."

He waits, awkwardly, because it's only Tuesday, and she might not remember- only it's clear that she does, because she's rolling her eyes and shoving the laptop's screen around so he can see the form that's brought up there. His name is on the top. There's a box, next to it, and when she clicks on it, his name turns green.

_Name: Barton, Clint F. Status1: Active. Status2: Deployed_

"A little lacking in fanfare," he smirks, saluting as he heads for the door.

"Get back without blowing a cakewalk," she calls after him, "and we'll throw you a parade."

He's out of practice, but this, he knows. Locker. Regular shirt off, uniform shirt on. Listening in to Tony and Steve, already talking tactics. Boot tracker activated, sunglasses and beacon in his pocket. The only addition to his routine is the extra ten seconds to switch out his hearing aids for the comms-ready set. His go-case is ready in the armory, where Natasha, also following the conversation, is double checking the EMP equipment.

Five minutes later, they're taking off. It's the first time he's even set foot in a quinjet in almost two years.

He thinks he's going to have to get re-certified, though. Natasha's piloting hasn't improved _at all._

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"And I'm just saying, _Steven_," Tony argues over the comms,"that if I _had_ designed this one, the target tracking would've been been a lot better."

"Tony, do you even hear yourself?" Steve rolls his eyes. "You're saying your design would be _more_ dangerous."

"If you're a bad guy. If you're a civilian, a water fountain, a filing cabinet, or a- I'm pretty sure that was a statue? Anyway, yeah. Less likely to get killed by uncontrolled plasma blasts."

"Long as you'd promise to put an off switch on the damned thing," Clint mutters, checking on Steve, who's already got eyes in the hall; behind Clint, Natasha's got his quiver and is prepping the remote EMP control rig. "How much time do we have?"

"Two minutes before it's due back in your section," Tony replies. "Unless something triggers the sensors and it decides to get curious."

Shit. "You didn't say it was an AI, man."

"It's not. Just following protocol. A really badly written salt-and-burn protocol."

He keeps his eyes trained on the corner the bot's due to be rounding; next to him, Steve is doing the same. Only Steve, he's got the shit job: if Clint misses, he's there to draw the robot's fire.

This will all go a lot more smoothly if he doesn't miss.

"Pairing's done," Natasha hands his quiver back. "Slots one through three are live, everything else is where it should be."
He scans the rows of fletching out of habit, though he'd checked it on the jet and already knows she's not wrong. Mission specific, followed by the usual array of tactical- grapplers, trackers, tear-and- knockout gas- then the explosives, in order of blast radius. And then the standard tips- armor-piercing all the way down to rubber-tipped.

He straps the quiver on; rolling his shoulders to get it to fall into place right, he's doing a few practice grabs- slots one, four, and fourteen- before he even realizes that the habit's come back. Which is just as well. They're short on time and there's not going to be a lot of time to mess around. He draws from slot one as he picks up his bow.

Hefting the arrow in his hand, not liking the balance. Tony'd stopped them on the way in to re-engineer three of them on the spot- possibly just to drive Steve insane, but mostly because he hadn't been interested in starting shit with the Pentagon by accidentally wiping out their woefully under-shielded office computers. They're a little heavier than before, thanks to the heavier resistors.

He'll make do. He's got three chances before he needs to start getting creative.

Up and around the corner, the noises are getting closer, though he doesn't notice it until Steve and Natasha go on alert. Three second buzzing sweeps, with about two seconds in between, presumably to recharge.

The bot is mid-blast when it rounds the corner, searing a three foot tall scorch mark into the walls as it turns towards them. The barrel is already swinging back to the right, preparing to fire, when he looses the EMP arrow.

His timing's off; the arrow's incinerated less than a foot from the barrel, but it had flown true and the next is already nocked as he throws himself back and to the side, making room for Steve in the doorway. He can hear the motor now; it's speeding up, having locked onto a new target, but Clint's got the timing down, now, and Steve's quick on his feet, dodging out of the way again, giving him room.

He fires.

The second the arrow's planted into the joint supporting the barrel, Natasha's calling out. "Iron Man, you clear?"

They can hear the robot's treads grinding over office debris and broken glass; this close, he can hear the plasma cannon warming up. He's got no idea if the shot had done the right damage, but Steve just rolls his eyes as he drags him back around the corner.

"Sittin' pretty as always," Tony replies. "Go ahead and light 'em up. Or, you know. Technically the opposite."

Natasha's thumb is already on the button, and the bot's next blast is cut off two seconds too early.

"All right," Steve commands. "Fall back."

Outside, Tony's crouched over his suitcase, pretending to be completely unaware of the gathered crowd of officials and agents behind him. Flicking his wrist, he stands; by the time he's upright, the suit's almost completely locked into place.

"Be careful," Steve tells Tony, as they watch him head back in towards the robot for visual confirmation and final deactivation.

"Yes, mother," Stark grumbles, heading back in towards the robot. "Have fun with the idiots while I dismantle their billion dollar baby."
It's not until Steve's hooking his shield over his shoulder that Clint sees the scorch mark burned into the metal.

God damn it.

For the next ten minutes, Clint's attention is split between Natasha, who's mostly keeping an eye on the crowd of agents, Steve, who's talking carefully with the officials, and Tony, who's still on comms and decidedly less careful about his words as he strips the bot down.

At first he's just cursing about bad design and materials - he could do better with a handful of legos and a roll of tin foil, apparently - but he eventually works on to question the skill, intelligence, parentage and attractiveness of the engineering team. Loudly and at length.

Nice thing about the Pentagon, though, is that at least nobody wants them sticking around for a press conference.

They're back home before rush hour's even really getting started.

---

Headphones in but not on, James waits for his coffee and pokes through the app store on his phone. Candace had said there's probably a Russian version of Scrabble somewhere, and it's not like he's got a lot of opportunities to practice these days, outside of Natasha.

Once the barista calls his order out, he gives up and turns the music back on. A group called the Dum Dum Girls, because Aimee'd been wearing their t-shirt the other day. He's about to pocket the phone when Clint's text pops up.

_First op today. It was awesome. Heading back to NYC now._

_Congrats!_ he sends back, after a minute's deliberation. He's not sure how he's supposed to be feeling about this, right now. It's only Tuesday. Clint hadn't figured on being cleared for fieldwork until tomorrow at the earliest.

As if _that_ even matters. They'd deployed him easily enough when they'd needed him down in the subway, and he'd been in much worse shape then.

It's a little messed up, though. Here he'd been, at work all day and finally making some headway on the week's project, and it hadn't even occurred to him that Clint wouldn't be anywhere besides the tower.

Fuck, if something had gone wrong?

Someone would've told him.

A teenage girl nearly bumps into him because he's still rooted to the spot and staring at his phone like an idiot, right in her path. He grins apologetically- not that she sees him- and finally gets moving.

He's just winding himself up, here. Nothing had gone wrong on the op. Clint's on his way back to New York.

From somewhere.

Whatever.
He's halfway down the block, his coffee halfway to his mouth, when his phone rings. Squeezing the button on the cord irritably- he almost breaks the stupid damned thing- he answers.

---

*You're being an idiot.*

He'd been in a terrific mood, all things told. His first day back, the mission had gone smoothly, all of this- it's starting to feel *real*, now.

After firing a text off to James and changing back into his regular clothes, he stops for coffee, then heads up to the debriefing in the conference room. It's just Steve in there when he arrives; he's on the phone, looking out the window.

"Yeah. Yeah, we did," he's saying. "Guilty as charged." Turning around, he grins at Clint and signs *BUCKY*. "Nothing to write home about. All the damage that was done happened before we got there, I promise."

It's totally normal to feel totally jealous when someone like Steve- when *Captain Freakin' America* is talking to your boyfriend on the phone, right? And totally stealing your thunder without even realizing it because he's too perfect a human being to do something like that on purpose?

"No, it was good. Clint's finally back in action. Did great." He's torn between wanting to grin like an idiot at the praise and question every inch of it. It's not like they don't all know that Steve's shield hadn't taken *two* hits before he'd even gotten his first shot off.

And now Steve's smirking. "He's *totally* fine. Like I said, he did great. You want to talk to him? He's right here."

Just as he's wondering how to navigate that conversation- talking to James in front of the others and not letting on- he hears Hill and Tony getting off the elevator. It sounds like Bruce is with them. Steve's following his glance, looking at him questioningly, so he shakes his head and shrugs. "I'll catch up with him later," he says.

"Actually, shit, Buck. Looks like we're just about to get started. Shoot me a call later if you want, or I'll talk to you tomorrow... All right, see you."

---

"Steve, your shield's been sent down to the lab for Tony to check out. In the meantime you've got backups in armories 1 and 3," Hill's saying, glancing on the screen that she's got set up on the conference room table.

"Okay. Low priority, though. It wasn't that big a deal."

Next to Clint, Natasha settles down in her chair, bored out of her mind already.

"Right." Tony smirks back at Steve before taking a sip of that nasty green shit he's always drinking. They've been low-key arguing about every damned thing since they'd set foot back on the jet in DC. "Because you're an engineer, now."

"Enough of one, apparently, to know that it held up just fine."

Even Bruce, who's just sitting in to get caught up on what he'd missed since he's not quite over his
allergy to buildings full of Feds and military, rolls his eyes. Steve's making this way too easy for Tony. Even though they're both just joking around, it's kind of a disturbing trait in someone who's regularly in charge of field tactics.

"Yeah. No. See, heat can affect the metal," Pulling a face, Tony cuts himself off and sits up straight. "Wait. You're just fucking with me. I know fire was invented before you were born."

Rolling her eyes, and clearly ready to change the subject, Hill looks at Clint instead.

"Barton, good shooting today," she says, instead of asking him, outright, why he didn't take the shot immediately upon visual contact. "Your response time is better than we'd been hoping for, so soon out of the gate. Only two shots, correct?"

"Thanks? I mean." Ugh. This part hasn't changed. At least it's just arrows he's got to account for, and not bullets; they're easier to find and identify in the aftermath. "Could've been faster though." Seriously, he should've been able to get it in one. "It still got Steve."

"It got the shield," Steve rocks his head back to give him an unimpressed look. "Which is kind of what it's for."

"Semantics," Tony shakes his head, drinks more of his nasty green shit. Right now, though, there's a part of Clint that's pretty sure he's the only one here who actually gets it.

When they leave, though, there's a message from James on his phone.

_You apparently saved the world or some shit today so I'm making dinner. Text when you're heading back._
"It's open," James calls out, dodging back from the oil spattering up from the skillet as Clint enters the kitchen. "Beer's in the fridge. How'd it go?"

"All right." Clint sighs, grabbing a beer out of the fridge. "You hear any details?"

"Course not. Talked to Steve, but it sounded like you all hadn't debriefed yet." He checks the timer on the potatoes and turns on another burner to get the water boiling for the green beans. While it's heating, he leans against the counter, only to realize that it's still covered in flour.

Brushing his hands on his jeans, he looks up to find Clint smirking at him, gesturing at his shirt. "It's a lost cause, man."

"Fuck." The shit's everywhere. That's what he gets for deciding to go all Betty Crocker.

"Eh, don't worry about it." Clint halfheartedly helps him brush it off, but apparently it's just an excuse to pull him in for a kiss.

He pulls himself away before the chicken has the time to burn, picking up the tongs to flip them. "So what're you cleared to tell me?"

"Robotic plasma cannon prototype."

"One of Stark's?"

"Thank god, no. His bad ideas are a lot harder to put down." Clint's rubbing at his ear when he glances back up from the stove, looking mildly irritated. "So how was your day?"

"Anticlimactic. Went to work, grabbed coffee, went to the grocery store."

"Cool." Clint nods at the stove. "Cool. Anything I can do to help?"

"Grab some plates?"

For the next few minutes, he's busy getting the food ready, sneaking glances in Clint's direction. It still looks like something's bothering him.

"What's up?"

"Huh?" He's just stalling, though. His hearing aids are in. So James just waits him out, dishes up, and hands him a plate.

"It's weird," Clint says, sitting down at the table and kicking a chair out for James. "Not used to not being able to tell you anything." Taking a bite of chicken- it's still probably too hot- his eyes water. But he's grinning. "This is awesome, man."

"Had time to kill," he says, because admitting that he wanted to do something to celebrate- that he'd texted Kate to ask her what his favorite food was, or that he'd been planning on it since yesterday- seems weird now, with this new thing hanging between them. At least he'd thought better of wine and candles.

"It's fine," he says, picking at his green beans. If the chicken's still too hot, the potatoes are deadly. "I get the whole need to know thing. Not my first rodeo."
"Yeah, but. It's weird, now. Cause it's me that's doin' it. And the part of the op that I can't tell you about is totally stupid."

He grins. "National security at stake kind of thing?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny," Clint smirks back, taking another bite of the chicken. "This is fucking awesome, by the way. Thanks."

---

He knows something's up with James, but it's not until he's heading back down to his own place, half hard and intent, again, on the shower he'll be taking in five minutes, that he really lets himself focus on it.

At first, he'd thought maybe James had just been bummed out. Clint's taking off with the team, on to new and exciting things- as long as you ignore the waiting, the briefs and debriefs, the weapons inventories, and mandatory check-ins with medical- and James' days look exactly like they did last week. Maybe it's going to take him a few days to adjust.

James making dinner wasn't all that out of the ordinary, but he's not usually one to go all out on anything that takes more than a few minutes to prep. Fried chicken's one of Clint's faves, but it's a complete pain in the ass. Ergo, he never makes it. Ergo, it's never come up in conversation.

The odds are good James had asked around, then. Which is ridiculously thoughtful and ten kinds of awesome- so much that Clint has no idea what do with it. But it's also out of left field. Like.

Like he's playing Suzie Homemaker, or something. Doing the groceries and practically having dinner on the table by the time he walks through the door.

Fucking hell. Could be that he's just overanalyzing and projecting and all that crap. One meal doesn't equate with an entire new dynamic between them.

The thing is, though, their dynamic is changing

And it's not like it's all bad, or something. It's mostly good. Like James is just getting more confident with him. Or at least he's trying to get there.

James had seemed to calm down- a little out of breath, and a little resigned- when Clint had mentioned how late it was getting. It's just... it hadn't been until right then that he'd realized how hot and heavy they'd been going at it. Fuck, he hadn't been thinking at all, really.

Kind of hard to, when his hand's wrapped around James's shoulder, sleeve all rucked up to the point where he could feel the seam of the metal and skin with his fingers, just enough to note the difference between solid and slightly-less solid. Kind of hard to when James is kissing back just as hard.

Kind of hard to, when James' hand on his stomach, under his shirt, had been enough to re-route all the blood from his brain to his dick.

It's like he's fifteen again, all confused about shirts or skins. Only when he'd been fifteen, the things he'd worried about had been more along the lines of oh shit are we gonna get caught and keeping an eye on the window in case Sarah's parents came home early. He'd been all dumb enthusiasm and sweaty palms and too hell bent on making it happen- worrying whether it even was going to happen- to worry about what came after.
Right now, it's the after that's everything. It's not like James is made of glass, but neither of them are leaving town with the circus tomorrow, either.

He's got his hand wrapped around himself before his clothes even hit the bathroom floor. There's a blast of cold crashing against his skin when he steps in, but it only barely manages to take the edge off because his brain's too busy focusing on all the ways that James might look when he's coming.

Maybe he'd get all flushed, neck muscles cording, eyes screwed shut against the intensity as he pounds into Clint.

Maybe it'd be the other way round. Maybe he'd just freeze, mouth slack, eyes wide and unseeing, but staring up at Clint all the same as he pushes into him, slowly as he can.

Or maybe it'd be something in between. Brows furrowed like he's worried, chest heaving, thigh muscles jumping underneath Clint's hands. Or just a half-caught gasp against Clint's mouth.

Maybe he'd be quiet, or maybe Clint just wouldn't know. But it's the image of James, spent, muscles twitching across his stomach as he tries to catch his breath, hair plastered to the sides his neck, that sends Clint careening over the edge, crashing hard.

His knee buckles and he knocks everything off the shower shelf as he stops himself from falling. The tile is cooler than his skin, though, and he thinks that sprawling there for a minute wouldn't be the worst idea while he catches his breath.

By the time he's up and out of the shower, Lucky's on the other side of the door, tail thumping across the floor, looking worried.

---

In the morning, he holds the door for Mrs. Aslanova from next door as she makes her way down to her waiting taxi. She pauses next to him, leaning on her cane to squint up at him.

"Were there ninjas in the building again last night? Around 11:30? Your dog was barking something awful."

"No," he says, puzzled until he does the math. Today, he thinks, would be a good day to crawl under a rock and die, but he'd settle for not blushing. "More like the exact opposite. Sorry about that. I had my hearing aids out."

She makes it down the steps before turning to smile back up at him as she taps her own over-the-ear device. "I didn't."

And then she fucking winks.
FINALLY heading towards wrapping this up. I've got 4-5 chapters I'm posting today, and another one or two and this monster will be FINISHED. *throws confetti**drinks all the champagne and falls down*

When she spars with Bruce, Natasha telegraphs every move, keeping her motions fluid so as not to startle him. And while she is going easy on him, it's not enough to tip the balance.

"Remind me again why we're doing this?" Bruce groans, splayed out on the mat for the second time in three minutes.

"So you can gloat that you've got better abs than Stark," Natasha replies, offering him a hand up.

The real reason- the one that Tony had let slip- was that they'd needed to adapt to being a man down. Steve had glared at Tony briefly when he'd said it, covering by saying that no, it was because Bruce needed to get a better grip on his reactions to being startled.

Whichever the case, Bruce's getting pretty good, all things told. It's obvious he's still reluctant to attack unless Natasha's leaving him a very good- and very deliberate- opening, but that could just be his usual aversion to fighting. It's not lack of skill, Clint decides after about five minutes. It's just that Natasha's a whole lot better at it than he is.

"Sorry I'm late," Sam calls out from the doorway, rushing into the gym and crashing right into Bruce, who's finally gone a little green. "Or maybe not?" He's frozen for a long moment, until Bruce shakes his head, nodding at him as he passes.

"Hey Sam," Natasha offers, easing past him on the way to the showers.

"How'd it go?" Sam asks, once the other two are out of earshot.

"Fine." Clint shrugs, not really sure what he's supposed to be reporting. "He stayed with it the whole time."

"That's good. Been waiting long?"

"I got here early."

He follows Sam to one of the other mats to start work on grappling. It's weird- this is only the third time they've ever sparred, but he hasn't figured out Sam's technique yet, which means he's spending as much time studying him as he is attacking and countering.

"You know, you should wear the rig next time," he decides after about twenty minutes, offering Sam a hand up. They're not quite evenly matched, which is admittedly kind of an ego boost. He's not having to hold back nearly as much as Natasha'd done with Bruce, but what Sam lacks in speed, he makes up for in strength. Still, all the strength in the world isn't going to account for much if someone manages to use the thirty pound wing rig against him.
"Yeah," Sam says, circling him him. "Tried it once with Cap. Wound up jamming the damned thing and nearly gouged his eye out." He lunges, wedging his shoulder under Clint's elbow and grabbing his arm as he moves past. "Stark's working on that, though."

Clint nods, taking a controlled fall and rolling to break Sam's grip. "Could be a useful move, if you play it right." Jumping to his feet, he shoves into him, grabbing his shirt where the strap for his wings would be and tugging down and sideways. He spins, hooking his foot behind Sam's knee, only Sam's twisting and they're both going down.

At least he's not the only one who's out of breath. He's about to suggest calling it for now when Hill's voice booms into the room over the loudspeaker. Saved by the bell.

"Avengers, report to Ops Con for a field update. Avengers to Ops Con. Ten minutes."

"She makes it sound like we're going to the principal's office," Sam grumbles, getting to his feet. Clint's head's swimming, a little bit.

They've got enough time to hit the showers and change, if they're quick about it.

---

There's water dripping down the back of his shirt when he arrives to find that everyone else, including Sam, has beaten him here. Natasha and Bruce are already seated at the table, looking not at all like they've just been spending the better part of an hour trading punches. From across the table, Sam slides him a sweating bottle of Gatorade that he'd had the presence of mind to swipe from the cafeteria on the way up, which pretty much cements him as being the best sparring partner Clint's ever had.

"Okay," Hill says, standing at the front of the table, pressing a button to turn the projector on; it bathes the screen in an ice-blue light that's just irritating. "It looks like our timeline's just moved up a few hours. Nothing to worry about, but I wanted to make sure you all had the latest intel."

Thankfully, just as he's starting to connect the color and his reaction- fucking Loki- the blue switches over to a live video feed. Coulson's face is four feet tall. His eyebrows are raised and he's grinning.

"Coulson? We're live, you read?"

"All right, thanks. Yes. Good to see you all." Behind him is a brick wall and a wedge of unfinished ceiling. There's dirty light coming through a window off to the left, but beyond that, there's nothing to indicate where he is.

"You too. Your message said you have an update?"

"We've secured a base of operations for the mission, and we have beta sites selected should plans change. We've had good coverage with the satellite relays and can now confirm that he's on track to make landfall in 26 hours."

Sam's halfway to raising his hand, asking, "Why's the timeline moving up?"

"You know that storm off of Papua New Guinea?" Hill glances down at her notes. "It's... okay, I'm glossing over a whole lot of things I don't understand, but it's messing with the currents. Down south is a mess, but up closer to the Bering Sea, the Pacific currents are working in his favor."

"There's already a lot of overtime going 'round at the docks," Coulson adds. "Three major shipments have arrived ahead of schedule and they're expecting several more over the next few
days. And the NYK2 Vega is one of them."

"Correct," Hill confirms, nodding at the room and then glancing at the camera. "Have your people gotten control of the area?"

"We've got access to enough systems for coverage, onshore and off." He pulls a face. "I'm staying resolutely out of the know regarding exactly which systems those are." Looking away from the camera, he reaches for something on his desk and says, "Daisy, go ahead and patch Ops Control in."

For a moment, everything is quiet. Sam's Gatorade bottle crinkles as he screws the cap on, and onscreen, Coulson is scratching his chin.

This is surreal, Clint finally admits to himself. Three days back onto the job, just barely, and it's feeling like old times again. Waiting for marching orders. Reminding himself to check to make sure Lucky's got enough food for the next few days and that someone- well, it used to be Katie, but now it's James- is lined up for petsitting duty. Wondering if anyone sitting around the table notices anything strange in his expression as he looks at Coulson on the other side of the camera.

There shouldn't be, now, he tells himself, not anymore. Old habits die hard. But he's glad Natasha's looking at Hill, all the same.

Hill's hand finally goes to her ear. "Yes? Acknowledged. It's cleared for upload." With a nod to the camera, she turns back to the table. "Okay, so here's where we're standing. Banner, you're our man in the tower on this one." Bruce nods- the biotech conference had been in Clint's second or third briefing, but she explains it again for Coulson's sake. "There's a Dr. Fielding who will be there. There's been a lot of chatter about his work- and a few groups interested in funding some research- coming across the desk lately."

"So I've heard," Coulson nods.

"Everyone else, you're flying out at 0700, so report in an hour before that. Sorry for the early start, but it'll leave time to adjust final ground preparations if something comes up."

"Sounds good," Coulson nods, because of course he'd have no sympathy for mere mortals having to get their asses out of bed at four thirty in the goddamned morning. "We'll have transport at the hangar ready to get you into position as soon as you land. We'll be there to meet you at eleven o'clock, local."

---

Around six, James can hear Lucky on the stairs; a few minutes later there's a text from Clint.

*Back from work wanna order Chinese?*

*Usual order?*

*Y.*

*Calling it in, see you in a few.*

He places the order, and goes back to folding his laundry. There's a loose button on one of his cardigans; he's going to need to sew it back on. When he hears Lucky on the stairs again a few minutes later, he brings the sweater down with him.
Clint kisses him hello right there in the hallway- it's cool; even if the neighbors saw, they wouldn't care- while Lucky does his best to get his leash tangled around their legs.

He holds up the sweater as Clint extricates himself enough to get the door opened. "You still got that sewing kit?"

"Junk drawer," Clint says, unclipping Lucky's leash so the dog can jump all over James unimpeded. "Want a beer?"

"Sure," he says, watching Clint head for the fridge like he's on a mission from God. There are no bottle cap theatrics this time around, and the light's better here than it had been in the hallway. Clint looks exhausted as he passes him a bottle. "How'd it go?"

"Ugh," Clint sighs, heading towards the couch.

James stops to rummage for the needle and thread before following. "That good, huh?"

"I'm flying out at ass o'clock tomorrow morning, instead of tomorrow night." He rolls his head back against the cushion to look over at him. "How was your day?"

"Boring," he says, maybe a little irritably, but Clint's the one who's changing the topic. "Why'd the flight get moved up?" Sewing kit in hand- it's not as big as he'd been expecting, and there's a memory there, but it's probably not worth chasing down- he moves over to the couch.

"Stark's had satellites tracking Dr. Asshole ever since he set out for California. His ship's been making good time."

Using satellites to track people is just a thing that happens, nowadays. It shouldn't make his stomach knot the way it does. "Why?"

"I dunno. Currents or headwinds or some shit."

"I mean, why the satellites?" With everything that happened with Project Oversight, it's unlikely that Steve would be enthusiastic about relying on them.

Clint shrugs when he says so. "SOP for this sort of thing," he explains. "And it's not like he doesn't know they're used for a whole lot of other things these days. Besides, Winslow's going after one of his own, you know?"

Clint's smiling, and he knows it's supposed to be a nice sentiment, but for some reason it's pissing him off again.

Maybe it's the way he'd fucked with his meds. He'd taken them this morning, but it could be a delayed reaction to skipping them yesterday. Maybe it's the fact that this entire situation is bullshit. Clint and Steve and Natasha and everyone are going to go fight his battle for him while he sits here on his ass, because there's a guy out there who wants to turn him back into a killing machine.

Maybe it's just the fact that, down underneath it all, even knowing that is fucking terrifying.

Trying to thread the needle- he has to switch hands because his left's no good with the thread- he asks, "You worried about it?"

"Not really. We've got good intel, we've got Coulson's people out there already, so we'll be hitting the ground running. Mostly I'm just pissed off that I've got to be up and functioning before the sun's even up, you know?"
It sounds like he's talking about just another day at the office. And shit, these days? It probably is.

"Yeah." *There.* He's got the needle all set, so he pulls the button free of the sweater and picks away the last remains of the old thread. It leaves tiny holes, marking the spot where he'll need to re-attach the button.

Lining up his stitches is almost distraction enough. Of course Coulson's going to be there. And he's got his own crew. That probably brings the count of people dealing with James' mess up to, what? Twelve? Fifteen? Steve joining up with the Howling Commandos had brought their numbers up to ten, and they'd been taking on an army.

When he glances up, Clint's fiddling with his hearing aid and watching him work with a strange smile on his face. "What?"

"Just thinking. Must be nice, having built-in thimbles. I always stab the shit out of myself."

He's not sure where the impetus to bite back *I'll be sure to tell Hydra you approve of their design* is coming from, but he shrugs it off. "At least I'm getting some good use out of this thing."

While Clint might be able to make any shot imaginable, his arms aren't made of metal. He's got no sort of augmented healing capabilities.

*This* irritation, he recognizes. It's like Steve, back before the war, all over again. Knowing that he's going to get his ass kicked six ways to Sunday, and throwing down anyway.

After another few minutes- Clint's got the TV on, now- and he's tying the knot off. He hasn't managed to think of what to say next, though. Clint's going on a mission tomorrow, and he's sitting here, sewing like some sort of housewife.

The last time he'd been in this spot, he'd been confined to a cot while Steve- fully capable of paying back every Sunday trip he'd ever taken- took charge of the troops.

"It's fixed, right?" Clint sounds hesitant enough that it warrants a glance up.

"What is?"

"Your sweater thing. Which means you don't have to glare it to death anymore."

He doesn't give a fuck about the stupid sweater. He wants Clint to just tell him what's going on. He's about to try asking again when his phone vibrates. "Food's here."

Clint's already grabbed plates by the time he comes back up, but he's got a concerned expression on his face. He manages to hold out until they've dished up and are sitting at the counter. By the time he gets around to spitting it out, it's amazing he hasn't exploded.

"Everything okay?"

For all of his expectation of the question, he should probably be able to manage more than a shrug. "I dunno. Just weird, knowing that this whole situation Winslow is actually coming to a head."

"Better than not knowing about it. Least this way we'll be able to bring him in, if he lets us."

"And if he doesn't?"

Clint pauses, fiddles with his chopsticks. "Bring him in or take him down, those are the orders. Everything else is just details." Spearing some chicken on the end, he pops it in his mouth, then
almost immediately stops chewing. "Or. Shit."

"What?"

"Been thinking about logistics all day, you know? Didn't really hit me until now."

He waits, but Clint needs prompting. "What didn't?"

"It's fucking Winslow, you know? And like, normally, I'm used to having no advance warning. Shit comes at us out of nowhere and we assemble and handle it. But this, it's been hanging over our heads for weeks. By this time tomorrow, we'll actually be dealing with it. Finally."

The "we" doesn't include him. By this time tomorrow James will probably have filed a few things, and that's about it.

No sense making a big deal over it, though. "Shoot me a text when it's done?"

"Of course." Clint nods. A minute goes by, and he sets his fork down, turning to look at him. "Look, dude. I know this has gotta suck, your having to sit and wait, but..."

"It's not that," he says, maybe a bit too fast to be entirely believable. "I mean, yeah, that's part of it. " If he hadn't opened his mouth, Clint wouldn't be waiting for him to finish. "More like, everyone and their kid sister has to go out to deal with my shit while I just twiddle my thumbs."

"You know we all signed up for it, right?"

"Shouldn't have had to."

"Well, that's on that fucker Winslow, not on you." The fact that Clint's looking like he's being careful about whatever he's going to say next though? That probably is "But, ah, yeah... Given that, how awkward would it be if I asked you to check in on Lucky tomorrow?"

The dog's ears twitch at the sound of his name, but when no scraps of food accompany it, he settles down again, still watching them both.

"On a scale of one to five, maybe a three?"

He's joking- of course he'll watch the dog- but Clint doesn't look like he caught it; his expression goes back to worried. "Shit. Um. I'll make it worth your while when I get back? Drinks and dinner? Someplace decent?"

He grins, because Clint's really looking like he needs it spelled out. "It's a date, and it's a deal."

Clint relaxes, slumping down in his seat enough to bring their arms into contact; he leans against him and spears some chicken with his fork.

James is about to apologize- he's not sure for what- when Clint, his mouth full, adds, "I'll be able to fill you in on everything then."

"Damned right you will."

---

James already knows Lucky's schedule, and where the food is, and he's got the number to the vet if anything goes wrong. He's got a key.
There's just one thing that Clint's been putting off asking him all night. He'd nearly worked 'round to it when they were done eating, but the conversation had gotten sidetracked; they'd wound up comparing notes on their various times in Russia instead. The first three times James had been there, Clint hadn't even been born.

It's getting late, though, and James probably needs to go and crash just as much as Clint does; he's already reaching for his boots.

Clint's second time in Russia had been spent working with a whole lot of dubiously sourced and engineered C4. That at least, had felt less stable than the way he's going to have to bring this up.

"Question for you."

"Yeah?" James tosses his hair out of his eyes and glances up at him as he tightens his laces, shoving them back into his boots because he's not going to bother tying them. He's going to trip and die on the stairs and maybe Clint should tell him that.

"What?" James shakes his head. "Spit it out, I'm not gonna explode."

Pointing out his choice of words would take too much explanation. "I know, just. Should've asked earlier, but. If it were up to you..."

"Would I kill him or jail him?"

He laughs, because really, James has probably never been all that slow on the uptake. At least Clint's not the only one who's been thinking about this all damned night. "Yeah," he nods. "Not promising it'll change anything-" oh god, that probably sounded patronizing as hell. "But-"

"Ice the fucker."

"Good."

James raises his eyebrows at that. His eyes go wide and everything. "Really?"

"What?"

"I dunno. I mean, Steve wouldn't be for it."

"Not his first choice, but it's not his third." All Steve had actually said was that there was no way in hell he intended on letting Winslow out of the box they're setting up for him. But Steve says what he means. And if he means it, he'll allow for the possibility that he'll have to give the order.

Clint respects him and the others enough to wait for the order, but there are points on his arrows for a reason.

"We've got a plan," he tells James. "But the consensus seems to be that if Winslow wants to make a mistake out there, we'll oblige him."

It's probably at least a little fucked up that the smile James is giving him is the realest one he's managed all night. Maybe it's bloody, maybe it's just hopeful; sanguine's the word for that, either way. But regardless, if shit goes that far south, at least Clint's going into it knowing that he's got permission from the one person who actually matters, here.

---

Brushing his teeth when he goes upstairs, it's kind of hard to ignore the elephant in the room,
sitting on a shelf behind his reflection. And he's not trying to disassociate here, anyway.

He'd taken his meds this morning, which means he's going to skip them tonight- he'll be asleep anyway. Maybe there'll be a nightmare or two, maybe some insomnia. It's nothing he can't handle. It's not like he hasn't had plenty of practice.

Besides. He'll take them again in the morning, even if he feels evened out when he wakes up. Besides having to work, he's definitely going to need to keep himself steady so the agony of waiting for news doesn't topple him completely.

If he's still doing well tomorrow night, he'll skip them again.

If, on the other hand, he's a mess- if any of the discontinuation symptoms on the list start showing up in full force, or reality's hitting too hard- he'll take them as directed.

If something goes wrong, and Winslow wins, he might need to take all of them.

That's a stupid thought.

Or maybe he'll have to swear off of them completely and hope like hell he can still pull off the whole Winter Soldier thing.

Okay, that one's probably worse.

But hopefully, this staggered break he's taking from his meds will make things go more smoothly when he and Clint get together Friday night. He will have had a little time to adjust to the lack in his system by then. If it comes down to it, though, the list includes nausea, sore muscles, headaches, panic attacks, fatigue, depression depersonalization, crying spells, anxiety, loss of appetite, and/or seizures.

If he's heading down the road to any of those, date night's trashed before it even arrives.

Right now, even with his morning dose, he's honestly a little stressed. Mostly it's just the impatience he's noticing, and that, along with the irritability, can be chalked up to the embarrassment of having to wait here like some princess in a tower. Talking it out with Clint to the extent that he had might've helped, but it hadn't changed anything.

He's tired, though. That's a good sign.

He's doing okay. This is just stress, and he's handling it. He'll take his morning meds, he'll skip tomorrow night. By Friday, Clint will be back and Winslow will be dead or detained- hopefully the former, but either will do. Knowing that should bolster him enough to forego them Friday morning.

Friday night, after their date- or maybe, hell, hopefully, it won't have ended yet- he'll take them before bed.

He's not sure which of his thoughts is the one to set off the low thrum of arousal that he's just noticing. The thought of Winslow being gone might have something to do with it, but the anticipation of Clint coming back victorious- and the possibility that maybe their date will finally go further than just necking on the couch- is definitely factoring in.

He doesn't do anything about it, though. He just spits out the toothpaste, shuts off the light, and heads over to the bed.

He's tempting fate enough, here, and he knows it.
Chapter 44

Keeping to the schedule he'd made for himself, James takes his meds first thing in the morning before jumping into the shower. He's nearly dressed when there's a knock on the door fifteen minutes later.

"Coffee?"

"Can't stay," Clint shrugs, watching him sit down to pull his other sock on. "Heading to the tower in a few." For some reason it makes him sound like he's off on some fairy tale quest. Like he's going to battle dragons in Central Park, or something.

"Finally off to play my knight in shining armor, huh?"

"Well." Clint snorts, reaching over to tap his metal wrist twice. "Think for accuracy's sake, we'd have to flip it around, so we might want to save that line for when it's your turn to come pull my hide out of the fire." He blinks at the coffee pot like he's reconsidering it, and stifles a yawn. "We're flying out in an hour and a half. Should be on our way back either really late tonight, or tomorrow, depending."

"Noted and filed." He can hear Clint's phone vibrating; he's got a pretty good sense of what the message is going to say even before Clint's reached for it. "Done with work at four today. Text me when you can, yeah?"

"Will do." He pockets his phone and sighs. "Natasha's downstairs. Gotta go."

"Right on. Good luck," He pushes himself back from the table and is moving to get up, but Clint plants his hands on his shoulders, keeping him there as he leans down.

"Don't need it," he grins. "But thanks."

Clint, when he kisses him goodbye, tastes like toothpaste and smells like soap, more than anything. ---

He's on his way to work when the perfection starts to wear off of his morning. The wind blowing down through the tunnel is cold, cutting through everyone on the platform like a knife and making them more irritable than usual.

Once he's on the train, the temperature shoots up considerably. It's sweltering, and by the time his stop comes up, he's sweating. The cold air up on the street feels like a reprieve.

Only, by the time he's made it halfway down the block, the sensation of being watched settles in over his shoulders.

He's bringing this on himself, and he knows it. It's not on the list of discontinuation symptoms, but it's not entirely unanticipated, given the circumstances.

Right now, everyone he cares about- most of the people he even knows- are on a flight to California. Trying to find some quiet before the action, maybe. Steve's probably going over logistics again. There's probably a map involved, only James doesn't know if it's on paper this time around, even if he's picturing it that way.

He tracks the reflection of the street in the store window as he rounds the corner. Nobody's looking
at him. Nobody's even veering unexpectedly off course or being caught in the act of casually glancing away.

He's fine. He's just going to have an irritating day, is all.

---

Clint still needs to re-take his flight test, a point which Sam cheerfully reminds him of when he offers to spell him in the pilot's seat. Probably because as of right now, Sam's the only one on this plane who actually has something to do. They've been flying for almost two hours and there hasn't been any new information coming over the wire from Hill or from Coulson.

There are no plans to be re-drawn, no new logistics to sort out, nothing. It doesn't stop Steve from staring angrily at the tablet in his hands like it owes him something; that's not new.

Clint pulls out his phone and checks- no messages- before putting it away again. He'll let himself check again in half an hour. It's not that he's expecting anything, but after Hill's frankness yesterday regarding their lack of numbers, he'd managed to convince himself that the mission was looking like too much of a cakewalk not to implode terribly, that the biotech conference was going to result in mass mutations and a rampaging Hulk, and that seventeen different minor megalomaniacs were going to choose today to make their plans for world domination known, right there in Central Park or something.

He'd gotten a message from Kate yesterday, asking him if he knew anything about the biotech conference. Apparently she and America had been hearing the same rumors Clint's almost heard about Dr. Fielding, and they'd been planning on checking it out on their own. She' had said she'd report in. But she hadn't said when, and it's leaving him with precious little for distraction. Tony's up front with Sam, now; they're debating whether Predator or Terminator is the better movie. Given Tony's history and capabilities, it's unnerving as hell to find him so firmly in the Terminator camp.

Natasha normally tries to crash out whenever they're flying, and normally, he'd be following suit, but he's too wired. And so is she, apparently.

Or maybe, he realizes, watching her shoot Steve another concerned glance, she's just worried. The guy does look miserable.

Of course he is, Clint realize. And he should've had that figured out for a week already.

Steve's probably just as fucked up over Winslow as he himself is. Maybe not to the point of dragging James all over the block searching for good places to cache weapons, but definitely enough to be re-examining every bit of intel he can get his hands on for the fiftieth or sixtieth time.

It's probably not doing him a whole lot of good.

But Clint's fucked if he knows what he should say to the man. What's he going to do? Tell him that he's worried too? That James had been all out of sorts last night and is probably anxious as hell right now? That won't help.

James does need to call Steve, when they're done here. Or vice versa. As soon as Winslow's handled.

He checks his phone again. Nothing from Kate. More importantly, Nothing from James, either.

He types out hey how are you doing, and then deletes it, letter by letter, with his thumb, because if
he's already having a shitty day, being reminded that someone expects him to be having a shitty
day won't help any.

But hell. Pretending like he's not worried is a dick move, too.

So he types it out again. This time with his left hand, so it takes slightly longer, helps kill off a few
more seconds.

When his phone vibrates a few minutes later, though, it's just a reminder that the power bill for the
building is due in three days.

He pauses to check the time as he puts his phone away.

He's only managed to kill two minutes.

---

"You doing all right?"

"Huh?" James blinks away from the quality control screen to find Candice frowning quizzically at
him. "Yeah. I'm fine."

"You look beat. Got that whole hundred yard stare thing going on." She smiles, rapping her
knuckles on the top of his cube as she steps away. There's no point in telling her that it's a thousand
yard stare- that's how it's phrased. And there's no point in arguing whether or not he's got it. "At
least the we're nearly looking down the barrel of the weekend though. And hey, you're off
tomorrow anyway, right?"

"Yeah," he nods, watching her head back out to the front of the shop. It's another figure of speech,
he knows it, and he wouldn't be picking at it so much if it weren't for the fact that looking down
barrels of things a whole lot less pleasant than weekends might very well be happening in
California.

Not for a few hours, though, probably. Clint hadn't told him when everything was actually due to
go down. Maybe it's already happening.

Right now, though, James has got to keep his however-long stare on his screen, and he's got to get
through this file before four.

It's all he can do, really, from here.

---

The lack of activity is starting to drive Clint insane. Without any significant new intel, the holding
pattern they've been in all day hasn't changed since yesterday.

He's been paired up with Mack, who looks tired, like he's lived a few years in the weeks since the
warehouse fire. Coulson's team's been putting up with plenty of their own shit lately. That much is
obvious. But details are a little thin on the ground.

"Fastline Shipping. This is the last one," Mack says, pulling the truck to a stop at the gate and
flashing his ID. Like the previous half dozen times, they're let through without incident or even
comment. Coulson, at least, had always been good about clearing the way.

He's scoping out one of the cranes before his feet even hit the ground. The only problem with this
one is that it's too obvious. This is a smaller yard; it's only got the three of them, and the mechanisms are controlled from the ground, which means someone would have to be posted there to cover it.

Oh well.

"They're not happy about it, Mack explains, "but they've agreed to clear out on our signal."

"As long as we don't land the place in wrack and ruin?"

"Pretty much. Same deal as before. We're already wired into the systems and can take over admin control at the push of a button, so there'll be no worries there." Mack sounds bored; it's the fourth time he's gone through the spiel in the past two hours. "Only reason it's at the bottom of the list is that of all of them, this one's the most exposed. Not a great landing pad, if that's what Winslow's looking for."

This close to the highway and as closed in as it is, Clint has to admit that it honestly looks like it's begging for agents to sweep in suddenly and raid the place. Compared to a few of the others, and given the hastily averted gazes of the few dock workers they pass, it looks like it might've actually happened already, in fairly recent history.

He knows why they're there, though. As much as he'd like to write this one off, he's got his orders. The best vantage point will be relatively sheltered, but not so much so that he doesn't have room to move, and not so encapsulating that he can't see what's coming at him. It should be as central as possible, in order to give him full coverage of the yard, and getting up there should take as little time as possible.

He's going to end up sweltering on a metal shipping container again, squinting against the glare as the reflected sunlight chars him to a crisp. He just knows it.

---

They've been in position ever since the harbormaster informed May that the NYK2 Vega was slotted for docking at the West Basin Terminal, and Clint'd had a bead set on the ship for over three hours, now. Word going 'round is that it's going to take a full day and a half to get the entire thing unloaded.

Which would be a drag, if it was mere cargo they were looking for.

As it is, though, it's been docked for a very long time, Coulson's team's gone through with the inspectors, and their reports have the same content that they've had twenty times in the past hour.

"There's nobody here." This time it's Hunter's voice coming over the comms channel.

"Acknowledged," comes Coulson's reply. "Barton, anything?"

"No unexpected movement up here." A bad thought's been circling his head for the last half hour. "If he's in one of those containers."

"He would've suffocated to death."

"Yeah, sure, if it's unmodified."

Daisy comes on the line, sounding just as defeated as the others. "Fitz has the thermal imaging drone out; the containers are clear."
Morse sounds like she's trying to remain hopeful, though. "Do you think he jumped ship?"

"Do we even know that he was on this ship?" Hunter mutters.

"There's a whole lot of would and could, here," Coulson reminds them. "Everyone, stay the course and hold on. I'm going to check in with Hill." He clicks off the radio for a long moment. Sooner than expected, however, he's back on.

"Fitz and May, I need you de-staging the yard. Everyone else, pull back and head back to the trucks to await further orders."

Fuck.
---

"After all this," Sam crosses his arms as Coulson hurries across the pavement towards them, "we're aborting?" Natasha shrugs; Clint's careful not to look at the furious expression on Steve's face for more than a few seconds, because if he's that pissed off, then Clint's probably going to go postal in a second, here.

He loosens his grip on his bow; it's digging into his hand, even through the gloves.

"No," Coulson takes off his sunglasses and scratches his nose. "We're heading to the airstrip, and getting on planes back to New York."

Tony rolls his shoulders and checks something- not, evidently, the time- on his watch. "Okay, patch it through to my suit. I can be there in three, three and a half hours. Fill me in on the way?"

Coulson nods, looking slightly less stressed than he'd been a moment ago. "I owe you one."

Tony shrugs, dropping his case to his feet and stepping back. "Been meaning to test out the long term flight capabilities on this one for a while now. Haven't had the time." Swiping a thumb over his watch, the case flips itself open and metal starts climbing through the air towards him, swarming him as the plates lock themselves into place around him. Once everything's locked in but the faceplate, he adds, "If I don't crash and die horribly, I'll name this one after you."

Hunter snorts. "And if you do crash and die horribly?"

Tony smirks at him, dropping the mask down; his voice sounds only slightly robotic. "Someone'll have to name it after you." Flashing them a metallic peace sign, he takes three steps backwards, and lifts off.

Sam, watching him go, is the first one to speak. "If we're on comms anyway, do we want to have this conversation on the road?"

It's probably not Coulson's first choice, but he's obviously trying to cater to the frustrated crowd. "Good idea. Let's go."

They break off, Clint riding back with Steve, Sam and Natasha while Mack and the others follow Coulson, still talking into his radio, back to their own truck.

"Long story short," Coulson's voice comes over the line as Natasha puts the truck into gear, "it looks like Winslow got around us. And he probably had help." He sounds angry; worse, he sounds beaten. "The only reason we even know that much is because Bruce Banner had an epiphany at that conference of his."
"How so?"

"Hang on," Daisy says, "We're still linking in Ops Con... Okay. Got it. Bruce?"

"Hey everyone."

"Banner," Steve says, "What're we looking at?"

"Ran into a friend during lunch at the conference. We got to talking about the keynote; it was about sampling strategy. She asked me a few questions about the situation with Barnes-" "Bucky?" Steve frowns.

"Who was it?" Clint sits up, fast enough that the strap of the seatbelt pinches painfully at his neck. There aren't enough people- not friendly ones, anyway- in New York City for strangers to be bringing him up in conversation to Bruce Banner. "Kate, actually."

"She was there?"

"She and America Chavez were doing their own investigation at the conference," Hill adds; Clint hadn't even known she was on the line. "Yes," Bruce adds. "This is a whole lot more serendipitous than I'm really comfortable with, but... when we first got to talking, America had made a comment about not understanding why replicated observations on selected data points were such a big deal. It was still on my mind when Kate asked about Barnes a minute later."

"So he called me up to tell me he was coming back in, and to request extra agents at the conference to keep an eye on Kate and America." Hill adds. "He came back and started looking through the satellite files."

"Well, don't keep us in suspense," Tony adds, his voice comparatively loud on the line. "At about seven last night, the satellite captured the NYK2 Vega slowing down. Not soon after, a smaller boat- we're thinking it looks like a decommissioned Coast Guard vessel- made contact with it. They were paired for about twenty minutes before the smaller vessel broke off and went southeast. It went out of range almost immediately. We're still trying to figure out which other satellite in the network might've been able to catch it after that, but. It looks like they'd selected their time to rendezvous in accordance with minimal satellite coverage. They were playing the odds."

"What do you mean?" Sam asks. "Did he know we were watching?"

"He probably suspected- he's on a slow boat from China, it's got GPS, so we've got to assume that he'd at least be aware of the possibility. And there are a lot of satellites out there. True, even with one, you're still being captured, so to speak, but when there are dozens of satellites out there, and they're all owned by different entities and tracking different kinds of data. But that's not what's worrying."

"What is?"

"The fact that it was one of ours, and we did capture the satellite imagery. But it never got flagged. We have it on the system. Hill's got the tower on lockdown. Hopefully it's just a glitch, but..."
"It's a little too on the nose," Tony says.

"Exactly," Coulson adds, his voice clear enough over the line that Clint can't help glancing out through the windshield, trying to catch sight of the other quinjet.

"Damn it," Steve mutters, up in the , running a hand through his hair. "You're telling me there's a mole in Ops Con?"

"There's nothing incriminating on the servers," Hill replies. But I'm going through the duty roster of everyone who worked last night, just in case."

"And we- well, I, am running scans on every personal device staff have brought into the building," Bruce adds. "It's a mess, though, and it's going to take a while."

Up in the driver's seat, Natasha's frown is a puzzled one. "Where did Winslow go?"

"Dunno. We lost him."

"Already on it," Daisy says. "I'll call you as soon as I find anything. May, I've got Simmons here already. Come find us as soon as you get on board."

For a few minutes, the conversation washes over Clint completely. He's going to have to tell James that Winslow got past them. He's going to have to warn him.

But that alone isn't a solution, and he knows it.

"What time is it in New York?" he asks, as they arrive at the airfield.

"Just past six," Steve confirms, glancing down at the watch he hadn't bothered resetting, obviously eager to be of some form of use, here.

Too bad Clint's next words are going to wipe that expression off of his face. "James should've just gotten back from work."
Chapter 45

He's lying on his back on the kitchen floor. He's been telling himself that he'd get up in one minute for the last half hour. The cold linoleum feels nice against the knots in his back, though, and it's *solid*, in a way that nothing else had been by the time he'd gotten home.

Steve not answering his phone was what had set him off. He'd fallen into his usual routine on the walk home from work, and had been dialing to call him like normal. When he'd realized that Steve wouldn't pick up- and *why*- and that calling Clint or Sam weren't options either, for the very same reason, a spike of anxiety had shot through him so suddenly that he'd been left navigating his course home by tunnel vision alone.

Once he'd made it, though, it had felt like his strings had been cut.

He promises himself that when he stands up, he'll be fine. The panic is long gone, and it's left nothing in its wake but fatigue.

Maybe he'll just doze here for another minute or ten. Maybe by then, some of the aches will have subsided.

But before he gets the chance to find out, his phone rings.

"The shit's hit the fan, man," Clint says, by way of greeting. "He got around us before we even got out here. Don't know where he is, but Hill's sending a truck to get you over to the tower. Could take a bit, but there should be some gear you can use in my bedroom closet, if you need it." He pauses, like there's more that he wants to say. "We're on the plane back already. Call me when you get there."

"Understood," he says, though he doesn't. And it doesn't really matter; Clint's already signing off.

At least that means he doesn't hear the sudden sob catching in James' throat as he rolls over and pushes himself up to his knees. It's just the one, this time- an impulse reaction, nothing more. As long as he takes deep breaths and concentrates, for a second here, he's going to be fine.

He needs to get up. Put his shoes on.

He needs to go downstairs. Clint's right; all James has in his apartment is a few kitchen knives. He's still sore- a side effect of pulling himself off the drugs- but he's not going to start crying again.

For a moment, honestly, all he really wants to do is lie back down on the kitchen floor and go to sleep.

The adrenaline's spiking, though, and he's not tired anymore. Once he's on his feet and moving, he's on autopilot. Shoes, coat, lock the door behind him and head downstairs. Unlock Clint's door, scratch Lucky behind the ears so he doesn't get excited. Head up the stairs to Clint's room.

He needs to find weapons, needs to prepare.

Of course, now that Clint's started moving gear back into the tower, his household weapons cache is really little more than a disorganized collection of knives, a ridiculously well-organized collection of trick arrows, and a sniper rifle that's going to be impossible to hide.

James grabs two knives, both easily concealed. He considers stashing a razor blade in his boot, but
he's got faint scars on his soles- he's had them for years, probably- which tell him that it's probably a stupid plan that he's tried before. There's a folding box cutter down in the kitchen drawer, though.

He's stepping down the stairs past Lucky- whose usual excitement's been placed by unease, though maybe he's projecting- when the thought occurs to him.

Winslow had planned enough to get this far. A few knives aren't going to be enough.

He heads back up the stairs to Clint's room- it's funny how much an interloper he doesn't feel like, but then again, once you've raided a man's armory, the sight of an unmade bed and laundry strewn on the floor by the chair doesn't seem that big a deal.

And Clint had said to help himself to whatever he wanted.

So. The trick arrows. Funny thing to call them, really, at least when someone like Clint's wielding them. Or when one is rigged with explosive charges and there's a detonator right there, in the case next to it.

The detonator goes into his pocket next to his phone. The charge itself is garishly labeled, but attached to the metal shaft with only two small screws; it doesn't take much to remove them with a knife tip.

The charge goes into his other pocket. It all only takes a few seconds.

No big deal.

---

One of Stark's fleet vehicles pulls up to the curb in front of the building, so James pushes through the security door and heads down the steps as the back door opens and an agent with a shaved head gets out. He looks vaguely familiar, but he hasn't been around the tower often enough to really recognize faces.

"Mr. Barnes," he says, "Hill sent us. You call for a ride?"

"Not exactly," he sighs, moving in and taking the seat behind the front passenger.

As the agent climbs in after him, he glances at the two up in front to find them both are watching him with a definite amount of trepidation.

James doesn't wince when the locks bolt down and the truck pulls away from the curb. He wants to, but he doesn't.

It's not until they're at the end of the block that he realizes that while the driver's got his eyes on the road, the other two are still keeping more of an eye on him than they are the street. Which either means that they already know that nothing's coming- Hill's got satellites following boats around the Pacific, so it's doubtful their own backyard would be an unknown to them- or they're just more worried about what's inside the car than they are about anything else.

Still. It's sloppy. He'd been on extraction missions before- a long time ago, back before survivors had become a liability to be handled- and hell, given what Clint had said about Winslow being in the wind, he would've predicted a little more caution.

It's dead quiet in the truck. No conversation, no radio chatter as they head through town.
And they're passing Atlantic, which means the two most direct routes to Stark Tower—over the Manhattan or Williamsburg bridges—are n't, apparently, part of the plan. Maybe they're shaking a tail. He hasn't noticed one, but it doesn't mean it's not there.

Unless...

"Where are we going?"

"Safehouse," the driver says. "Hill ordered it. The tower's too hot."

The radio unit hasn't been turned on since he'd gotten into the truck. They hadn't called anything in since they'd picked him up. Maybe the order had come down before they'd arrived in Bed Stuy.

Maybe it hadn't.

_God,_ he's being paranoid.

He sits back in his seat, catching the passenger side rearview out of the corner of his eye as he looks out his own window. Just in time to catch the guy up in the passenger seat register his movement before cutting a warning glare at the driver.

He turns to look at the agent sitting next to him, and the agent nods back at him. Only his eyes are a little too wide for the casual gesture, and his left arm is wedged down between the seat and the door.

This isn't an extraction.

James swivels his head, too quickly, back to his own window as he tries to keep his breathing in check. The front passenger is watching him through the rearview, far too intently.

It's a setup. And they're starting to suspect that he knows.

He needs to get out of here. He's not sure how the door locks work, but he'd heard the locks engage when they'd taken off. And anyway, testing them now will just attract attention. Even putting his hands anywhere near his pockets will alert them that something's up, so playing along—waiting for more intel, pretending that he can't feel the man next to him shifting as he gets a better grip at whatever he's got hidden by his hip—is the better play for the time being.

At least they're not being obvious to anyone observing. They're keeping steady with traffic. Not running any lights, signaling every turn.

The driver's getting ready to head right onto Union, so James leans forward slightly and takes a breath—

*Back seat, front passenger, driver.*

—and lets it out, rocking with the turn when it comes. He catches himself just before moving into his seatmate's space, and shakes his head in apology. It has the nice effect of keeping the guy's eyes off of his hands. Which is good, because he's punching with his left.

The guy's first impulse, obviously, is to try and block his throat from further attack; his flailing makes the gun—a tranquilizer, evidently—easier to grab.

He shoots his seatmate point blank; by the time he's got the gun pointed at the front passenger, the truck's swerving, this time to the left. The centrifugal force rocks him back to the right, so he
switches targets, shoots the driver in the neck while he's got the shot. Tires are screeching, but the noise is coming from outside, the front passenger's turning his head to glance out the window and James takes the shot a full second before they're struck by the oncoming SUV.

It's decelerated enough not to do anything more than nudge them, but the friction slows them down enough for James to launch himself up between the seats, reach past the the still-trying-to-move driver, and pound at the door locks until the bolts disengage. He thrusts himself back, and then out the door; he's running the moment his feet hit the ground.

Someone behind him is shouting about a gun. It's probably not the first time it's happened.

By the time he's crossed the street, three more black trucks- not Stark issue- are veering towards him.
Chapter 46

Fuck. Maybe he'd misread the whole situation.

It had definitely been one of Stark's trucks he'd gotten into. He knows this.

But the one still tailing him- the other two had broken off to widen the net, no doubt- have much louder engines. He thinks there's at least one on the next block over and up ahead, so he takes a hard right towards it and then cuts right, towards the park. It's not a large one, not by any stretch of the imagination, but there are walking trails and several entrances and he'll see the trucks coming before they see him.

He hadn't gotten a good look at the driver or front passenger, but the guy sharing the back seat had looked familiar. Not well enough to place him exactly. But he's seen him in passing.

And it's not like Stark and Hill tranquilizing him are completely out of the question. Given how he'd reacted last time things had gotten chaotic, it's really more surprising that Clint hadn't thought to warn him. Because, yeah. Some junior agent being ordered to shoot him with a tranquilizer if things got hectic- and that agent being nervous about the task- would've been likely as hell.

Fuck. He just doesn't know what their exact orders had been. Right now, he can't even pinpoint what it had been that had set him off.

He ducks underneath the roof of the open pavilion and crouches down next to his wall, pulling out his phone and setting the screen down to minimal brightness. There's a message waiting for him already.

It's from Clint.

WTF?

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"Hill, talk to me," Steve says, leaning over the console as if it's going to make the transmission go through any faster. "What's happening?"

James is gone, Clint thinks. That's what's fucking happening.

"We don't know. He was gone by the time Carter arrived. No sign of struggle. Hold on, Daisy's on the phone."

"He wouldn't have run, Steve insists at the line to the tower that's gone dead. He's looking at Clint frustratedly, like he needs him to back him up, here. But it's not like Clint knows how to.

"I know." Fuck. It's only been twenty four minutes since they spoke. He can't have gotten far. Sure, he'd been a little freaked out by the whole thing, the past few days. But he wouldn't have gone off on his own. "Not when he knew an extraction was coming."

"Sorry," Hill's voice comes through the speakers. "I've got news, and it's bad. Daisy caught him off the police camera at the end of the block. He was getting into one of Stark's trucks."

"Okay," Clint sighs, relieved. Maybe something had been wrong with their radios. Maybe
something had spooked them. But they'd gotten him out all right, that's the main thing.

"No, not okay. It left the scene five minutes before the agents I deployed arrived. Daisy’s sending me a clip from the file, she says we've got visual on one of the passengers, but I don't know that it's going to be of any immediate help."

"So there is a mole," Steve sighs, rubbing a hand over his face. It doesn't leave him any less angry looking. "Damn it. How did this not get spotted sooner?"

"We're working on it," Hill replies. "But the footage should be the missing piece. If we've got a face, we know who to focus on. Once we know that, we might be able to piece together their plan."

"Yeah," Sam grumbles, "good luck with that."

"How long ago did it happen?" Coulson asks, over the line

"About fifteen minutes ago," Hill says.

"Shit," Tony cuts in. "I'm really sorry, everyone, but I'm going to have to put down in New Jersey. The converter's burning out. I'll send for another suit once I stash this one, but I'm gonna be running late." He snorts. "Though it's not like I know where we're even going, anymore."

"Understood," Steve says. "Stay on the line."

"Aye aye, Captain."

"Ops Control is relaying some police chatter about gunfire at 3rd and Union. Someone matching Barnes's description has fled on foot, heading northeast and there are three black SUV's heading after him. His tracker is pinging in Carroll Gardens but he's moving fast."

"Get someone out there."

"Already gave the order," Hill confirms, just as Clint's phone vibrates. A spike of hope shivs through him, until he sees that it's just a text from Hill. Also sending kb and ac bc mole. He holds the phone up so Steve can see, cutting him of from the argument he's very clearly about to make.

"Understood."

"If we put down in Red Hook I should be able to get to him pretty quickly," Sam says, breaking the silence that's settling down too quickly over them.

Steve nods, though it looks like he's not really hearing him. "That's good," he says. "Do that." Even with his arms crossed and his shoulders hunched, he seems to be taking up even more space than he really is. Clint stands up and moves towards the back, giving him some room, or maybe just taking it for himself; he's not really sure.

He's got his phone out when he sits down on one of the equipment crates, but the screen is dark. No reply from James, no new intel.

They've got people on the ground looking for him- and at least two of them, Kate and America, they can trust. They've got two planes of cavalry inbound. James is going to be okay. He'd done fine in the subway tunnel. He'd gotten himself free in the warehouse.

But it's been twenty minutes since they've made contact, and that's all it takes, really.

Even if- no, when- they catch up with them, there's going to be fallout. Winslow getting around
them was bad enough. Him getting nabbed by a mole in one of Stark's trucks is fucked up enough that Clint's rethinking his decision to come back to the team.

And shit, Clint had just left him there, open to all of it.

So yeah. The last twenty minutes had been bad. But there's no telling how much worse it's going to get in the next twenty.

He's got the phone in his hand. He could call. He could text.

He shouldn't, though. Any sound- even a vibration, even a flash of light- could give away his position at a vulnerable point.

His screen's still dark when Natasha eases onto the crate next to him. Steve's up talking with Sam; they don't see it when she nudges against his shoulder briefly, or when he leans back against her. His heart's not in it, but she's trying. Might as well let her know that he knows it.

"You okay?"

"No."

She doesn't say anything, just takes a deep breath, holds for a count of three, and releases it. "We'll figure it out. No other options, right?"

The hushed conversation happening up front erupts into sudden shouting, as Steve throws up his hands and stalks back towards them, trailing a muttered, "fucking Coulson" in his wake.

He's hesitating by the quinjet's jump door, though, with a look on his face that indicates he's considering using it.

"No good ones," Clint mutters, reminding himself to breathe. Trying to hold it in like Natasha'd done, trying to keep it quiet, so she won't notice. He's not sure why.

"Hey," Natasha calls out to Steve, reaching an arm out to snag him when he wanders back towards them. Dragging him into their little circle of misery. Her voice is quiet, barely more than a whisper.

Steve pulls a face, but nods.

"It's bad, I'm not saying it isn't. But it's not the worst situation any of us have had to deal with, and that includes Bucky. Okay?"

She might have a point. James has been in worse situations. But right now, somewhere in New York, Winslow is looking to drag him back to all of them, all at once.

But Steve doesn't need to hear him say so.

"Okay. We land in fifteen minutes," she says, glancing from Steve to him and back again. "Which means the two of you have ten." He knows where this is going, already. It's always been something that's worked for her, more than for him. "Pick it apart until it's something manageable. Freak out if you need to." She's got Steve by the hand, and his knuckles, white against hers, are an image Clint could do without. "But you both need to be clear-headed in eleven minutes."

"He'll have had more than half an hour head start." Steve winces into a rueful grin, which Clint finds himself trying to return. They've been on ops together, and been concerned about the exact same things. But this might be the first time that they're both worried about the exact same person.
It's weird.

"We're tracking his position. We'll catch up."

Clint sighs. He doesn't want to say it, but it's coming out anyway. "What if we're too late?"

"We won't be," Natasha leans against his arm again. "But if we are, then we'll get him back, okay?"

And, fuck. That's the worst case scenario, right there. It's taken James months just to find his footing. He might not be as deeply programmed, now, but it's not like Clint's got any idea what this is going to do to his head. He doesn't want to admit it- there's a very large portion of his brain that's fighting against the possibility right now- but last time around, James hadn't had anyone he'd been counting on.

This time, he does. And they've failed him, every step of the way.
Chapter 47

Maybe it's just the running and hiding and the aches and the mission but somehow, the first coherent thought that manages to break through the mess in his head is that he'd done this before. He'd run. He'd tried to escape.

He remembers footprints in the snow, he'd tried sticking to the open streets, to take advantage of the trodden slush as much as possible, but that had meant being out in the open where anyone could see him. There was less snow underneath the overpass, so he'd made a break for it, ducking into an alley just on the other side.

He remembers not knowing where to go, or why he was hiding. Only that he had to.

He remembers his shoulder throbbing jaggedly inside a coat he couldn't remember putting on.

There'd been a billboard telling him that the Mercedes-Benz 190 SL would be unveiled at the 1955 British International Auto Show; the sign's light had bled just enough into the alley to see by. After checking around the corner once more, and with his right hand shaking, he'd pulled down his collar, expecting to see livid shrapnel tearing into his arm.

Not shrapnel. But there had been metal.

All the way down to his fingers, when he'd pulled his glove off.

He'd wanted to scream- had actually opened his mouth but there'd been no air and that had been all that had saved him; the sound would've given his position away to whoever'd been looking for him. Peering around the corner again, he'd seen a couple walking towards the corner store at the end of the block.

There'd been a flicker above him; when he'd looked up it had been to find three men on ropes, sliding down towards him-

No.

He blinks, and the billboard and it's shiny new car is gone, replaced with a faded radio station advert- all glaring white teeth and perfect hair.

It's just the drugs wearing off that's fucking with his head like this, and he'll get right back on them, fuck, as soon as he can. But there's nothing for it right now. Right now, he needs to keep moving. Needs to not get hung up on ancient history that he only half fucking remembers, needs to not think about what his brain's going to do to him next, or why it's doing it now.

He needs to get gone before they track his position again.

Only there's no telling how they're triangulating it. They hadn't had a chance to tag him with anything in the car. Anybody on foot, he would've noticed in the park. A drone, maybe? He's seen them on television. But he would've spotted it when he'd cut through the station.

Oh.

Fuck.

He runs. Keeps under the overpass as long as he can- the shipping yard's in sight now, only
running safety lights, thank God- but instead of heading straight for it, he ducks around the corner into the first bank of warehouses he can find. The river smells horrible, here, but that's to be expected. Likewise the dogs barking somewhere. Could be they're searching for him in the junkyard, but there are no gunshots, no sudden silencing of the barking.

He's lucked out; they're small warehouses on this stretch, owned, probably by several different companies, all of whom need access to the alley. He clears another three blocks before he's got to hang a left and head back to the street. He's overshot the shipping yard, but not by much.

He's been bleeding his position ever since, well, ever. Stark had built even more failsafes into his arm when he'd gone in for repairs after the warehouse mess. There's no reason to suspect that Stark's in on it himself, but. Who knows who's got access to the system?

Reaching for his phone as he runs- shutting off the GPS seems like a faint hope now, but it's the best idea he's got, he dials Clint's number.

"Where the hell are you?"

"I'm being tracked."

"I know, we've got you."

"So do they," he says, instead of asking why Clint had asked in the first goddamned place.

"Fuck." Clint sighs as James stops short along the side of a warehouse. "Tony? Your fucking tracker's been hacked, man!"

"I'm on it."

There's some background chatter that he can't quite make out without concentrating, and he can't afford to right now anyway.

The road's clear, but across the way is a tall concrete wall. He can't see what's at the end of the alley, only ten yards away, between it and to the beer distributor's, but there are tires squealing behind him. He doesn't have time to check.

He's got the explosives if he needs them. Pocking the phone, but leaving the call open, he runs for it. There's no handy door, but there's a dumpster, and from the top of it he's only got to jump three feet. Makes it on the first try, if only by luck. Whatever's on the other side- dogs, dock workers, search lights- it's too late to worry about it now.

"James!"

"I'm here."

"God damn it, man, don't do that. Okay, we've got you outside the Central Logistics shipping yard. Is that correct?"

"Yeah." Honestly, he hadn't seen a sign, but he's got several hundred yards of margin before the next one so it's probably still the case. "Closer to the water. Should be easier to get visual. You know, if you all want to get your asses over here."

Glancing over his shoulder, he can see white light swinging over the wall. "They're here. Gonna have to go quiet."
"All right. Tony's remoting into the tracking system and shutting the whole thing down, so we're coming in blind but that should take the heat off. Get as close to the water as you can but stay low. We're twenty minutes out."

Twenty minutes. He can do twenty minutes, no problem.

He's fucking hungry, he realizes, and his hand shakes when he shoves the phone back into his pocket. Hopefully it's just the adrenaline, but instead of worrying about it he closes his eyes and listens. No movement nearby, so he heads for the lines of shipping crates closest to the lights. It's the last place he should hide- light being the enemy and all- but hopefully these assholes know at least that much. The longer they spend searching the darker reaches of the yard, the better off he'll be.

There's a voice up ahead, thick Bronx accent shouting about the gate, which means that there's someone- maybe a few someones- within earshot to hear it. He drops into a crouch, waiting. Pulls out his phone and texts Clint.

_Civilians_

_k_.

It's not the most affirming response he could've gotten, but it's something.

A moment later, his phone brightens again. _Don't engage. Coulson reports attackers only stunning civilians so far. Escalation risk._

_k_, he sends back.

See how _Clint_ likes it.

A truck starts- he has to duck back to avoid the sweep of headlights as they wash over his position, much closer than he'd realized- and heads for the gates. He waits until it's gone, though it's hard to tell with all the weird echoes off the crates- and makes his way closer to the water.

There are raised voices, but only for a second. Hopefully they've just been tranquilized.

There are cameras posted every so often, but it's a large yard, and there's a lot for eyes to sweep through, if the cameras are even manned at this hour, without a ship at dock. Still, he does his best to avoid them, even as he tries to get visual on the main office. Not that he's planning on going there; it's just that if there are more variables about to enter the equation, that's where they'll be coming from.

Another shout- he can't hear the words over the wind coming in off the water, but he thinks it sounds like Winslow's voice. He's not sure. Doesn't really care, right now, to be honest. A shout's a shout. An order to search the docks is inevitable.

But Winslow's here, and there are a lot of blind corners, and right now might be the only spare moment he's going to be able to afford for the next little while. He takes stock. One knife in his boot, the other in his sleeve, hilt resting at his wristbone. Box cutter in his pocket next to the detonator. Phone's on silent next to the charge. Tranq gun weighing down his belt irritatingly; that's going to be his best Plan A. Semiautomatic, one capsule in the chamber, five more in the clip.

Plan B, he's got to admit, is a work in progress. The detonator and charge are still in his pocket, but crouching here, listening for the inevitable sound of footsteps, he's not sure what his options are going to be. Blast radius of six feet won't get him much if he doesn't plant it somewhere useful. As
a distraction, it would be glaringly obvious.

He's been here long enough; wants to check the time to make sure but it's a risk, so he doesn't.

Planting it somewhere useful. In a yard full of giant steel shipping containers. Yeah, right.

He darts three rows over and moves up the column towards the water. If they're fanning out, and were only enough to fill three trucks, he's looking at fifteen men, max, and that's if everyone's searching. Still, the odds that their paths are going to intersect, soon, are pretty good.

He risks another glance at the office tower by the water; nobody's made it there yet, which is counterintuitive. Maybe someone's manning the cameras by now, though, alerted by the disturbance in the yard.

One aisle over, he hears the distinctive sound of a radio unit clocking off, and suddenly, he's gone from having a minute to having nothing. He eases down his own aisle, stepping quietly, and for an imagined second he can hear the person breathing. Crouching low as he approaches the corner- it's clear, he rounds towards their aisle but doesn't move past the end of the container. Looks for light on the walls of the nearby containers to ascertain positions, there's nothing, so he risks a glance around the corner. Sees a black-dressed man flicking a flashlight on the other end of the container, then moving on.

Staying silent, he crosses behind him to the gap between the next two containers; it has the disadvantage of placing him that much closer to the wall, but the advantage of putting him in an area the man's probably considered cleared, at least for the moment.

"All positions report," comes from a radio at his four o'clock, meaning he has to back around another corner to avoid colliding with some idiot who left his radio volume on high, and who jostles his flashlight as he switches over to reply.

"All clear in one," he says, and he's followed by perimeters two through twelve, which means that James is on the edge of their perimeter. And which also means he'll have to duck back into their midst in just a few moments.

"We want him alive." It is Winslow's voice. "Tranq's only."

The man's, "received," is echoed, only slightly more faintly, through his radio before it's shut off.

James has the tranq gun readied before he even steps back around the corner, and it's as quiet as it's got any right to be. Clamping his left hand over the man's face to keep him from shouting, he's got him eased to the ground before he can even make a sound.

That's several more rounds he's just earned, and a few more minutes before anyone will come looking.

The rush of it is starting to go to his head; he's already held out at least five minutes, and-

Don't get cocky. Winslow's got a plan, you've got shit.

All of a sudden, the yard's lit up, bright as the sun, blinding him. Someone's made it to the tower, and will, if they're smart, have snipers in position, which makes the open area close to the docks irrelevant; he's not going to be able to break for the waterline; they're boxing him in. Taking a breath, he opens his eyes and tries to focus but it's disorienting, the sudden, absolute lack of shadow. Already, there's a headache brewing just behind his eyes. Like the fuckers' ve managed to weaponize light somehow.
They want him alive. He already knew this.

But it also means he has his plan B, now. Quickly, he crouches down between the short ends of two containers, and digs the detonator out of his pocket. As a distraction, it's laughable under these conditions.

As a really fucking horrifying solution, though? It's plausible.

No. He's only got to hold out another fifteen minutes or so.

But there's more noise coming from the entrance. More vehicles joining the ranks. Reinforcements. It's now or never. Removing his ponytail holder, he grabs the explosive charge, winds it into a hank of hair, and secures the band around it all.

For something that will- if things go really, really badly- blow his head off, it seems underwhelming, only having the whole process take twenty seconds. He wants to laugh, and then he wants to start screaming, and the only reason he doesn't do either is because there are voices coming towards him, down the aisle to his left.
Finally, they're on the ground. Everyone but Sam, who'd shoved himself away from the console the moment they'd stopped moving, shrugged into his flight rig, and streaked out the door.

And everyone but Coulson's team, who'd continued on to Stark Tower to drop off their hackers and scientists, and check in with Hill.

Coulson'd said they'd be back right away. It doesn't sting so much as it infuriates, but Clint's got to focus on what's in front of him.

Tony is inbound. Sam, Steve, and Natasha are still on the ground with him, and Natasha's already got a small boat commandeered to get them across the harbor to the shipping yard. It's a recreational boat, meant for weekend parties and Saturday afternoon waterskiing, not for stealth.

"It's going to be a loud entrance," Steve says, with an air that's more resigned than anything else. It's not like Clint gives a damn, either. If they can be heard, they can draw some attention- it might actually help.

It might escalate the situation beyond all control, too, but Steve's already decided.

It is what it is.

Clint's been geared up ever since Sam had announced their impending arrival, but he checks again anyway, out of habit. Natasha'd already been patting down her pockets as she'd stalked off the plane.

All Steve needs is a shield. And maybe a target. Now that they're on the ground- now that the waiting is almost over with, he looks better. Angry, but calm. He's prepared to fight. Hell, he looks like he wants to.

He finds himself wishing, suddenly, that Thor was here, if only so Steve wasn't the only one in that headspace. Because it's not how Clint operates- not ideally.

He wants to get in, get James, get out, without being seen. He wants to leave them in confusion, get clear before they realize what's happened. *That* is his only real definition of success, here. But they don't have the advantage of position or higher ground. They're going to be a target before they even reach the yard, and they're going to be leaving themselves open on the approach.

The yard lights are blazing, though. Which means anyone near the docks is going to be slightly blinded to what's happening on the water.

"We're ready to go," Natasha says, waving them down onto the boat. As she's pulling away from the dock, the running lights seem to grow brighter in the relative darkness. They're not as bright as the headlight Natasha's not using would be, but there's no sense in making it easy.

"Sam," he goes on comms, because the waiting is killing him. "You got anything?"

"Got a bunch of people running around, but I haven't figured out which one is him. I'm going down for a closer look."

"Be careful," Steve orders, the steel back in his voice for the first time in hours. "You got a good exit, you get him out of there. Otherwise, wait for our distraction."
Taking his K-bar out of its sheath, he hammers at each bulb he can find. Cuts the connection to the
chain of LEDs that line the gunwale. When he turns around, he catches sight of Steve, climbing
carefully up onto the bow and smashing the red and green sidelights. Natasha glares at him when
he clambers back down next to her, and Clint's thrust back sharply as she gives the engine some
gas.

He regains his footing, gets a grip on his bow, and watches as the lights of the shipping yard grow
closer.

---

The gunshots as they pull into the area under the yard aren't unexpected, but they set Clint's heart
to pounding all the same. Any wrong step here, and they could end up dead.

They haven't even gotten up there, yet. The dock's built for large shipping liners, not yuppie
weekend speedboats. For the moment the dock itself, hanging over the water, is giving them all the
cover they need, but they're going to get pinned down the moment they go anywhere near the
stairs.

He's glancing back out of the alcove to the open water- black, it's all black, with scattered reflected
light streaking the wave- when a line of gunfire moves from right to left above him. Sam swoops
down a moment later, coming to a skidding halt.

"I saw him," he pants, hands on his knees. "Managed to draw some fire but they know where y'all
are now. Hopefully it'll give him an opening."

To do what? Clint doesn't ask, because there aren't a whole lot of good responses.

"Think he'll make a break for the street?"

"He's too far in. About twenty yards away from the tower, and the street's covered. They've got the
civilians penned up near the front gate, three or four armed men guarding them."

Crap. He knows better than to ask. "Hostages?"

"Probably," Sam replies, straightening with a resigned look on his face. "If it comes down to it."

He knows what he'll find before he even turns. And he's not wrong. Steve's eyes are closed, both
hands on his shield. It would be a lot less worrying if he wasn't hanging his head.

"We're going to need to get them clear." His voice is quiet, but there's no doubt that they'd all hear
him.

"Cap," Natasha sighs, shaking her head. "That's not the-"

"It's not the mission," he says, after a pause long enough that Clint's wondering how much of his
heart is in it. "But it's a complication, and none of this is on them."

"I can thin them out," Sam offers. "Grab the guards, launch 'em in the water or something." He
looks at Natasha speculatively. "I'll need someone on the ground though to keep them distracted."

Natasha nods back. "You'll cover the exit."

"Should be good for a lift back across to the action afterwards, too."

"You've got a deal."
Winslow's guards are spooked, moving faster and therefore less carefully. It works to his advantage, for a while, but he's starting to lose track of the guards, and they're catching on- he can't remember how many there'd been at the start, or how many are left, but he's finding more of them with each corner he takes. Everyone's got their radios on- everyone's listening only there's too much going on for the chatter to be of use.

They're starting to converge on his position.

Near the end of a line of containers, crouched against a dark green shipping container, he peers around the corner, trying to estimate the distance to the next spot of cover, some five meters away. He swings his gun up at the movement he senses above, but it's too far away to be a direct threat. A gull, maybe. As it swoops back in a circle, he shudders at the wings. They're not white like feathers, and there's nothing angelic about him. Not that he thinks he's ever really been all that religious- they don't even look like demon wings. But they are silver, like knives, and they're gone in an instant.

He's seen them before, on Sam.

*Sam's here.* Which means that the others are as well, he just needs to find them. Glancing out at the yard again, he hears someone shouting behind him. He deliberates- if he stays to fight, it'll draw out others, and getting across will be even hairier. So he runs.

Something jolts against his left arm, startling him enough that he goes down. He shouldn't look- he needs to keep moving- but he glances down anyway as he scrambles to his feet.

It's a bullet. He doesn't stop to examine it further, just keeps running. Even though his cover's already blown and there are shots firing off behind him. Even though he's just going to have to find a new destination.

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"*Dammit!*" Clint crouches, peering around the corner in time to see James jumping back to his feet and disappearing around another corner. He'd been so fucking close, but James- he's spooked, or he just didn't hear him.

He's still running, though, which is almost as good as fighting. He hasn't surrendered to anyone yet.

He gets back on comms, trying to be heard, trying not to be loud. The gunfire off to the north of his position has the guards distracted just enough to slow their steps as they head after James

"Cap, I lost him. Heading southeast towards you and he's got company."

"I'm on it." A hammer-on-metal noise comes through right on the heel of his words. "Widow, Falcon, how long until you can get up to the tower and get those damned lights off."

"It's gonna be a minute. One of the hostages took a tranq to the side." Shit. If it had been one of the bullets meant for James, it's probably enough to kill a mere mortal. "We need to get him out of here."

"I'll get him out," Tony's voice comes over the line, just as Clint gets a glimpse of his suit streaking across the sky overhead. "What did I miss and what's with the lights?"

"Nobody's carrying night vision around here," Steve sounds frustrated, like he's clinging to hope
and that's about it. "And if he sees that he's got cover, maybe he'll be able to think more clearly. Might help us make contact."

"I hear you. Jarvis, we need a blackout. Everyone else, I'll be right back."

If the yard's about to go dark, he might have enough time to make it up to the lights on top of the loader frame without being spotted.
None of this seems real. A few hours ago, he'd been staring at a computer screen, literally making sure that the P's and Q's were all in order on someone else's file.

A few hours before that, he'd been kissing Clint goodbye. It's a fact that's in his head now, but it's no more real than any other memory, not right now.

Because if it is, then he has to admit that the other memory- the one jogged by the sound the knife had made as it had crashed against the side of the shipping container as he'd fought off another one of Winslow's guards- is just as real.

He'd been in a train yard, or so the memory tells him. Fighting with a senator who'd been done some time in the Marines, and who wouldn't be fighting for much longer, even if he had managed to knock the blade out of the Soldier's hands.

The senator had been sweating, red faced and furious, and then more red-faced as he'd choked, slowly, struggling for air. His punches had faded to hits, then to barely noticeable brushes of pressure, and had finally faded to nothing at all. His eyes, though, they'd gone bright. Tears had welled up, first, some spilling over as he'd struggled, and then the vessels had burst. His irises had seemed bluer than ever when the blood pooled, red, against them.

Satisfied, the Soldier had let the body drop to the ground, stepped over it, and reported in.

This time, he merely incapacitates the guard before stepping over him.

Somewhere, in the back of his mind, he thinks this used to be easier. Listening carefully, he brings his hands up to tighten the elastic holding the detonator in place.

Back of his mind, back of his head. They're not all that different sometimes. And anyway, it could very well be that by the time tonight is over with, which memories were real will be an irrelevant question.

He thinks he should feel something about that. One way or the other. But mostly he thinks he should find another knife.

---

The lights slam off, suddenly, sending the yard into pitch black for a few seconds until James' eyes adjust.

This close to the clear area by the rail loader, the crates aren't piled up as they could be. On his right, they're stacked only two high. To his left is a long gapless row of unstacked containers. Anyone could be up there, but what's more worrying is that he'd wandered into a bottleneck with no cover. If they see him before he sees them, he's-

"Bucky!"

Snapping his head up, he catches sight of Steve jumping down from the stacked containers on his right to the one on his left. It happens so quickly that he's honestly not sure he saw or heard anything at all. Just as he's about to give up and move on though, Steve's leaning over the edge, reaching down with one arm.
"Drop it, and come on! Gonna get you out of here!"

Steve's plans were never without risk- they're going to be visible to almost everyone, this close to the center of the yard- but he's always had them. Setting the gun down as quickly as he dares, he reaches up, startling when his hand actually comes in contact with solid flesh, and takes hold. He jumps, and he's being hauled up fast.

This is real, then.

He manages to get a grip on the edge of the container with his left hand when Steve's grip goes suddenly slack.

His chin slams hard on the corner, and he's pretty sure he's warping the metal of the container, but he manages to keep his grip. He's hauling himself up even before the shock wears off.

Just as the pain's starting to register- his eyes are watering horribly and he tastes blood- he sees Steve, who's slumped on his hands and knees, trying to push himself up.

"I'm here," he says, only maybe he shouldn't have tried to stake that claim, because Steve's crumpling, going slack. And he's had nightmares about this, but he can't remember when. Or who'd had them.

Steve's dying right in front of him, only that can't be right, because it's Steve and Steve would be fighting this, and this is just his head fucking with him again, taking one detail and spiking him in the brain with it.

He needs to see, he tells himself. Needs to be sure. If it's-

If Steve's-

If it's real, he'll stop trying to think. Probably won't be able to at all.

But the possibility isn't as terrifying as it had been a moment ago.

He gets to his knees, crawling towards him to stay low. Just as he'd reaching out, there's a glint off in the darkness to his right, followed by the booming sound of heavy footsteps on sheet metal. There's a man racing straight towards them, running down the nearly seamless line of containers.

*Clint*, he thinks, stomach lurching, but the shadow's resolving. That's not a bow over the man's shoulder, it's a rifle. He's got a gun, and-

-and his is on the ground. The man stops about forty feet away, taking aim and counting on his trigger finger to cover the last few shipping containers Says something, but the wind takes it away before it arrives.

When he glances at Steve, he can see the red dot of a laser sight settled at his temple. It's twitching, slightly, either with the gunman's pulse or with Steve's. Hopefully both.

There's no point training a gun on a dead man.

So at least Steve's still alive.

All he has to do is wait for the guard to get closer, but apparently this one has some sense. He's hanging back, out of reach. Crouching, now, to stabilize his aim.

He doesn't need to come any closer. He's got them pinned.
There's a thump against the other side of the container, and another man is coming into view.

His good first look at Winslow is jarring. There's the rumpled, unassuming suit that he'd been expecting from the pictures, but that's where the similarities end. His hair's all out of place, and there's a bright sheen of sweat on his skin, and he's grinning madly, teeth bared like he's going to devour the world.

"Glad to see that you haven't actually had all the sense wiped out of you," he says. "But just in case, here's how it's going to go. If you move, Steve will get shot again. We might shot him anyway, just to find out if a double dose works. If, however, you come peacefully, we'll let him sleep it off in peace. And, well." He reaches behind his back and takes out a handgun. "Needless to say, if things escalate and I sense the need for it, I'll shoot you, and then I'll shoot him. In the head. Do you understand?"

He doesn't think he can speak. He's choking on the blood he's trying to swallow down. But he tries.

"Thought you needed me alive."

"Need me alive a lot more, though, don't I?" Winslow grins, stepping back, glancing up at his gunman to make sure he's not blocking his view.

It has the added effect of really hammering in how fucked he is. If he's lucky, he can throw himself over the edge, get up and get some distance between them before they have time to react. Only that would get Steve killed. And it's been a minute; the rest of the guards are probably surrounding them by now.

"Why don't you just knock me out?"

"I'm planning on it. But I want it to be your choice, seeing as how you've had so few of them." James can feel his words in his spine, even with as calmly as they're spoken. "I don't think your previous employers really thought that through. But we'll have time to talk about working philosophies later."

Behind Winslow, there's movement on the other shipping container. It's a tactical strike, not even a fight. The gunman goes slack, and the person who's got him is easing him down, taking the gun from his hands and taking over his position.

"Right now, I need to know if you'll come willingly."

"If I say no?"

He looks at Steve the moment the laser sight finds his temple again, and shit, if he'd looked half a second later, and it hadn't been there when Winslow'd followed his gaze? They'd be fucked. But it's there, like it's never been gone. A bright red dot, maybe a little more solidly positioned than before.

"We'll tranquilize you, you'll wake up, and we'll go from there."

No surprises there. Behind Winslow, a flashlight turns on briefly pointed downward. Whoever's just taken the position is checking something, it looks like, so he needs to buy them a few more seconds.

"And if I say yes?"

Across the yard, there's a shout, followed by a brief smattering of gunfire. Winslow grins, cutting
his eyes away to follow the sound. There's less than a second between when the flashlight goes
dark and Winslow looks back to find that everything seems to be going as it should be.

"Same deal. Only you'll know that your friends are safe."

A nearby radio crackles, and one of the men in the growing crowd of people down on the
pavement down on the side of the crate is calling up to Winslow to let him know that the hostages
have escaped.

"They don't matter. Get the trucks ready." Winslow rolls his eyes. Behind him, the person manning
the rifle turns their flashlight on again, shining it down on a hand. It's moving quickly enough that
he has a hard time recognizing it for what it is, but it's steady.

-...T A Y D O W N-

His eyes are locked firmly on Winslow again by the time Winslow's looking back, but-

-but Winslow's scowling now. He's crouching down in front of him and squinting at him, and
there's no telling what he's reading on his face, now.

Or maybe there is, because as Winslow's standing up again, he's stepping to the side, twisting to
bring the gun around, pointing it at Clint.

James slams his eyes shut at the sound of the gunshot. When it's not followed immediately by one
entering his own skull, opens them again. He doesn't realize that he's half expecting to see
Winslow dead on the ground until he's met with the exact opposite.

Clint's hunched over himself on his knees, the laser sight sweeping through dust as he aims at
Winslow, but he's not fast enough. Winslow sends him sprawling with a second shot, then swings it
back towards James, holding it there a moment before shifting his aim back to Steve.

He fires once, hitting him in the shoulder, but his body jerks with the impact and there'll be blood,
soon.

Steve's not moving.

Clint's not moving, either.

There are half a dozen men gathered down in the open paved area; most of them back away
instinctively when James tackles Winslow down over the edge and onto the ground, but one's too
slow, and gets brought down with them.

He's not slow to start kicking, though, but James manages to slip the knife out of his sleeve and
stab him in the leg, burying the knife in bone. He throws himself back towards Winslow, needing
to stay close in case anyone gets any ideas about shooting at him. Winslow's unarmed; he'd lost his
grip on his gun and there's no telling where it's landed.

The men- five of them standing, now- are closing in on them both as James gets a grip on his throat
from behind. When he goes for the box cutter in his pocket, he finds the detonator instead.

Winslow shot Steve, and he shot Clint. Either or both of them could be dead or dying right now.
James has five guns pointing at him, and he's backed up against a wall.

There are no good choices. If he squeezes just a little bit, Winslow's out of the picture, and he's out
of options against a firing squad.
"Back off," he says. "Drop the guns."

He's so goddamned tired.

Winslow's twisting, trying to get away, but his words have no effect on the rest of the group. He wraps his fingers around the detonator in his pocket, his thumb finding the switch cover easily.

He's going to do this. Clint's forty feet away, but Steve's maybe only ten. James is pretty sure the container will shield him. As far as the rest of these assholes go? They don't even know what's coming. And he honestly doesn't care.

And Winslow, struggling against his chest and thrashing his head around, mere inches away?

He's definitely inside the blast radius.

The rest of them will scatter. Whatever. They won't be his problem any more than he'll be theirs. Their boss will be dead. Steve's people will come looking, they'll find Clint and Steve. Maybe get them out to safety. Maybe it's too late to matter.

Despite everything- despite his weak frame and persistent cough, and even later, despite his tendency towards fights that were always so much bigger than him - he'd always been pretty sure Steve would outlive him.

He'd been right, and then, years later, he'd been wrong.

Maybe this is just a balance that needs to be reset. It's a nice thought, and he almost wants to believe it. Except there's Clint, bleeding out, up and out of reach on the container and James just doesn't know how badly he's hit.

Either way, though, he doesn't think Clint would begrudge him this. But he'd be pretty pissed that nobody was checking in on Lucky.

Someone will sort it out. Natasha or Kate or someone. It'll get handled.

Winslow's struggling is getting weaker. But he's getting tired of keeping the pressure on his throat, he's tired of-

-God, he's just tired

He closes his eyes- it makes it easier to pretend that the last thing he's going to see can be anything other than this- and flips the switch cover open.

---

"-got to keep pressure on the wound," Natasha hisses at him, shoving his hands where he doesn't want them to be as she leans over him, looking up and away. Everything hurts, bad, but mostly he's just cold. Tired. He can't keep his eyes open. Doesn't particularly want to, to be honest.

He manages, though, just for a second, at the sound of the blast.
Chapter 50

Clint's head is swimming even before he opens his eyes, and that's never a good thing. It means he's alive, though, so it's not a bad thing either. And it also means damage assessment and hospital food. Staring at some show on TV that he doesn't care about, but he'll be too wiped out to bother changing the channel. And hey, bright side: once that's all said and done, there'll be the usual six to eight weeks of physical therapy to look forward to. Again.

But it's not like keeping his eyes closed is going to make any of that go away.

He's well-versed in how this goes. He takes it slow. Inches them open slowly, letting his eyes adjust to the light, and waits for that moment where whatever's wrong with him surges up through the painkillers to let itself be known.

He remembers, this time, what it is, which means his head's not too injured. Even if he can't hear anything. He's deaf- he knows that already- but he's got at least two more bullet holes in him, too.

...and right on cue, they set to aching.

"Fuck."

"Clint?"

Steve's voice- that's good.

That's very good, he realizes, quickly enough that his carefully planned slow ascent to wakefulness takes a back seat to slamming his eyes open wide and wincing against the glare like an idiot.

"Steve." He's only now realizing that he'd only heard him in one ear. Hopefully the fact that he's missing his other hearing aid doesn't mean anything serious. But who fucking cares? "You're not dead?"

"Got a headache making me wish otherwise," he admits, finally stepping into view. His hair's wet, he's showered recently. But he looks haggard as all hell. It's mostly in the eyes. "But yeah. You're holdin' up okay too, or so they tell me."

"Got shot."

Steve half-grins. "That you did."

"James?"

"He's downstairs," Steve says, but there's a twist to his expression that Clint does not like the look of. "He's okay. He's gonna be fine."

"Those are two separate statements," Clint argues, ignoring the fact that there's something up with Steve and it doesn't bode well. Instead, he feels along the edge of the mattress for the button that'll move this thing a bit more upright. If he can just find the damned thing.

Maybe it has something to do with all the tech wrapped around his torso. Fucking weird, not noticing it until now. But it's like he's been stuck in an oversized copier or something. He can barely make out the shape of his feet past the end of it all, but he can't quite bring himself to drag his eyes down to the lights that are moving over his midsection.
It's childish and he knows it, but if he doesn't look, it's not happening, and if it's not happening, he doesn't have to freak out about it.

"What happened?"

"Stark found him backed into a corner with one hand around Winslow's throat, and another around a detonator he'd broken off of one of your arrows."

Clint frowns, confused, then grins. *Attaboy, James.* "Was that the blast I heard?"

Steve's next breath is stuttered, far more than it should be, with the supersoldier serum and all, because apparently, that's not the response Captain America's looking for right now.

"No. Thank god and small fucking mercies."

---

Downstairs, Clint soon discovers, means downstairs in the *locked ward* where Banner tends to hide out when he's having a bad day. Stark had dubbed it the Chillout Tent, and the name had stuck, but Clint's been down there before. It's a reinforced cell that locks from the outside. There is a window out into the hallway, but it's shatterproof glass.

Clint's pretty sure you can't call a place a retreat if you're forced in there against your will.

And no, he can't go down there to see him. Not yet. Not until Stark's fucking *machine* has finished threading his *literally* blasted abdomen back together. And not until, Steve finally admits, they've managed to get James stabilized a bit more.

But he won't- or really, can't- tell him what he means by that, because he hasn't seen him yet either. Fucking hell.

---

They let him shower after he takes his meds. They switch out his clothes and gear for hospital scrubs and shoes that don't have any laces, because despite all evidence to the contrary, everyone seems to believe that he's still intending on blowing his head off.

Not that he's got the means, or even a reason. Winslow's dead. Clint and Steve are alive.

But he gets it. He'd be cautious too.

Back in the yard, there'd been a moment when, in the wake of the blast, everything had gone quiet. He'd been aware that he was alive and that his head hurt and that he'd started hyperventilating because there were lights everywhere, suddenly, and they'd all seemed to be aimed at him.

He'd only opened his eyes at the sound of Natasha's voice- quiet, but startlingly close by.

"You're okay, James," she'd said, putting one hand on his shoulder as she'd eased herself down to sit next to him. "Just breathe."

"Head hurts," was all he'd managed to grit out by way of response. In hindsight, it hadn't been the best move. Because she'd looked. She'd reached back to run her hand carefully over the back of his head while watching his face. When he winced, it wasn't because she'd found the goose-egg.

"What's-" her face had ducked out of view as she'd gotten up on her knees for a better look, and
there'd probably been a few seconds where she'd thought it was shrapnel stuck in the back of his skull. But she hadn't seemed happy when his hair had fallen back around his neck and she'd come into view, holding the charge from Clint's arrow up to the light.

There'd been a minute where he could've tried to explain. Maybe expressed some sort of relieved surprise that the charge hadn't gone off on impact. But he hadn't had the energy, and she hadn't asked him. She'd just settled in next to him again, legs stretched out his own, while he got his breathing back under control. For a while, they'd just watched people- Hill's, Coulson's, various medics- had swarmed the yard to begin the cleanup.

She'd shaken her head at Sam when he'd approached, and James had pretended not to notice. It hadn't been hard, because it was only right then that he'd realized that it was Natasha sitting next to him because nobody was quite sure who he'd been, right then.

Mostly, he'd just been watching the dust floating around the yard under the lights, trying to sort out what had happened.

He'd panicked. He'd been so intent on the gunmen that he hadn't noticed Iron Man hovering overhead. When the blast- the particle beam from Stark's gauntlet- had turned a nearby pile of pallets into so much flying debris, he'd thought- no, he'd reacted like it had been gunfire, throwing himself back and down. Winslow's neck had snapped in his grip.

"He's gonna kick your ass for this, you know," Natasha'd said a minute later, pocketing the charge she'd been fidgeting with and following his gaze to the sight of Steve- his movements slow and confused- being harangued into the back of an ambulance.

She'd been smirking, though. And for a minute, he'd thought everything was going to be okay.

He hadn't known, then, that on the other side of the shipping container, Clint was being lowered down from where he'd fallen, being loaded onto another ambulance. He hadn't known that unlike Steve, Clint hadn't been moving at all.

He'd gotten a glimpse, though- once Natasha had deemed it safe enough for a medic to come close enough to check him out- of another ambulance peeling out of the yard. Just the lights at first, but then the sirens had kicked in as it disappeared around a corner. He hadn't known who was in it until he'd glanced sidelong at the Natasha's expression.

And then it was like everything that had been waiting in the wings to set in had just descended, all at once.

He'd had to keep his eyes shut for the rest of the field examination, counting out each of his breaths in time with the medic's instructions. Thirty two exhalations later, he'd been released back to Natasha and Sam, and he'd still needed to keep counting.

Sandwiched between them on the drive out of the yard, he hadn't been able to track much of anything. He thinks Sam had tried talking to him, but he's not sure. He'd just been staring up and out through the windshield, trying- and failing- to catch sight of the fading flashing lights.

He'd flinched at every bump in the road, imagining delicate life support machines getting disconnected with every jarring movement. His teeth had been so tightly clenched that his lower right canine broke for the second time in an evening, and he'd kept the loose shard pressed tightly against the roof of his mouth the whole way back.

It hadn't distracted him any, but he hadn't had any idea what else to do.
He can't make out the words but he can hear Steve's voice, down the hall, and it's bone-deep familiar. Quiet and reasonable at the start of the conversation. A little more cutting in reply to something he disagrees with. And then the inevitable raised voices in return as Steve ignores whatever he's just been told and does what he wants anyway.

"You want to go to town over this, you just let me know." It's glib now, almost cheerful, as Steve circumvents- or, more likely, plows right through- whatever resistance Hill's people have bothered to muster.

He's only been down here a few hours, and he's gotten a few updates. Steve's fine and Clint will be- Natasha had promised him on both counts. He's been trying to believe her, but this? It might be proof.

Listening to Steve's footsteps coming down the corridor, he gets up from the stupid cot thing Dr. Gupta had sentenced him to. The room weaves a little- whether it's the concussion or the meds kicking in is really just six of one and half a dozen of the other. Going by the reflection in the window's shatterproof glass, his jaw is pretty much all bruise. He tries grinning anyway.

Only Steve's grin when he arrives on the other side of the window, isn't lining up right.

"Buck, you doing okay?"

Something's wrong, and for a second he's sure that he's about to tell him that there's been a problem, that Clint didn't come out of it, that-

No. If things were that bad, Steve wouldn't bother trying to smile at all.

And if Steve's trying, he can too. "Better than I was."

Steve nods, but the smile's turning into something serious. He's turning his hand over to reveal what he's been holding, and he sets it on the window frame and his eyes are turning to steel.

It's maybe two and a half inches long, an inch wide, and there's a hole in it where an arrow's shaft is supposed to be.

"Why'd you do it?"

Steve is angry, then. Of course he is.

"Didn't think I had any other options." Now that the meds Dr. Gupta'd given him at intake have had a time to kick in, he knows, objectively, how bad that sounds. But it's true. He'd thought Steve and Clint were dead, or dying. He'd known that being shot would only delay the inevitable.

And he'd known- he'd seen it in the files- that he'd bled out on the table during Hydra's first attempt to rebuild him into what they'd wanted. They'd been working at the limits of technology, then, and those limits are gone now.

These days, they'd probably only need his brain intact.

It's probably more than Steve wants to hear, so he takes a breath and tries to translate it into something he'll understand. "I didn't want to die, and I didn't want-" didn't want to go back. "I just couldn't take the risk, you know?" One glance at Steve- his jaw's set like he wants to punch something- and it's clear that the reassurance isn't helping.
But Steve leaves a minute later, so at least there's that.

---

Sam waits until the techs have finished checking that the machine's working as it should be before telling him. Probably because he'd known that the minute he hears that James had been intending on blowing his own head off with one of Clint's explosive arrows, he was going to try to jump out of bed.

Shit, the machines do not like it when he tries to move, beeping loudly as the guiding grid light repositions itself over his abdomen. At least it gives him something to snarl at that isn't his own stupidity for moving so abruptly in the first place.

"You're fucking serious?"

"Do you know where he got them?"

"My closet. Told him to grab whatever he thought would be useful in case Winslow's people got there first."

He lies back down and glares at the ceiling. Any one of his explosive arrows could put a hole clean up into the next floor; and the target needed to be cleared with a radius of at least twenty feet before loosing one was anything besides drastically stupid.

This is all Winslow's fault, he reminds himself. Yeah, but.

"How's he doing now, though?" It's not a change of subject- he'll be coming back to that in a minute, and probably every time he shuts his eyes for the foreseeable future. He just wants Sam to get to the goddamned point. He just needs some news.

"Broke a tooth and hit his head, but that's about it as far as the physical goes." Sam hesitates, but rolling his eyes at him is enough to prompt him to answer the real question, at least. "He's being kept in for observation, just for the night." Sam crosses his arms, breaks eye contact. "He's in his head, though. More than I've seen him in a while, though it would be weirder if he wasn't."

"Has he said anything?"

"That's kind of the thing." Sam looks up at him again. "He's responsive only as long as he's being asked a direct question." The way he says it- the careful tone he's using- is enough to catch Clint's attention. He shrugs, tries to figure out what to say that'll earn a useful response.

"Think he's just worn out?"

"Could be. But it also could be that he's only doing that much because he's wary of disobeying. That's one of the things we've got to figure out."

It takes him a minute to parse it out, and he doesn't like the result. "You're worried that the shock caused some sort of regression?"

"It's a possibility. Really, it's no more likely than him just trying to deal with having a really shitty night. It's going to take some time for it to all shake out, you know? I spoke with Dr. Gupta. She agrees that we need to let him rest for a while before checking in again in the morning. We'll know more then." Sam rocks forward on his feet. "Look. After that's done, me or Steve will bring him by here, okay? Long as you get some sleep. These machines," he gestures down at the hair-thin beam of light that's gone back to printing skin around the edges of the worst of the two wounds, "they
can't do everything."

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"Have you gotten any sleep?"

"Maybe?" He grimaces around the bad taste in his mouth; underneath the bitterness, his tongue is numb. "What time is it?"

"Just past four AM," Dr. Gupta confirms. "How are you feeling?"

"Bad."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

So far, she's the only other person to set foot on his side of the glass all night. He's got no doubt that everything they're saying is being piped out onto the other side where Steve and Hill are standing, staring at him with deliberately detached concern.

At least this time around nobody's chanting possible code words at him from the other side of the window. And Steve's not looking as furious as he'd been earlier, but for some reason, it only makes him want to test it. So he smirks at Dr. Gupta, even though it hurts his teeth.

"No."

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Steve's arms cross, which he takes as a petty victory, but Dr. Gupta just huffs out a quiet laugh. "That's valid. Will you tell me what happened anyway?"

He scratches his arm. It's healed over already, but the point where they'd drawn blood earlier, right there at the end of the faded s in Barnes is still itching. He wonders if the tube of Anbesol she'd brought in with her to tide him over until morning is a bribe or a peace offering.

"At this point-" she doesn't turn her head back so they can see, but she rolls her eyes to the side- "I think you and I both would prefer that you've had some time to process before we get down to the big picture stuff. Right now, we merely want to know what happened."

He can feel Steve and Hill- and Coulson now, great, watching him intently. The sooner he gets through it, the sooner they'll fuck off and leave him be. He nods.

"Thank you."

He opens his mouth, but the first words that come to mind are "Winslow shot Steve," and everything else is a blank.

It must be a minute that he's sitting there with his mouth hanging open- God, he's probably drooling, he can't even tell- when she takes pity on him.

"Can you start from the beginning?"

He nods. Swallows, and tries to think. For a minute it's just a blank, and then it's just hazy, like the older memories are, all out of context. Being in the backseat of a truck and surreptitiously glancing at the driver. Something about a billboard?

And then, finally, it snaps back into place.

Lying on the floor in the kitchen because he'd been an idiot. Freaking out.
What he says, though, is, "Clint called and told me that Winslow had gotten around them, that someone was coming to get be to the tower."

After that, it all comes out almost easily. Right up until he's flinging himself back to get away with what he'd thought had been gunfire.

"And Winslow, I. His neck got broken."

He can't remember what he'd been thinking, then, because he hadn't been. So of course that is what everyone wants to know.

Fuck.

If this was one of their usual sessions, Dr. Gupta would probably be typing something right now, but as it is, she's just looking intently back at him. Doesn't even have her laptop on her.

His shoulders are all hunched in. But straightening them out would mean that he's aware of it and it might mean something, subconsciously, to her or Steve or Hill or Coulson, and he doesn't know what.

Dr. Gupta smiles at him, calmly, though.

"Okay. Thank you. There's just one last question I feel I should ask before we wrap up. Is that okay?"

She wouldn't be warning him if it wasn't going to be bad. But he resists the urge to glance out the window. It's not as if there's any reassurance coming from that department.

"Yes."

"At any point, did you find yourself thinking that going along with Winslow was a good solution, or the better of worse options?"

He waits to freeze up; he's expecting it this time. But it doesn't happen. Which at least means he can stop holding his breath. Given everything he's just told her- told them, really- he almost wants to laugh.

But her eyes widen just a fraction, and he needs to rein it in. And he has to think back, he needs to be positive, here.

Because they might want the answer, sure, but he- violently and suddenly, he needs it.

"No."
Chapter 51

Thanks to a near total lack of sleep, James is tired enough by the time morning rolls around that he probably could've slept through the dentist's visit even without the novocaine. Afterwards, his face just feels as puffy and strange as the rest of his head. No more, no less. It's not until he's glancing back at the chair on his way out the door that it hits him. What it'd looked like.

But it's not like he'd wound up in one of those chairs.

"Dr. Gupta's gonna be by in an hour for your follow-up," Steve says, meeting him in the hallway outside, where he appears to be quite settled in. Though it had been obvious that they'd upped the tower's security when he'd been led up here, there are no signs of the agents he'd been expecting in the hall. "You want to grab some coffee or something?"

He shrugs, hoping that with the new teeth and all, he'd be off the hook from answering for the next little while. Honestly, he'd been counting on having the next hour to come up with some way he can explain everything to Dr. Gupta that won't land him back in the cell permanently. He hadn't been prepared to deal with Steve just yet. Not even nearly.

Steve had been a lot of things, but he'd never been angry with him like he'd been last night.

And James had gotten angry right back, because it's not like he'd tried hurting anyone once reinforcements arrived. He'd followed every order and request to the letter, afterwards. But he'd been on the wrong side of the glass to argue about it then, and he's just too exhausted, now.

"Look." Steve says, stopping in the middle of the hallway, a few strides short of the turnoff to the elevators. "James. I'm sorry about last night. I wasn't wild about leaving you down there, but we needed to be sure nothing had happened."

And that nothing was going to, James' brain appends. That part of it, he gets. He'd have probably ordered the same thing, if he'd been in any sort of position to.

"When I came to," Steve continues, taking a hesitant step forward, "Hill told me what had happened. And yeah, I freaked out. That's not on you. But you- that thing with the bomb? You planning to-" he cuts himself off. "Look. I've been there. I've gone down with the ship when there weren't any better options. But you scared the hell out of me, Buck."

"Didn't mean to." It only comes out so mumbled and small because of the novocaine, he's fairly certain. But it means he has to look up for this next part. "It was never plan A, okay?"

Apparently, it's the right thing to say, because Steve's shoulders unspool so much, and so suddenly, that for an instant James worries that he's going to shrink back down to his old size. "You wouldn't have needed a plan A if ours hadn't gone belly up."

He's about to ask about that- it's not like he hasn't been wondering, but it's not like he's assuming he's got any sort of clearance, either- when Steve grins suddenly. "You wanna go up and see if Clint's awake? He's been in and out ever since last night. He's been asking about you."

God, Clint. He grins, running his tongue over the tooth that's just slightly sharper than it used to be, now, and follows Steve to the elevator.
God, Clint.

He's asleep. Or maybe unconscious. He's lying down in a bed that's engulfed in some sort of machine, and it doesn't seem right, him being alone like this with nothing but metal and plastic putting him back together. The damned thing's doing surgery; it's a little fucked that nobody's in here monitoring the light that's glowing over his bare torso.

But they wouldn't have simply left it on if they'd thought it was going to randomly malfunction.

He hangs back, just in case.

"You want me to give you a few?" Steve asks, from where he's leaning in the entrance, just a foot or two behind him. He must nod or something, because he can hear the door close a moment later.

He can afford at least a few steps forward before he comes within reach of the cord running into the wall.

Clint looks pale, underneath the sensors stuck to his chest and neck. His skin's gone unsettlingly translucent except for where the machine is seaming him back together; the the skin around the wound is red and irritated, but it's not bleeding.

Though maybe it's because he's already bled out completely. Clint's lying so still that if not for the hum of the machine, and the line jumping on the monitor, he'd look-

Fuck.

Down at the foot of the bed, in a clear plastic container, are the clothes they'd probably had to cut off of him. They're grimy with dirt, and there's a dark spot against the plastic that shows through more clearly. The purple's nearly black, fading to a crusty brown-red at the edges. Realizing what it must be, he forces his eyes back to Clint's face, but there's nobody there.

The monitor on the machine is the only safe thing to look at in here, the only thing showing any movement at all. The numbers seem to be rising and falling in a steady rhythm but there's no telling what they're tracking. Maybe it's his breathing, or something else. Maybe it's his heart. But at least it's not a flat line.

He decides that Clint's going to be fine, because he has to be, and because it's not 1936. There's not a heatwave, no brownouts, and Clint's not Steve, mad with fever and close to dying because there'd been nothing in the apartment to bring his temperature down, and no word from the doctor.

Clint's doctors aren't far away; he'd seen them bent over a computer in their office on the way in. But they're a few doors down the hall, and dwarfed by the machine and the monitors and the sanitized room, Clint seems insubstantial enough to disappear any minute, and there's nobody in here making sure. They've just left it up to the tech while they watch cat videos or whatever it is that they're doing, and machines can break, they can-

He needs to get some air, he realizes.

If he leaves, though, Clint really will be on his own.

Fuck.

Without meaning to, he backs up, freezing when he suddenly makes contact with the counter. At
least the edge is something solid to hold onto while he tries to pull himself together.

Steve's waiting in the hall outside, he'll be back in a minute and he'll find him like this, gasping for air and gripping a dent into the fixtures. And it's not 1936. Steve's in his right mind, he'll realize right away that something's wrong with him, and he can't afford that right now.

Because Clint is going to get better- he will be released, eventually- and the notion of having to stay here without him- probably not in Banners room, they'll probably move him back to the academy- is just too damned real.

He's a fucking idiot, sauntering in here like everything was going to be fine. Like Clint would be up and about when last night, he'd gotten gut-shot right in front of James' eyes.

He'd fucking watched. And he hadn't done shit to stop it. Hell, big picture here? He'd caused it.

There's a tap on the door, and Clint doesn't move at all but James has to. At least he manages to change hands before accidentally scraping his eyelids with the back of the wrong wrist. Forcing another breath into his lungs, and, avoiding the cable running across the floor, shoves himself towards the door.

After all, he imagines Clint's voice telling him, you've pulled himself together from worse. Only Clint's never told him that, not really, and right now Clint's stuck inside a machine and not saying anything at all.

Steve's watching him warily the moment he opens the door, so he tries to think of something heartening to say- or even something that'll just make him look somewhere else- but he can't come up with the words or even the eye contact.

He's dimly aware of the hand on his back as Steve steers him down the hall, away from the guards stationed by the waiting area, and through another doorway. The room is empty, sterile and clinical, identical to Clint's but for the occupant.

It's exactly what Clint's room would look like if he hadn't made it.

But fuck it. It's not like he and Steve both haven't been waiting for him to break down completely anyway.
At least he'd freaked out before he'd gotten here.

"How are you feeling?"

"Awesome," he says, finding a point on the coffee table between them to stare at. He hadn't meant to lead with sarcasm, he realizes, only when she doesn't call him on it.

"It has been one hell of a night."

He nods, blinking. His eyelids feel crusty; she can probably tell that he's been a complete wreck for the better part of the last half hour.

"Well, to start, let's ease into it and just get the results of your physical out of the way first. I see that your teeth are back where they should be. How was the dentist's visit?"

She's actually asking about the chair- it comes up whenever something has to happen with the arm, or when he'd gone to a theater with Steve that'd had reclining seats. "They warned me before putting it back, it was fine." It's been flagged in his file, probably ever since Clint had taken him to get his first haircut this century.

"Good. How about the rest of you? Everything feeling all right?"

"No, I'm fine. Healed or whatever."

She nods, types something on her laptop. "Well, the good news is that no unforeseen agents were found in your system. If you had indeed been hit with the poison, it worked its way through your system quite quickly."

He nods- he could've told her that, if she'd asked, though who knows if she'd have believed him. But what she'd said makes him stop short.

"What poison?"

"From the guns?"

"Which ones?"

Her eyes widen, just a fraction. "Oh. I- I thought you'd have been informed. Winslow's men were carrying guns loaded with a tranquilizer that amounted to being the equivalent of eight times the lethal dose of ketamine."

"They were fatal?"

"I know it's crass," Dr. Gupta's expression cycles through expressions of horror, sympathy, wariness. But after a long, drawn out moment, she settles on smirking. "I know it's crass, but let's be grateful that Clint was hit with mere bullets."

Oh. He hadn't managed to have Clint's back, or Steve's, but at least he'd killed a few more people last night.

"Good to know, I-" dropping his eyes, he tightens his mouth, not sure what would come out otherwise. Breaking down in front of Steve had been mortifying enough, but at least it hadn't been
"James?" She sounds apprehensive; maybe for him, maybe of him, now. "I'm sorry for springing it on you like that. Hold up, can you look at me?"

He should. He knows he should. But when he doesn't, nothing happens. He just catches sight of her in his peripheral vision, leaning forward over her laptop. "You couldn't have known..."

He catches the cue.

"I couldn't have known." He repeats, almost automatically. He knows this routine, and he knows he hadn't meant to kill anyone. He repeats it again, trying to focus. Sometimes it helps. Sometimes it doesn't. The truth is, he's having a bad enough day that deep down, he wonders how much he cares about any of the ones who hadn't made it.

Steve would, though. Which means he probably should.

"Okay," she smiles calmly, once manages to pull himself together enough to look up at her. Sitting upright again, she says, "We can pick this up again later, once you've had some time to process- and again, I apologize for making assumptions. Are you ready to move on to something else for now?"

"Yes. Please." He lets out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "It's okay. Thanks for telling me."

He could've heard it from Hill. Might still do, for all he knows; at least now he'll be prepared.

"Okay. Well, you'll be happy to know that I'm not expecting to come across any more surprises with the things I'd like for us to go over today. But while we're on the topic of test results, I'd like some clarification about your medication."

There's no point in pretending not to know what she's getting at, though the impulse is there. "I skipped a few doses."

She nods. She had known, then. "Last night?"

"And yesterday morning. And. ah. A few other times."

"Okay. That at least explains what I'm seeing here." There's a slight crease in her brow that indicates her next question isn't a mere suggestion. "Do you mind if we discuss that a little bit?"

He'd been prepared for awkwardness; it's been inevitable. The guilt though? Not by half.

"James? What are you feeling right now?"

If he hadn't looked away just then, maybe she'd have missed it.


"Why?"

"I don't know." Because he's admitted, hell, almost everything to her- things far worse than this- and she'd barely blinked an eye. He knows he can trust her, even if he's let her down.

She doesn't prompt him, though, just waits.
"I. I skipped them. Because, ah. Okay, now it's just getting mortifying. "I was going to go on a date tonight, and...you know." Please, don't ask for details. "And I would've taken them last night because at that point yesterday, things weren't going so great. But then Clint called and everything took off, and I... it just made everything worse."

Of course, she lands right on the point he's hoping she'd miss. Though if he's being honest with himself, it's not as if she doesn't have her pick.

"Could you walk me through it? What made you decide that your medication was-" she cuts herself off, and thinks for a moment, her eyes narrowing as she scrutinizes him. "Am I correct in assuming that this date would have entailed physical intimacy?"

He shrugs, but nods.

"Okay. Well. Let's step back for a moment. Missing a dose here and there is probably fine, which I'm guessing you've discovered for yourself, if you'd skipped more than one or two." He nods, more relieved than he'd been expecting.

"But you went through a horribly traumatic experience. Your body might not know how to make up for it. Its nothing to be ashamed about- though neither, by the way, are your reasons for wishing to discontinue your current dosage." She glances down at her laptop and back up again. "If you'll agree to stick with them, just for a little while longer so that we can get you back to baseline, I think they'll help over the next few weeks while you're processing everything that's happened. Down the line, though, once we've established that you're ready, we can work on a more structured approach. Probably starting with a monitored and measured dosage reduction."

This is not where he'd been expecting this conversation to go.

"And depending on how that goes," she finishes, "we may even be able to start pulling you off of them completely."

"Thought you said there wouldn't be any shocks this session," he deadpans.

"You're surprised?"

"Because of the last sixteen hours," he says, sobering as he sits up. "Because there's no way in hell nobody hasn't already told you about the explosives."

Never mind the bodies he'd dropped. Never mind the bodies that had dropped because he hadn't done anything. But it's as good a way as any to change the topic before it becomes even more uncomfortable.

But she's looking at him with something resembling amusement. "That's creative, I have to admit. But. You've read your own files, correct? You know what you're capable of."

"Yes."

"The simple explanation would be that you've made tremendous progress, the events of last night notwithstanding. Were it not for that, this is still a conversation I would've been expecting to have as a part of your course of treatment. Does that make sense?"

Not really.

"What's the complicated explanation?"
"Before you were the Winter Soldier, you were still a soldier. And before that, as far as you've told me, you- what was it? Often had to finish the fights that Steven Grant Rogers started?" At his nod, she leans back in her chair. "It is not my intention to minimize the seriousness of your situation last night. And we will probably be checking in on it for the next several months- possibly years, if need be. But at this point, you need to allow yourself the possibility of trusting your judgement."

"I was off my meds."

"...And facing a real threat to not just your life, but your agency. Your personhood. You have a right to defend that as much as you do to defend your life." She looks down at her screen, probably to give him a minute to let it sink in. "We touched on it briefly last night- well, this morning- but let me rephrase it and ask again. Do you believe that, if you hadn't missed your prescribed dosages, would you have been willing to allow anyone to use you as a weapon?"

"No."

"Okay, then. And bear with me, because this is actually going somewhere, we just need to unpack it. When I first asked you how you were feeling about skipping your medication, you that you felt, not just guilty or embarrassed, but ashamed."

"Okay..."

"Why do you think that was?"

"Because..." He hasn't the foggiest. "I know I'm supposed to be taking them?"

She nods. He's apparently on the right track, but she's still waiting for him to get there.

"And I knew why- and that, okay, it's embarrassing to talk about. But..."

After another minute or so, he gives up with a shrug. "I really don't know what you're looking for, here."

"That's okay. You're circling it pretty closely as it is. Let's try this. You knew that you were supposed to be taking them, and, in opposition to your instructions, made the decision not to. Would you describe that as being accurate?"

"Yeah?"

"While it might not have proven to be the best choice, and I can't condone it, since I'm about as biased with regards to their use as it's possible to be, it was still a choice. More importantly, it was one you acted on. You trusted your own judgement enough to take the initiative."

"You just said you didn't condone it."

"Correct. I don't agree with what you did. And that's essentially my point. Up until now, you have been focusing a whole lot being able to trust anyone, including yourself. And while it might have proven to be a misstep in this instance, it's the first time that I'm aware of that you've trusted your judgement over someone else's."

Yeah, he wants to say. And look where it got me. But instead he just nods.

When he smiles back at her his teeth still feel wrong in his mouth.
The nurse standing guard informs him that the doctors are busy with Clint, and he hates how much of a relief that is. Despite his earlier meltdown to the contrary, at least now he's leaving because he's not allowed in there, and not because he's a coward.

Nobody is tailing him or directing him to go anywhere in particular, and nobody's stepped forward to apprehend him, but his fantasy of going back to the apartment to drowse on the couch crashes and burns when he sees the guards posted at the main entrance. They don't seem to be interested in him, but maybe it's only because he makes no move towards them. He just hesitates, for a moment, before heading back down the hallway.

He keeps his head down as best he can, but the tower's buzz of activity keeps crashing into him. There are people arguing in hushed voices in the hallway- they go silent when they hear him coming around the corner. He doesn't want to know how heavy that silence would be when amplified by the dozens of people in the cafeteria, any more than he wants to know how many people in the tower want to talk to him right now.

There are still more guards at the garage entrance, too. He thinks about asking them if they've seen Steve or Natasha or Sam or anyone, but he's not sure he's supposed to.

In the absence of any better ideas, he heads back down to the room they'd kept him in last night. It might be a sign that it's the first unguarded doorway he's seen in a while, but the door doesn't swing shut behind him, and that's about as good as he can hope for. He leaves the lights off because the controls seem to live somewhere on the panel on the other side of the glass, and he's not sure which switch to use. Dragging the mattress off the cot and folds it against the wall underneath the window, he sits down and tries not to think.

He figures it must be nearly an hour before there's a shadow carving through the square of light on the far wall, and Tony Stark's voice coming over to him from the doorway.

"We need to fix that tracker in your arm," he says, by way of greeting, taking a few steps into the room. "Don't look at me like that. I'm trying to prevent disaster from striking the tower, here."

He obviously wants James to ask, so he does. "By poking at my arm?" The novocaine's worn off, but it's the first time he's opened his mouth since leaving Dr. Gupta's office, and there it is again, the weird sensation of teeth.

"By my not being anywhere near the conversation about how the mole got as far as he did. No good will come of me firing everyone and blowing the tower to smithereens, tempting as it may be. And anyway, it'll only take a minute, no lab visit required. So. Whaddya say?"

He's giving him the choice, but no probably isn't the answer he's looking for. Besides. If it wasn't for Iron Man showing up when he had last night, he probably would've blown his own head off. So he owes hm one.

He's not surprised when the lights turn on with only a word from Stark to Jarvis, but Stark sitting down on the floor next to him is a little unexpected.

"Still not sure of the extent to which your tracker's been compromised," he says, unzipping his backpack and taking out a small rectangular device, which he plugs into his tablet. "So I wrote a new security protocol for everyone's. Just need to wipe- ah, replace the code on yours and pair it again, and you'll- here, hold your arm out." He does as he's told. "Thanks. You'll be invisible to the old system. Which is being dismantled anyway. I just...don't want to take any chances that copies got made."
Stark's skin is vaguely blue from the screen's light when he holds the device up for James to see, and after a moment, he carefully eases it towards his arm, like he's still afraid James will explode.

The device blinks once, and then digits start spooling down the tablet's screen, too fast to read or understand, but Stark seems to be expecting them. "Okay, it's transmitting just fine," he mutters to himself, frowning in concentration as he taps at the screen. "Just... okay. I'm sending the update..." The tablet chirps at him and the screen turns green. "...and it's loaded." Stark smiles, already pulling the device away. "You're all set."

It's just his arm, not his brain. But it had only taken five seconds for it to lock onto the new system, to effectively be something else than it was. If Stark's not thinking about it in any grander sense, James is not about to mention it himself. Honestly, he thinks, watching Stark pack up his gear to leave, he'd wished it had never occurred to him.

"Oh, and here," Stark says, reaching down into the bag again. "New phone to go with it. Everyone's getting an upgrade today. Already ported over your contacts from the cloud, you're ready to go." He hands it over; it's a little lighter than his old one. "As soon as you scan your thumbprint on it, your other one'll be bricked. You still have it on you?"

He shakes his head. It had gotten lost, last night.

"All right. Well, no worries. You want the lights on or off?"

He shrugs, because Stark's looking at him from the doorway like he's asking a different question entirely, and James doesn't know the answer to that one either. The lights stay on.
When the machine finally finishes repairing him a little after ten in the morning, and the doctors are satisfied that all of his organs are more or less where they should be, Clint's transferred to a regular bed and allowed a few hours of uninterrupted, actual sleep. When he wakes, there's a glow next to him on the bedside table that's so familiar he nearly forgets that it's completely out of place. His phone is there, charging next to his hearing aids and the water bottle, and it's got a message waiting for him.

_Hey I came by but you were asleep I hope you're feeling ok let me know when you want me to visit._ It's from James, and it's a few hours old. The phone itself, he notices, feels a little lighter than it used to be. Probably because it's not actually _his_. It looks the same, but there's no crack in the corner of the screen.

_Feel like shit but alive. And bored._

He's watching the ellipses wavering on the screen as James types out a reply, when he catches sight of someone stepping up to the doorway. It's Kate, looking angry.

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[You're a jerk] Kate signs, as Clint reaches for his hearing aids, settling them in.

"Good to see you too."

"-and if you don't get better soon, I'm kidnapping Lucky for good this time. Which won't take much, seeing as how I spent the night with him on your couch."

"You're the best," he says, before Kate leans over to hug him in his bed, which is even more embarrassing than being manhandled by the nurse had been.

"You know it. How're you feeling?"

"Like crap. What've you been up to?"

"Instagramming your dog, filling Bruce in on how awesome me and America were at keeping an eye on that doctor at the conference, and looking for you and James all morning. Where is he, anyway?"

"Dunno."

"He should be here."

"You're not even supposed to be here," he replies, though, yeah. It wouldn't suck if she wasn't right.

"Nobody's supposed to be here," Hill's voice comes at them from the hallway, but her expression brightens as she steps through the door. "Though Kate, I'm glad to have run into you. Thanks for everything yesterday at the conference, you guys did good."

The speed at which Kate straightens and squares her shoulders nearly sets Clint to laughing.

"Thanks."

"Give us a week or so, but I'd like to meet with your team so we can all talk about working together going forward."
"Really?"

The question seems to startle Hill. "Yes?"

"Sweet!"

Though she's obviously just been dismissed, she's beaming as she ducks back towards Clint. She gives him another awkward hug, shoving at him when he tries to sit up. "I'm glad you're not dead. Don't do anything stupid and I'll come by later to show you how awesome a time Lucky had with me so that you know how jealous you'll be if you make me dog-nap him again."

"Sure thing," he says, not entirely sure what he's agreeing to. But then she's standing up, nodding at Hill, and slipping out through the door.

"How're you doing, Clint?"

"Sore. Tired." Suffering the usual effects of Kate-induced whiplash. "Is it time to report in already?"

"If you're up for it."

He's not, but then by the time that question rolls around, he almost never is. But it beats lying here, staring at the ceiling while poking at his various and sundry injuries.

"No time like the present," he says, waving at the chair in the corner. Hill drags it over while he takes a sip of water, and then he starts in.

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"...and then Winslow shot me again," he says, finally getting to the end of his report, "and I kinda lost track of everything."

His chest feels like it's on fire from all the talking- it's starting to hurt. The button to call in the nurse is right at his fingertips. Not that he's got any intention of pressing it when his boss is sitting right there.

"All right. We should probably talk about how James got his hands on explosive material, and what he was planning on doing with it." Before he can get enough air in his lungs to start the huge fucking argument that he's finding he has all lined up and ready to go, she holds up a hand. "But then we should also probably be talking about the fact that a mole upended this entire operation and resulted in your needing to tell him to go raid the household weapons cache in the first place."

Which, yeah. That had pretty much been what he'd been planning to go with. Now that he doesn't need to shout back at her, he's got no idea what to say. So for a minute they both just sit there.

"Look," he says, not sure where he's going until he opens his mouth, but it's not the first time. "I'm gonna be having words with him about that, because what he did? That's gonna be fucking with me for fucking days, and by days, I mean years." Hill nods, resting her elbows on her knees as she leans in a little closer on the chair she's pulled over, still listening. "Honestly, though? As far as I was concerned right then, if there'd been a small nuclear device hidden in my closet, he would've been welcome to it. As far as his plan goes- that's out of my control. It sucks, and I'm blindsided and freaked the fuck out, and that's on him."

God, he's being such an asshole, here. What the fuck, he'll give him a nuke but won't take an administrative bullet for him?
"But...James' mind is own," he adds, once another minute's gone by. "That's kind of been the point of this entire exercise, right?" He looks over at Hill, whose blank expression gives him no indication that he's making any sense at all. "Him leaving the academy, staying with me. Getting a job and, what's the word... assimilating, or whatever."

Finally, she's deciding to stop letting him babble. "How worried do you think we should be about his actions last night?"

"Shouldn't you be asking Dr. Gupta's thoughts on that one?"

"I have, and now I'm asking for yours."

"Okay, well. I don't."

"...You don't think we should worry?"

"Alright. Well, think about it. Someone coming to kill you is bad enough, right? Someone coming to turn you into a mind-controlled killbot against your will? And not as some abstract concept that you've only heard about, but, like, something concrete, because it's actually happened before?" He takes a breath because with all this talking, if he doesn't just take a second, here, he's going to start coughing. His lungs really won't like that. "He's been working his ass off, trying to get better. And he's being better, and now... That's what I'm worried about. So, I get why we're having this conversation, but."

He'd been right. Coughing feels horrible. In the minute that it takes him to get it under control, he can't figure out why his stomach doesn't feel like it's bleeding. He has to glance down to confirm that the machine hadn't left him with any stitches to split. He's fine. But he's losing his train of thought, so he spits out the rest.

"In this line of work, your mission and your survival aren't always the same things, you know?"

She's nodding before he even gets around to the question, but doesn't interrupt. "Agreed. Which is why I'm going to need you to be straight with me, even if you don't want to be." Her face is blank; she's trying not to let her own thoughts sway his judgement.

"Okay..."

"On the advice of Sam and Dr. Gupta, I see no reason why his current situation needs to change. But by virtue of proximity, it has a large effect on your life as well. Would you feel comfortable with his return to your building? Or?"

"Yes," he interrupts, because honestly, he doesn't want to know what other options she's got in mind. "The sooner the better."

Hill smiles, finally. "I agree. And I'm certain he will as well."

"How do you mean?"

"We released him this morning, but he's gone to ground back in the chillout tent. Which at least means he's been managing to keep clear of the investigation."

"Investigation?"
"We've identified the three drivers and the individual tweaking the satellite surveillance, but we can't just assume they're the end of it. Sam's down there with Natasha, trying to get answers out of them."

"Who all was involved?"

She stands up with a sigh. "So far? Agents Varner, Kane, Holien and Suttles. You know them?"

At least if he had, he thinks, he'd have some sort of sense of personal betrayal to go off of. But all he's got is a vague notion, maybe, of who Holien might've been- brown hair, always looked like he needed a shave- and even then he's not sure.

And in the end, he would've been wrong about him, anyway.

"We'll know more soon," she assures him. "Steve and Bruce have taken charge of screening the rest of the personnel, and at most we think we're looking at an isolated, small group. They're not Hydra. It's not as bad as last time." She snorts, shaking her head. "And the award for damning with faint praise goes to... Maria Hill!" And with a bow, she leaves.
Sam rolls his eyes at him as he leans against the side of the doorway.

"You're still moping in here?"

"I'm not moping."

"Come on up and get some lunch." He steps to the side of the doorway, making room for James to pass as if it's a foregone conclusion. "Moping and eating aren't mutually exclusive."

"Say moping one more time," he grumbles, but playing along is better than admitting that honestly, he's been starving for an hour now because the thought of going into the cafeteria fills him with nothing but dread. He gets to his feet and eases past Sam, managing not to look too thankful.

In retrospect, when they arrive in the cafeteria, he shouldn't have been. There are about thirty people scattered around the tables, and most of them look nervous.

"They're not worried about you, man," Sam says, nudging him towards the sandwich line. "Come on."

He grabs a coffee and a pastrami on rye and only remembers that there's nowhere and no need to pay when Sam's leading them to a table off to the side of the room. It's just as well. He's got no idea where his wallet is.

Hopefully it's not lying in the street somewhere, waiting for someone to snag. But honestly, even if another Winslow stumbled upon it, the address printed underneath his name will lead them straight to the Academy.

"So, I talked to Dr. Gupta. How're you holding up?" Sam asks, biting into his own sandwich as if he's deliberately trying to keep it casual.

"Fine, I guess. Considering."

"Considering what?"

Maybe he should've just stayed down in the chillout tent; he really just wants to eat his damned sandwich. "Considering how much yesterday sucked."

"Yeah? Well. Bright side. That was yesterday. Clint and Steve are okay, Winslow's out of the picture, and whether you believe it or not, you kept your head. Can't really ask for more than that."

The sandwich tastes worse than it had looked.

"What've you been up to?"

"Steve's been flagging suspects for a closer look all night, so me and Natasha been dealing with that."

"How's it been going?"
"Awful." He glances around the cafeteria with a smirk. "Ain't used to being the least popular guy in
the room."

"Hang with me," James smirks. "I'll show you the ropes."

"Thanks, I think." Something catches Sam's eye behind them; he's waving.

Kate Bishop is nodding back at him, turning to add some sugar to her coffee before making her
way through the tables towards them.

James has only met her a few times, but she looks beat. And a little pissed off.

"You here to see Clint?" Sam asks, then, "the doctors said he wasn't going to be up for any visitors
until two."

"Should've waited," she admits, sitting down next to James, flashing him a humorless grin. "Snuck
in to see him. Only, really wasn't ready for it."

"You or him?"

"Both?" She seems younger than she is when she says it, but James kind of gets it. "Turns out that
seeing your mentor hooked up to a bunch of machines keepin' him alive totally sucks."

"Who knew?" Sam snorts, and for a minute they just drink their coffee while James tries to think of
something to say. In the end, she saves him the trouble and looks at him with something
approaching a glare.

"So I heard about what happened, obviously," she says. "Would've tracked you down too but I was
a little miffed and had to get over it."

He grins- not because it's good, but because it's nice, not being handled with kid gloves. "So, ah...
how's that going?"

"I'm good now- Bruce set me straight on a few things." She leans against him briefly. It's the kind
of thing Clint would do, and it's that, more than anything, that sets him at ease. "Anyway, figured
you should know and I'm sorry. And for, like, everything that happened, because it must've
sucked."

"Still sucks," James says, looking down at the sandwich he really doesn't want to finish, now.
Across the way, Sam's shooting Kate a warning look that's not really necessary.

"Yeah," she replies, though to whom he's not sure. "Lucky's gonna be glad to see you guys,
though."

"Digging in her pocket, she pulls out her phone. "I went over there last night when I
realized how late it was getting and let him out." Her grin is suddenly bright. "He was all worried
but he likes me more than you, so it's fine."

Sam scoffs. "How can you possibly know that?"

"Because he lets me dress him up and take pictures." She hands him her phone so he can see. In the
first, Lucky's got heart-shaped glasses balanced on his snout, along with Clint's gray wool hat, in
the next he's got a cardigan on over one of Clint's T-shirts.

It's the one he'd fixed the other day; he must've left it there. But he doesn't mention it.
He can hear Maria Hill's voice in Clint's room when he goes up, so he continues on towards the waiting area by the windows, ignoring the guards by the elevator and choosing a seat that will allow him line of sight on Clint's door.

Only he hadn't thought it through. The moment Hill steps into the hallway, she's heading for the elevators, and worse, he's right in her path.

"Hi James," she says, stopping a few feet away. "You get through the dentist's okay? How're you holding up?"

"Better." She's smiling, so he should probably at least make the effort. "Got my teeth fixed." Thankfully, the doctors have emerged from their office at the sound of voices in the lobby, and it's as good an out as he could've hoped for as they start heading towards Hill.

"That's good. Clint's awake, if you want to go in and see him. One quick thing, though. It occurs to me that you might have been tired when I spoke to you this morning, but in case you missed it, you're officially free and clear to come and go as you please."

"Yeah?" It's obvious, suddenly, that word of his skulking about the place has gotten back to her; he's not sure if that's a good thing or just an embarrassing one. Thankfully, one of Clint's doctors, no doubt alerted by the sound of them talking, emerges from the office and heads towards them. Eager to be moving now that an out is presenting itself, James stands, but before he can make it more than two steps, Hill eases into his path.

"Hold up. I just wanted to let you know... I hope you don't mind if we send along an escort, just to be on the safe side? Until the investigation's nailed shut, I mean."

Given the fact that he'd spent all day thinking that he was about to be locked away again, it's a small price to pay. But still. "As long as they're not the same guys who showed up last time."

"Steve and Bruce have cleared almost everyone," she says, and out of the corner of his eye, he can see the agents standing guard at the elevator squaring their shoulders when she glances at them. "There are only a dozen or so more we still need to talk to, and they're under house arrest on floor 28 until then."

It's odder still, he hadn't even really given them any thought at all until now. "Think I'm gonna go check on Clint, first." He looks at the doctor, who's waiting a few feet away. "Do you know when he's due to be released?"

"There's not much more we can do for him," the older one says. "Tonight, so long as he gets some rest, and promises to get more. But we might hedge our bets and try keeping him here until tomorrow."

"Given past experience," Hill grimaces, "you'll probably have to sedate him."

"Given past experience, we'll be looking forward to it," the doctor smiles. That seems too easy. With his luck, it probably is.

---

Okay, this looks bad.

James is practically glued to the wall, looking at anything and everything that isn't him. Everything about him is muted; his arm's glinting slightly blue, but it's probably a trick of the light. He needs a
shave, and could probably use a shower, and everything about his clothes indicates that he's spent
at least a fair portion of last night- and possibly today- under observation.

But they'd let him come visit him, without even a chaperone. "You okay?"

James nods, finally manages to hold eye contact for more than half a second. "I'm supposed to be
asking you that."

"I'm fine. Sore, though." He wishes like hell James would come closer, but asking for it just feels
pathetic. "They said I'm all fixed up, but my brain doesn't know it yet. The machine repaired the
damage, so apparently what I'm feeling is a combination of the recovery from the repairs
themselves, and the fact that my system's not quite ready to be back in one piece so soon." He takes
a deep breath, just to feel his lungs burn; it's a different sensation, at least, then the constant ache of
remade tissue. "But hey, at least I'm not dead."

James, nods, seems to relax a little bit, but he goes back to staring at the floor.

"Sit down, man," he gestures at the chair Hill had left by the side of his bed. "You're making me
nervous."

"Sorry." He sits down, scooting the chair close enough that Clint can lie back on the pillow a bit
like the good little patient he's trying do be.

"It's okay. What've I been missing?"

Another goddamn shrug, but at least this once's followed by a grin. Not much of one, but at least
he's trying. "I dunno. Everyone's trying to sort out what happened yesterday."

"They catch everyone yet?"

"Not sure. I've kind of been out of the loop." James doesn't elaborate. But he does grab Clint's hand
when he reaches out. Only that might've been the wrong thing to do, because he's ducking his head,
and Clint can hear him breathing-

"I'm sorry."

-but he can barely hear that. "For what?"

Instead of replying, James' shoulders heave once, and the grip on his hand tightens enough that for
the first time ever, Clint's probably lucky that James isn't using his left. Even so, there's no telling
what's running through his head right now, only that it's bad.

"Hey. Whatever you're thinking, you've got nothing to apologize for."

That, at least, earns him an irritated glance. "I couldn't stop him. I should've taken care of him
before you got there. If I hadn't been freaking out and off my meds I could've-"

"What?"

James' eyes widen, and it's so obvious that he hadn't meant to go there that Clint regrets asking.

"What's going on with your meds?" And speaking of, he should probably alert the on-call that his
own are wearing off.

"Can we, um, talk about it later?"
And yes, he does regret it, but James gets to leave after this, and Clint, he's going to be stuck here all night trying to guess which shoe is going to drop next. "Like, are you saying you missed a dose, or...?"

"...more like a few," James's mouth is tight and his face twists over the words. Worse, when he glances up at Clint, he looks afraid.

"You picked a hell of a week to try going off of them," he says, deliberately. If it had been accidental, this would be James' cue to correct him.

"I know." It's not a correction, but James' mouth ticks up into a rueful grin. "Dr. Gupta said the same thing."

At least she already knows, which means it's being dealt with. Only he can't imagine how he'd work this back into conversation down the line. Clint just needs a second to think. If he has a baseline, he might be able to figure out how he's supposed to respond.

"What'd she have to say about it?"

"That we can work on lowering the dosage a bit more cautiously once I've gone back on them again."

"How bad was the withdrawal?"

"Felt kind of shitty. Then after you called and everything happened, I was. I dunno. Muddled. Panicking."

It's about as good an opening as he's going to get.

"I heard about what you did with the explosive arrow." What he means, though, is, would you have done it otherwise?

"Yeah."

He tells himself James is only acknowledging the statement, that he hadn't heard the question. But he's not sure what's more troubling- whether James had only considered it because he was off his meds, or if he'd still do so when he wasn't. He's sure, though, that he hates that he's probably not the first or person who's grilled him about it today, and that things are so fucked up that everyone needs to.

"I wasn't trying to die," James blurts out, after a few seconds, leaning forward beseechingly. "I just didn't want to live like that again."

It's a little hazy, but Clint's pretty sure he'd told Hill the same thing himself, less than an hour ago.

"I get it," he replies. "I'm just really glad- like, you don't even know- that it didn't go that far, okay?"

James smiles at him so damned relieved and thankful that he doesn't really have the heart to keep pressing. Clint would rather get up for this, but he's getting tired again, and tugging on James' hand works just as well. "C'mere, hey?"

James comes easily, braces himself on the edge of the bed, his arms bracketing Clint's shoulders. He's being careful, trying to avoid injuries that aren't there- not really, at least- any more. His hair falls down around Clint's face and it's kind of awesome, how it blocks everything else out but the
two of them, if only for just a minute. He hasn't brushed his teeth all day, and James' feel weirdly sharp when he kisses him, but something settles in his chest, something eases. And here he'd been, chalking it all up to the bullet holes.

"What time is it?"

When James shrugs, he can feel his arms move. "Was about two when I came in here."

"Cool. Sorry the venue's so lame, but hey, at least I didn't miss our date."

This close up, he can see the blush spreading across James' face. It's weirdly endearing.

"What's up?"

He shakes his head, then sighs. "About that..." He looks at Clint for a moment and seems to be considering something. "I ah. Just. So you know. The drugs, that whole thing? I kind of took myself off of them because of that."

Clint's missing something, here. "Because of our date?"

"Yeah." James is looking at him with only one eye now; the other's squinted shut like he's trying to hide but not really. The fact that Clint knows he's just staring back up at him in confusion isn't helping him out any, either.

Hang on.

"Wait. You mean, like... you went off of them. Because of-"

James is nodding, probably just to get him to shut up, and it has the advantage of letting him duck his head. But his arms close in a bit more around him. "More like, in case."

"Oh."

Oh.

Holy shit.

"Well, ah. I'm kind of gut-shot, here-" he can tell even before it's out that it's the wrong thing to lead with, so he rushes through. "So it's gonna be a rain-check situation in any case, but fuck. Thank you? I think?"

James' laugh is quiet, but it's real, and he hasn't moved back so far that Clint has to stretch much to kiss him again.

"Seriously, though," he says, when they break off the kiss, wondering absently if he could manage to reach the call button without James noticing. "New ground rule. I love you, but fucking with your mental well-being on account of me is not allowed."

"I promise," James presses his forehead against his. "Love you too, by the way."

Chapter End Notes

The end! Except for the undoubtedly insanely long epilogue, which will be coming
next week. Thanks for reading!
Two Hours later...

He blinks back to reality at the sight of Steve's knuckles rapping on the table next to the cup of coffee that'd gone cold an hour ago. He's smiling, but he looks tired, worn down.

"You ready to get out of here?"

_Out of here_ means clean clothes. A shower. He's got no illusions that he's going to wind up anywhere other than on the couch down in Clint's apartment with Lucky, but he's looking forward to it.

"Totally and completely," James says, standing up to follow him and dumping his coffee down the sink drain on their way out. They're parked down in the garage- thankfully, the presence of Steve takes care of the entire getting-into-a-vehicle-with-strangers issue he hadn't even thought to worry about until he'd seen the rows full of trucks. He waits until they're heading up and onto the street before asking, "how's it all going?"

"The investigation? It's... going. I think we actually got everyone fairly early on. Everything else is just wrapping up loose ends. Sam's heading to DC for the weekend, Natasha and I are gonna finish up tomorrow, hopefully. How about you? Sorry I haven't been around much all day."

"The sooner that's all tied up, the better," he replies, shifting with the car as they pull into the crawl of rush hour traffic. "And, ah. It's cool. I don't know if you really missed much of anything."

"How's Clint?"

"He's okay." It's the first time he's said it and believed it. "Still hurting, I think. He had to call in for painkillers a few hours ago, then he passed out."

Right before that had happened, though? That thing that's had him turned into some sort of zombie for the last few hours? Yeah. Clint had told him he'd loved him, and he'd replied with the same. It had felt like a reflex, almost. As easy as a counterattack

He thinks that maybe it's just that he hadn't needed to _think_ about it first.

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Three Hours Later...

It's dark outside when Clint half-wakes up from his painkiller-induced coma to find Natasha frowning at her phone in irritation.

"Who's the target?"

Sitting up in her chair, she reaches towards him, picking up his hearing aids from where they've fallen on the pillow and handing them over.

[How're you feeling?]
He rocks his hand back and forth as he shrugs. "Dosed. Did I miss anything good?"

"Nothing but an entire buildings' worth of agents being put through the wringer."

"How literal are we talking, here?"

She shakes her head. "Sam and I asked the questions, Bruce has been correlating their responses with their biometric readouts. No major surprises. We're letting the six who we've identified as being involved some time to cool off before blacklisting them and turning them over to the DHS."

He nods. "Hoping to turn one of them?"

"We don't entirely know how large a network Winslow was working with. I doubt they'll be of much use, to be honest, but you never know."

For a moment, he's perfectly comfortable. Then he realizes he's just falling asleep again, and snaps his eyes open. "You see James at all?"

Her eyebrows twitch in surprise; whether it's the question or the lack of segue, or just the expression on his face that startles her, he doesn't know. Her headshake could either mean that she hasn't seen him, or that she doesn't understand what he's asking.

"I mean, is he- did he get home okay?"

"Yes." But her eyes are narrowed, now. Calculating, if only for a second.

It's a tactic, and it works.

"What?"

The shake of her head is deliberate and noncommittal. "Nothing, everything's fine. Steve drove him home a while ago. We've got people watching the block."

"Okay. Good." She's still looking at him, so he sits up to get on an even level. "What?"

"He's fine, Clint. And we got the asshole turncoats."

"I know. Just." He's tired enough that explanations aren't as easily found as he'd like them to be, and for a minute, he just blinks back at her.

"You do worry about him an awful lot."

"No." The room's starting to sway a little bit, so he lies down again. "I mean, yes, I do, but it's not like that." Though to be honest, it's not like he doesn't have just cause. He's got a hole in his gut-invisible and healed now, but it's there. He's got a crystal clear recollection of the look on James' face when Winslow'd been looming over him with a gun in his hand. And that one's not going anywhere.

But honestly, he's exhausted, and it's late enough that Lucky probably really needs to be walked sometime soon.

"What's it like, then?"

"Like we're dating," he mutters, finally letting himself lie back down. "But also like he's supposed to make sure Lucky gets out before anything bad happens to the carpet."
She snorts. "Sure took you two long enough."

Turning his head on the pillow, he musters up an eyeroll.

"Shut up," he yawns. "You had no idea."

"Of course I did."

"Sure. It's why you waited until I was half-asleep and stoned out of my mind before fishing for confirmation." Now that he's stretched out again, his eyes really don't want to stay open. "I'm onto you, Romanov. And I totally know about you and Steve. For a secret agent, you're pretty bad at your job."

Grinning, she eases back in her chair, almost out of sight. "I admit nothing," she says. "Shut up and get some sleep."

Joke's on her, though. He's already halfway there.

---

**One Day Later...**

*Clint's been released. We're ten minutes out.*

If he'd been sleeping, he would've missed the text alert, but as it is, James finds it harder than expected to extricate himself from Lucky and get up. He manages to get himself back upstairs and showered in record time, so it at least looks like he hadn't spent the night on Clint's couch, staring at the ceiling.

Not that it really matters. Lucky'd been so worried last night that James would've felt like the scum of the earth for leaving him there. As it is, there's a newly clawed tear in the arm of the couch, hidden behind one of the pillows. And in the end, even his own efforts to look vaguely presentable are pretty much all for nothing. Clint's eyes are barely open when Steve, Natasha and Sam wrangle him through the door. He shakes them off in favor of greeting Lucky, though they both watch him like he's worried he's going to collapse right there on top of the dog as he stands to drag himself-under his own steam, and it looks like he's making a point about it- to the couch.

"Hey James," Steve says, bumping shoulders with him. "How's it going? You all right?"

"Tired. Lucky was up worrying all night."

Yeah. That's it. Blame the dog. But now that everyone's here, he's kind of wishing they weren't. It's stupid, and he knows it.

From here, all he can really see is Lucky's tail thumping against the floor on the other side of the couch.

"He's probably going to be out of it for a few more hours, maybe the rest of the day," Natasha tells him. "The sedatives are going to take a while to wear off."

"Got some painkillers, though, for afterwards." Sam hands him a small plastic bottle. "Just make sure he eats something first- and you might want to keep it simple on that front for the next few days. And he should get plenty of rest."

It's probably too late for it to occur to him that he's got no idea what kind of shape Clint's actually in. The machine had put Clint back together, but it could be like he'd said- the injuries are gone, but
his body might not know it yet.

"We have to head back pretty soon," Natasha says from the fridge, apparently unimpressed with the contents as she lets the door swing shut, though at least the cabinets seem to pass muster. "I'll stop by with groceries tomorrow. You guys need anything in the meantime?"

Just like that, he's deciding that maybe he wouldn't be the worst thing if someone was to stick around a while longer. At least until Clint's a little more settled in, because James has no idea what he's supposed to do, here.

He catches himself glancing again at the back of the couch as if he honestly expected Clint to tracking any of this at all. "A solid week with no attempted kidnappings or other disasters would be nice."

"We'll see what we can do," Steve says, clapping him on his shoulder. "We'll get out of your hair, but I'll call or text later to check in. You guys get some rest in the meantime."

"Aye aye, Captain," comes Clint's reply; he's holding a thumbs-up over the back of the couch, but obviously isn't too hell bent on getting up to see anyone out.

By the time they're all gone and James actually gets a chance to go over and say hello, Clint's fast asleep.

---

When Clint wakes up—really wakes up—there's a pleasant breeze coming through the open window and the sun is shining.

It's irritating.

The thing about being locked away in the infirmary is that you have all this time to plan out all the chores you'd ordinarily be dreading—washing the windows, sorting out the bookcase, quietly going through the household armory and dismantling all of the explosives—just because you're that bored. The thing about actually getting home, though, is that you don't actually have the energy to deal with any of them.

Fucking sedatives.

James is reading sprawled in the armchair, which seems too far away, not that Lucky seems all that intent on making any room on the couch.

"Hey."

With as fast as James' head snaps up, Clint wonders if reading had been an overstatement. He's not sure if the book's hit the floor by the time James is kneeling next to the couch, looking worried.

"How're you feeling?"

"Meh."

Alarmed, James reaches out and feels his forehead.

"I don't have a fever, dude." He shifts, getting his elbows underneath him. James helps him sit up, which he doesn't really need, but doesn't mind, either.

"There's painkillers on the counter if you need 'em."
"I'm good. Thirsty, though."

Apparently that's all James needed; he brightens considerably. "I'm on it."

---

Once he'd managed to spend ten minutes coming up with a viable excuse for missing work, he'd called the shop and left a vague-but-hopefully-plausible message for Candice. He'd glanced out the window every fifteen minutes to check the cars parked on the street.

He'd spent three hours flipping through the only cookbook on the shelf- it had never been used, he'd cracked the spine- trying to figure out what to make for dinner that wouldn't be too much for Clint's system to handle. Every time he'd looked back at the page, he'd been seeing it for the first time.

Honestly, he'd mostly been staring at Clint, willing him to wake up and be better, already.

Now that Clint's awake, James has no idea what to do with himself. Clint's okay. He's healing and he probably doesn't need him wringing his hands over him. He does make room on the couch, though, so they can gripe at the idiots on the reality shows for a few hours. And he does manage a slice of toast and half a cup of soup before deciding that he's not hungry.

He's doing all right.

James spends ten minutes in the bathroom composing and deleting texts to Sam.

*Clint's not eating* will just make everyone worry.

*I don't know what to say to him or what I'm supposed to be doing here* is too fucking honest, and it makes it sound like he's worried about the wrong thing. He's just not sure what the right thing is and honestly, he's not sure he's up for trying to figure it out right now.

*Clint isn't eating much is that normal?* is better. It gets to the point, it requests a specific piece of information. From there, he tells himself, he'll know what to do.

---

When Lucky gets over his need to be no more than two feet away from Clint at all times, it's nearly seven.

"I'm gonna take Lucky out," he says, getting up and checking to make sure that Clint's phone is close to hand, but not wanting to mention it. He doesn't want to worry him. "Back in a few."

Clint nods, then swivels his eyes up at him intently. "You got your phone?"

---

Okay, this sucks.

He's feeling okay, under the circumstances, but James has been, well, not miserable, but brittle, maybe. All day, alternating between hovering over him like he's five years old, trying *not* to hover over him, or trying to stay awake while pretending he's not bored to tears.

So they've both been sitting here staring at the television all day long, ignoring the elephant in the room, and Clint's honestly relieved when James takes Lucky out for a walk, because maybe the both of them need some space.
Just not, apparently, enough for Clint to actually tell him that he doesn't have to stick around if he doesn't want to. He's awake but he's bone-tired, he's healed up but he's sore; he knows he's shitty company right now, but that doesn't mean he doesn't want it.

And he definitely doesn't like where his brain goes the moment James and Lucky head out into the hall. He knows there are agents watching the building. He knows that there are a lot of people working on making sure that none of Winslow's people can get to them ever again. He knows that James can handle himself in a fight. He knows there's no reason to worry.

As if that's ever stopped him. And it's been ten minutes.

He has to brace himself on the arm of the couch just to get up. The material feels rough against his thumb, and when he glances down at it there's stuffing coming out of a hole in the upholstery. And apparently his brain can only process one thing at a time, because he stands too quickly- his abdomen's not ready to twist that fast, apparently, and the pain shooting up his side is the first clear sensation he's felt all day. Trying to straighten up just makes it worse.

The kitchen is where he needs to go. Pills. Water. Something to lean against. He's only three hunched steps towards it when the door opens. Lucky's off his leash and bounding towards him; James following only slightly behind.

"What's wrong?" His hands are bracketing his arms, like he's afraid he's going to fall over, but Clint's been selfish all day, and leans into him.

"Got up too fast, pulled something."

"You should be sitting down." He snorts, his mouth tightening as he shakes his head, sliding an arm around his uninjured side. "Or. Probably more like lying down."

"Yeah, well." Now that the surprise of the pain's worn off- not the pain itself, because it's the worst it's been since getting shot- he's getting tired again. "Guess this is what the painkillers are for, huh?"

"Yeah," James steps back, just enough to steer him towards the kitchen, where he runs him a glass of water, and even wrestles the childproof cap open, which is an admittedly nice touch. But before handing them over, he's reaching into the pantry for the bread."

"Not supposed to take 'em on an empty stomach."

Eating is the last thing he feels like doing, but James seems set on it, throwing a slice into the toaster. While they wait, though, he edges back into Clint's space; it's easier to lean against him then to keep himself entirely upright, even if it is a little embarrassing. The warmth on his side feels just good enough to notice it when he moves again at the sound of the toast coming up.

There's no point putting anything on it. He's got water to rinse it down, and then two of the pills, afterwards.

"You should probably head to bed."

"I've been asleep all day."

"Well, one, you're wrong, and two, even if you weren't, the couch doesn't count." He smirks at him, then glances up the stairs. "Come on. Up to bed with you, before those kick in."

He grunts a token argument, but starts off towards the stairs. It's actually easier to make it once he's
got the railing to hold onto, but James is there to spot him- and keep Lucky out from under foot- all the same.

James has been up here before. But this is the first time they've been here, and it's slightly impossible not to be aware of it. Thankfully, sitting down without twisting his torso at all takes up most of his attention. Lying down will be better, but he's had enough of looking up at people from a pillow to last him another year or so.

"You want an ice pack or something?"

It'll just wake him up in three hours when it starts leaking, so he shakes his head. "Um. Would you mind grabbing my phone, though?"

"Sure thing."

James heads back down the stairs, and Clint moves to take out his hearing aids before it occurs to him that it might come across as rude, so he waits. Lucky's confused, though, circling in his dog bed but not sitting down. Maybe because the sun's barely setting; they hadn't even needed to turn the light on, up here. Maybe he's just not used to other people coming up here.

"All right, well. I'll let you get some sleep," James hands him his phone. "But, ah. Call me if you need anything, all right? I'm heading to bed, but I'm right upstairs."

"Sure thing." The screen flashes bright when he plugs in the charger. It's only eight nineteen. James is probably going to be up for hours, getting around to doing whatever it is he could've been doing instead of babysitting him. He grins; it feels only a little deliberate. "I'll try not to wake you up, though. You look beat."

"Don't worry about it."

James leans down over him, and yeah, Clint probably should've brushed his teeth first, but James tastes like the beer Clint hadn't been able to have with dinner, and it's kind of weird that this is the first time they've kissed today. It might've made things a little better. Still could, now that he thinks of it.

"Know it's early and all, but... you wanna just stay here?"

James hesitates, but he doesn't say no.

"Just to sleep. It'll be easier."

Easier if he actually does wind up needing help. Easier than thinking about all the shit that's liable to take over his brain the moment the sun actually goes down. And he thinks he might even be willing to admit it, if James asks. But he just shrugs. "Okay."

But it's not actually easier, Clint realizes. Scooting over to make room takes more effort than he'd honestly like James to see. And once it's done, and he's lying on his back, bringing up the whole clothes thing becomes weird because they're not there, yet.

But James is sitting on the edge of his bed, stripping out of his cardigan and leaning over to take off his boots. There's a thin swath of skin between the hem of his shirt and the waistband of his jeans, and there are circumstances where that would be sending Clint's brain in all sorts of directions, but for now he's just waiting awkwardly for whatever comes next.
It's been a long time since he's felt the mattress dip next to him because someone other than Lucky's lying down. And even though he's expecting it, he's unprepared to turn his head on the pillow to see James looking at him from less than two feet away.

After a moment, James smirks from what must be the very edge of the bed. "Is this weird?"

There are too many bad responses to that question; he actually has to give it some thought. "No weirder than the rest of the day."

"Yeah. Sorry about that."

"For what?" He blinks. "I mean, I was half comatose all day. Figured you were bored out of your mind. That couldn't have been fun."

"It's not that." He can feel it through the mattress when James shrugs. "Just. Being dropped right back here after everything, almost like it never happened, only not. It's weird, you know?"

"Yeah." He thinks he gets it. And he thinks- for the first time all day- that he might actually be able to help. "C'mere."

He reaches out his arm, and James edges just close enough that Clint can wrap his arm around his shoulder and tug him closer. James lets him, but he's tense, holding himself stiff, his metal arm wedged between the two of them.

Thank God Clint hadn't said anything about the clothes.

Gradually, though, after several minutes or maybe hours, and just when Clint thinks James is going to pull away, he starts easing into it. Shifts so that Clint's arm can fit better under his neck. Rests his fist on Clint's chest, albeit carefully. Lets him drag his fingers through his tangled hair.

And slowly, eventually, finally, he relaxes.

Clint hasn't been able to do shit all day long, but he's actually pulling this off, and he even manages to lean over- not so much that his side hates him for it- to kiss his forehead.

Slowly, James' fist uncurls, his fingers splaying out over his collar, just as Clint starts drifting off.

---

He'd fallen asleep for a while, there, but not, he thinks, so much that he didn't know where he was. Who he was with. What he was doing.

Which is good, and maybe not so good. Because he'd drifted just enough that the line between thinking and dreaming had started to blur, there, for a minute.

He knows it's late, and that outside there are people in cars keeping an eye on the place. It's weird to think of them out there, when he's in here, curled up around Clint, who's deeply asleep enough that he'd barely shifted when James had snapped back to full wakefulness.

And he knows that the agents keeping watch outside are doing so only because on some level, they- or, really, Hill and Steve- are still worried.

Winslow's gone, but he'd had plans. And it's just occurring to him now that he doesn't really know what they'd been. He'd never known their extent, and he doesn't know if they'd died with him.

But Clint's arm is warm along his back. And he can feel the rise and fall of his chest as he breathes.
No machines, no mask, just in and out, nice and even.

He's sleeping, and he survived, and they're safe.

He closes his eyes. Doesn't go back to sleep for a long while, but it doesn't bother him a bit.

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One Month Later...

"This might be the last one of the year, if the weather keeps going like this," Simone tells him, rubbing her hands together. Her kids are already bundled up as if they're planning on summiting Everest today, and not just drawing pictures in the snow that's barely covering the roof.

Deke and James are manning the steaks, though James seems to be eyeing Aimee's portobello's suspiciously. Mostly, Clint thinks, to mess with Kate. He's probably got her convinced that they hadn't been invented yet, back in the 30's, like he'd done with electric guitars and disposable razors. And he's probably doing it because up here, with everyone huddled around the grills to stay warm, he knows she can't say anything.

And it seems to be working; Kate's wavering from disbelief because she's falling for it, to fury because she knows it.

Even without looking, he can tell when Steve and Natasha have arrived, because Simone's kids absolutely Lose. Their. Minds. They take off so quickly and so suddenly that Simone's head whips around as she gears up to shout at them for running on the roof. They don't make it that far, though. Steve's smart, he's leading them closer to their mom already. Clint's not sure they've given him the chance to speak yet. As good as his hearing aids are, those two tend to become kind of a blur when they're excited.

"Hey Clint!" Natasha calls out, waving at him from the doorway, but then the movement changes. [Need to tell you something downstairs].

"Be right back."

James nods, saluting Natasha with the tongs. "Grab the garlic salt, would ya?"

Heading downstairs, he lets them into James' apartment and heads for the spice rack. "What's up?"

"Thought you might want to know how things are moving on the Winslow cleanup. The intel we got off of Varner finally panned out; between that and everything Coulson's team's managed to get out of the henchmen captured at the docks, we've been able to track back to Winslow's home base."

"Awesome." It takes him a minute, but he finds the garlic salt on the edge of the middle overstuffed shelf. "What's next?"

"We're handing it off to Coulson's team. They're closer. But May and Daisy are keeping Hill apprised." She shakes her head at the garlic salt and reaches past him to grab the pepper as well. "They should be moving on it in the next few days."

"Cool." He digs his phone out of his pocket and, after a moment's hesitation, brings up Coulson's number.

*Heard about the trip you and May are taking. Good luck, Godsspeed. And thanks. Let me know how it goes.*
Three days later, there are two messages waiting for him on his phone when he wakes up. It's a picture of a chair, in a windowless room where the white of the paint's started to yellow. It's the kind of chair that he's only ever seen in files he mostly wishes he hadn't read, and it's marked before.

After is pretty much just a dirty pile of debris. Beyond the thick black charring blasted across the paint, there's no making any sense of it at all.

He's about to forward it to James when his brain kicks in, and he decides to go upstairs to show him in person. James’ hair is tied back and his entire apartment smells like cleaning products and clean laundry, which isn't a surprise for a Saturday morning. The way he folds in on himself, hunched over Clint's phone staring at it with tears running down his face, though? That is.

Clint wraps his arms around him and holds on, even when James starts laughing- at himself, at the huge crashing surge of relief that's blindsided him- to the point of hiccups.

---

Two Months Later...

Clint hasn't been cleared to return to duty yet, but he's got gym and range access, and nobody thinks twice when James joins him down there. They've been sparring about once a week, now that Clint's healed up enough for more strenuous activity. The range, though, is where James tends to sit back and watch instead.

He knows how to use a gun, better than most. And even though Sam and Hill and Clint've all said so, he's not wild about sharing a range with people who don't know him.

With regards to the agents who might not know how clumsy Clint can get with his coffee when he's distracted, or for whom the novelty of archery has yet to wear off, it's amusing to watch them completely overlook how freaking deadly he can be with a bow in his hand. Clint can bank a tiny, weightless bottlecap off of four surfaces before landing it in the trash. Hitting a target at thirty or sixty or a hundred yards is nothing.

Only it's not, not at all. Because after about a week of him tailing Clint down to the archery range just to watch, Clint talks him into actually trying it.

It doesn't work, not even remotely. The joints of his fingers catch the string when he tries to release it, and when he switches to draw with his right instead, his left still lacks enough texture to grip the bow well once there's much tension on it. He can't get enough friction.

"Think I'm gonna have to leave the whole 'robbing rich people in the forest' department up to you," he decides, after an hour of no luck whatsoever.

"We're already in the tower of the richest person you or I even know," Clint points out. "And I don't think I could even lure him out to the woods in the first place. Besides. He's one of the good guys."

---

He'd been checking in with Dr. Gupta over email, mostly, and on the phone once or twice, and he knows what to expect. But the day of his first regularly scheduled appointment in a month finally arrives, and he's not ready for it.
"It's just that. Things are pretty good," he says, drumming his fingers on the side of his coffee cup; admitting it feels like tempting fate.

Over the course of the next hour, they talk about his job (it's good, he likes the problem solving aspects of it, but it's repetitive and none of it actually means anything to him).

He talks about Winslow (he's glad he's dead, he's not sure the part of him that wishes he'd been the one to do it is entirely healthy, but it's the collateral damage that's started bothering him).

"They were following orders, you know? And Winslow was crazy, sure, but. Could've just been a bunch of guys trying to pay the rent."

"If you'd known the tranquilizer bullets were poison to them, would you have shot them?"

"Nah," he says, sipping his coffee. "I would've just knocked them out.

He talks about Clint (they're sleeping over at each other's place every few nights, though he's yet to actually sleep more than a few hours at a time, and sometimes Clint wakes up at three in the morning too).

"What do you do when that happens?"

He shrugs, because he doesn't think his answer's going to be particularly telling, though he leaves out the time they woke up to the sound of Lucky vomiting on the floor. "Just lie there an try to go back to sleep, mostly. There was one night, where Clint started pacing around the apartment so I got up too. Had a few drinks, watched some shitty movie on TV while he tuned up his bow."

"Have you been having any nightmares?"

"No bad ones." He has to give it some thought. "Only two that I know of." The second time, Clint had just rolled over, not even fully awake, and sprawled all over him in something that had probably been meant to be comfort, though it had felt more like a really ineffective smothering. Which isn't to say that it hadn't helped anyway.

"And do you feel like you've been getting enough rest?"

"I sleep a little better in my own bed," he admits. "But if I'm lyin' there awake in the middle of the night, I kind of like it when he's there."

They talk about his medication, after she takes a break to run down and pick up his bloodwork (he's back to baseline, he answers a few dozen questions in lieu of a a physical, and in two weeks, she'll stop by with his new prescription).

---

Thanks to the blizzard, Clint's an hour late to report in for his first day back on official duty.

"Nice of you to stop by," Hill smiles at him when he finally makes it in to her office. "I hope you enjoyed your vacation."

"Yeah, well. It can't all be surfing, sunburn and sangrias."

"I hear that," she says, waving him into the seat in front of her desk. "Okay, well. First thing's first, I'm assuming you already know that Steve and Natasha are back up on primary assignment at the Academy for the next six months?"
He nods. He, James and Sam had helped them clean out their respective fridges, and had hauled a fair amount of furniture to Goodwill over the past two weeks. What they weren't taking with them had needed to be moved to Natasha's house- now their house- upstate.

"All right. So. Sam's covering DC. Locally there's you, and Stark, obviously. But we've got Kate's team on speed dial."

"Is Bruce still in China?"

"He'll be back next Tuesday for about a week, but yes. He's working on a water treatment plan. Checking in daily, though, and we've got a remote base with a quinjet parked should anything arise. And here's something you probably don't already know. Dr. Selvig thinks he's found a stable way to open up communications to Asgard."

He blinks, because it's not Thor he thinks of first.

The room's not actually getting colder; it's all in his head. "Oh."

"He's as aware of the risks as you are," she points out. "Probably even more so. Every precaution is being taken. But the fact of the matter is, there are more allies there than there are enemies."

He nods, but how they can know that for sure is beyond him. It's been months since anyone's heard from Thor.

"So what're the priorities right now?"

"Right now? Nothing local. There are a few situations that Coulson's working on- mostly due to his team's ongoing work with the, ah, inhuman community."

"Inhumans?"

"I'm not wild about the term, it seems... disrespectful. But essentially, we're talking about people like whatshisname, with the augmented hearing, down in the subway line. Or like Bruce, in that they've got capabilities that exceed those of ordinary humans. Some of them are allies, some of them aren't, most of them are just living their lives. I'm sure that'll come into play soon enough. If I'm being candid, we're actually overdue."

"As long as there aren't alien armadas pouring out of the sky, I'm good."

"All right, then. Well, either way, we're going to ease you back into it. We just got the newest batch from the Academy, and until you reach your three month mark, I'm going to need you working with Carter on structuring their teams. Though, bright side, you're cleared for your flight test, so you'll be up on the roster again as soon as you take care of it."

It's been well over a year since he's flown anything. He's going to have to brush up on the systems, first. It's going to take a while.

Weirdly enough, though, he can't wait to get started.

---

Four Months Later...

Everything's been going fine.

He'd finally gotten over his mild case of being gut shot, and has been off restricted duty for a few
weeks, now. In between missions, he's been helping Hill sort out team rosters, studying up for his flight test. Training and sparring and reviewing mission reports and everything's more normal- more level- than it's ever been.

And since the night James stayed over and woke up- well, maybe a little shy and awkward, but happy- they've been settling into a pattern of crashing out together every two nights. Sometimes in his bed, sometimes in James'. And for the most part it's just sleep. And just enough making out like high schoolers that he's been spending a lot more time in the shower than usual, on their off nights.

Most nights- and partially because Clint's been lazy about dealing with the drafty window casing in his room- he winds up with James' hair in his mouth and no feeling at all in his arm. Clint gets insomnia once a week or so, and James rarely sleeps more than a few hours at a time, but it doesn't appear to be anything new, and he doesn't seem to mind just lying there all night. Sometimes there are nightmares; they've even synced up, once, which would've been funny if they hadn't spent the rest of the night with their backs pressed together, eyes on the exits.

But for the most part, they're figuring it out.

So he doesn't know what's wrong with him, this last week, but he's tired all the time. Which at least explains how irritable and distracted he's been. James keeps giving him these looks, and asked, twice now, if everything's all right with this wary concern that Clint doesn't know what to do with, and at some point soon it's going to all come to a head.

What's really fucked about it, though, is that takes three days for him to even suss out the cause. Barney will have been dead for one year this Tuesday.

It's a hell of an anniversary. It's not something he wants to think about; he just wants it to be over. Which means he's being an asshole, here, because it's his brother, and he deserves more than that. Besides. What good does telling anyone he's dead and it sucks really do, besides making someone else feel awkward? He doesn't want pity. Doesn't want the guilt that comes with it.

At least he knows what's going on. It's not unfamiliar, either. The first few years after his parents died he'd been a total head case, but it had gotten easier. And it's not like he hasn't lost other friends- actual good people since then.

It'll suck, but he'll get through it. And now that he's identified where his head's at, at least he can work around it.

And he does. Right up until he blows it completely.

---

He's told himself that Clint'll tell him if something was bothering him. For three, four days now, and it's not getting them anywhere. James still has no idea what's going on.

Clint had been awake more than asleep last night, same as two nights before when they'd crashed out down in Clint's apartment, and looking at him now, it's doubtful he'd gotten any real shuteye in between.

He's just gone kind of quiet, is all. And he's not as good as hiding his exhaustion as he thinks he is. As soon as his injuries had healed, he'd gotten back to his old self. As soon as he'd finished his physical therapy, he'd installed a new walk-in tub in Mrs. Aslanova's apartment. They'd started going out on actual dates- to the movies, to the museum, out to dinner twice- and last week, he'd decided that below-freezing temperatures be damned, the two of them were going out for ice
Maybe this is—maybe all of it's been—just the actual comedown. A delayed reaction to being shot and nearly dying. Maybe James is reading into it too much. Maybe he's been putting too much stock into Dr. Gupta's whole *talking it out* thing.

It's clear that Clint doesn't want to talk about it. He doesn't really seem to want to talk about anything, the last few days. And it's not like James hasn't already tried asking him two or three times, now, to the point where Clint's probably dreading the question as much as James is.

And what's he going to do if Clint tells him, and he can't help anyway?

And what if Clint tells him that James is the problem, here?

He should call Sam. But he's due to talk to Sam tomorrow anyway, so he'll wait. At least he won't be going behind Clint's back on this. But Sam's first question, when and if James brings it up, will be to ask what's going on with him. And that's just the thing. James has no idea at all.

So they're sitting at his kitchen table—Clint's barely touched his eggs and toast, but he's gone through half a pot of coffee already—and James has been staring resolutely at the spice rack on the wall, as if he'd find some sort of answer there, between the coriander and the paprika.

No answers, there, and not really any courage, but fuck it, it's not like this is actually the most terrifying thing either of them have ever dealt with, and irritation's as good a motivator as anything.

"Clint. Is everything all right with you?"

"Huh?" Clint looks up from the sporting goods catalog—James never sent in for it, he has no idea why they keep showing up in the mail—and blinks. He's playing dumb already.

"You're not sleeping or eating." He looks pointedly down at the eggs on Clint's plate, because glaring at him won't get them anywhere.

"Dunno." Clint shrugs, as if he'd actually tried thinking about it. "Might just be getting sick or something."

He nods, and the speed with which Clint looks back down at the tennis rackets is more telling than not. It's a dodge; James has tried enough of those to recognize it when he sees it.

"And you've been really quiet," he adds.

"I'm just tired, is all." The irritation in his voice is a warning that he doesn't bother ignoring. Neither is the way that he glances pointedly up at the clock on the wall. It's nearly seven thirty. Clint's going to have to leave soon anyway to catch his train.

"Maybe you should call in, then. Take the day. Go back to bed."

It's enough to get a response that doesn't feel fake. "Christ, James. I'm *fine*. Just give it a fucking *rest*, all right?"

As if on cue, though at least it prevents James from saying something biting in return, Clint's phone buzzes, and he thumbs open the screen. "Looks like my ride's up top in ten." He stands up and just freezes, for a moment. "Sorry, ah. I gotta go walk Lucky before I leave. I'll see you tonight." And with a quick apologetic frown, he takes his leave.
Or makes his escape.
Whatever.
---
The helicopter lift from the roof had cut forty five minutes off of his commute, but God, he really hopes there's something worth shooting, this op. The odds are looking good, though, if Hill's called Kate in to back him up. All he's been given so far are orders to suit up and gear up standard, no frills.
"What's with you this morning?" Kate asks, as they're rummaging through the armory and switching out her current array of arrows- she'd been going up against some weird space ship, last week- for more mundane points and taser arrows.
He's getting tired of people asking him that. Even though she's only the second.
But that's kind of becoming the thing. And anyway, James is easier to talk about than that whole other thing.
"I fucked up. With James this morning."
It's so stupid when he says it out loud, and he hopes that she's not going to ask, but she, unlike some people, knows when to let things lie.
"Yeah, that's a given," Kate smirks, adjusting her arm guard. "But he seems the forgiving type."
Okay. Cool. Not that he's going to admit that her confident optimism is actually bolstering at all, because that would make it weird. "Why do you say that?" She's come to visit a few times in the past few weeks, and she and James might not be friends yet of their own accord, but they're friendly. But he's curious as to where this insight of hers is coming from.
"He forgave himself, didn't he? Might not say it, but he doesn't wince when he talks about it anymore." She straightens up, beaming, and claps him on the arm. "If he can forgive that guy, he'll probably overlook all your multiple sad foibles."
"Thanks."
"Seriously, think about it. And once it's over and done with and funny, I want details."
---
Okay, this looks bad, but the negotiation is going as well as it could be, all things considered.
Hill's already talked the lunatic asshole on the roof of Wall Street Plaza to let the third grade class trip he'd taken hostage go. Carter and the three other agents are regrouping the terrified children, about to move them back inside the vestibule for the elevator and stairs entrance.
The wind hasn't changed any since he'd found his perch across Front Street. And even though he doesn't have the greatest shot- he could still do it, and only slightly traumatize the teacher sitting the Lunatic's still got on the other end of his gun barrel.
"Kate, I've got this, fall back out of sight for a minute."
Those kids don't need to see her weapons, any more than she needs to see them seeing use them.
Carter, doing her best to keep their attention on her and on the other teacher, turns the group around and starts moving them towards the door, the other agents close in behind them. Their orders are to get the children back down to their bus and stay with them. In this exact moment, he's the only cover Hill and the teacher have. As soon as he hears Salinas reporting that they've made the stairwell, Clint gets back on comms.

"Kate, they're clear."

She's on the other side of the vestibule, so he can't see her, but she reports back a moment later.

"In position. I have a clear shot, as long as he doesn't keep backing up."

"Hold for now." She's right, though. The conversation isn't progressing usefully; he's starting to back away from Hill, shouting louder. He's still got ten yards before he gets anywhere near the edge- and it's not as if he's going to be able to climb the fence and keep the gun on the hostage, but still. There's nobody covering that side of the building; it's the highest one for four blocks to the north.

They're going to lose their shots. Hill needs to reel him in closer, but she's not on comms. That and her gun on the ground had been the lunatic's first demands. And apparently, trading the kids for the teacher had been the extend of his bargaining.

"He's not going for the trade," she says, referring to Hill in return for the teacher.

"Has he noticed you yet?"

"If he has, he's not letting on." She's right. The lunatic keeps backing away from Hill, straight north across the building, not northeast or northwest. Worse, there's an air conditioning or electrical box up there. It's not large, but if he crouches behind it they've got no shot at all. "Think the helicopter's getting close."

Now that he listens, he thinks he can make it out, but it could just be the wind. In a few minutes, he'll be on board, sitting in the back, with two of Natasha's favorite hand to hand trainees hiding behind the crates Pepper had managed to scrounge up from the Federal Reserve. They'd been for file boxes, apparently, but there's no need mention it to the Lunatic.

Still, this would go a lot easier if it's Hill getting on the chopper instead of the teacher.

"Oh. Shit. Kate mutters. "Clint, I've got him. Check your ten o'clock."

It's a helicopter all right, but it's got POLICE painted on it in giant blue letters. Either they didn't hear Hill's request for a cleared airspace, or they just don't give a damn, and they're going to fuck this all up.

Clearly hearing the helicopter too, the lunatic swivels to search out the sound of the noise- Clint's lost his shot completely unless he goes through the teacher, and this, right here, is where it goes off the rails.

The lunatic swings the gun to point it at Hill as he drags the teacher back, shoving her down on the other side of the electrical box. Another second and he's crouched out of sight himself.

"Dammit!" He lowers his bow. "Katie, you got the shot?"

"Hang on," she says, and a moment later, he sees her break cover.
He slides his arrow back into the quiver and dials up the grappler that he tends to take with him on city ops. More of less for this exact reason. Aiming at the back of the vestibule, he shoots, jerking forward slightly with the tug of impact.

"Don't do anything stupid before I get there," he says, stepping closer to the edge, disconnecting the cable and attaching it to the railing he's been braced against for the past half hour. It's stable enough.

"Was kind of waiting for you to bring the stupid with you," she grumbles back, stepping slowly towards Hill.

There's just enough slack that he'll hit the roof before the vestibule, but not so much that he'll send himself slamming into the side of the building.

He clips onto the cable and double checks the lockstop.

He's got his bow over his shoulder and everything's secured.

Now all he has to do is jump off the edge of this very sturdy building.

---

James has been in a bad mood all day, but it's fine. He'll sort things out with Clint later. Right now he's got an Environmental Impact Statement that's about five thousand pages long to sort through. Page by page. For the next three hundred years or so.

Candice always has the radio on, so he doesn't pay it much mind. It's when she turns the television on in their empty waiting room, just on the other side of the counter, that he takes notice.

It's the news. He recognizes the Financial District, he thinks, though it's clearly being taken from up in the sky somewhere. A moment later the words Police Helicopter Footage appears on the closed captioning that the television's always got running.

There's a few people on the roof of Wall Street Plaza but they go off of frame as the helicopter turns, away, suddenly, rearing up.

There's a blur that looks like a human foot streaking across the screen, either very large, or very close.

He gets up and crosses over, standing next to Candice to watch more clearly. For a second there's just nothing but some buildings in the distance, but the camera turns again, and from this distance, James can make out the shape of an entire person.

It's Clint, falling down out of the sky towards the street, too fast for the camera to track him.

For a minute, it's just buildings and the street again, and he can't breathe; his stomach knots up so hard and so fast that he's almost nauseas.

Candice looks over at him and smiles confusedly, then glances back at the screen. She taps him on the arm and points.

... despite the line snapping, snagged by the helicopter's blades, the man was seen a moment later
pulling himself up the cable towards the roof of the Wall Street Plaza building. At this time it is not
known whether this was a thrill-seeker’s stunt gone wrong, or something else. We can tell you that
the police have not released any other footage at this time. We have not been able to make contact
with anyone at the Plaza for a closer view, but we will do our best to keep you informed as the
situation develops.

He needs to get over there. He needs to go down and do something.

He needs to make sure Clint's actually okay.

And then he needs to kick his ass.

---

"Well, as far as distractions go, that's not the worst I've ever seen," Katie says, falling into step
next to him as they leave the infirmary. He just wants go get changed, get his stupid report written,
and get lunch, already.

"You kidding me?" Waiting for the elevator, he holds up his hand, where he'd torn the webbing
between his index and thumb by stupidly trying to climb the cable barehanded, before he'd
remembered what the clip-in handles in his pockets were always there for. "Those police, they're a
menace."

"Yeah," Katie says, glancing past his shoulder as the elevator opens. "Though probably not the one
you need to be worried about right now."

James is striding towards him, looking far too much like the Winter Soldier for Clint's liking.

Kate, predictably, disappears into the elevator, stranding him there.

Traitor.

"Hey, James."

"Hey, Jackass."

Clint grimaces. "So..."

"Congratulations. You made the news."

Oh, hell. That must've been why Hill had all of the PR staff waiting for her when they got back.

"I'm guessing it's not the part where we saved, like, a whole classroom full of little kids."

James snorts. "More like the part where you were falling off a goddamned skyscraper."

"Hey, it was unplanned, but not entirely uncontrolled. It's not like I went splat or anything." Okay,
so. It's not like he's had a lot of time to plan out how he'd tell James about it. But shit, apparently
humor's really not the thing to lead with, here. Actually, here isn't the place to be having this
conversation anyway. There's suddenly a whole lot of agents loitering in the halls and not looking
at either of them.

"I need to get changed," he mutters. "Come shout at me down in the locker room or something."

He leaves James to seethe in the locker room, ducking around the corner to rinse off before
changing back, finally, into his civvies. And apparently that had been the right thing to do, because
when he comes back out again, James still has his arms crossed, leaning against the sink, but his rage has been downgraded to angry frustration.

And it's given Clint a few minutes to think, too.

"So. As you can see, I'm alive. And yeah. Today didn't go according to plan. The helicopter wasn't supposed to be there. Maria'd cleared the airspace because of a hostage situation; we had one of our own inbound from the west. Maybe the cops just got curious and then got spooked. I dunno."

James doesn't say anything, but he's not smiling yet either.

"What I do know, is that in order for the line on my grappling hooks to be light enough to make it two hundred yards, the cable's pretty thin. I've never had one snap on me before, but I was clipped in. I've got a lockstop on there that will stop me if I'm going too fast. Other than a little whiplash," he holds up his bandaged hand, which he shouldn't have gotten wet, "and this, I came out of it fine. Is that enough confirmation for now?"

James rolls his eyes, but at least he's smirking. "Hey, don't mind me. I was just sitting at work, minding my own business, and saw footage of you committing suicide by pavement."

"That's not-"

"I know." James sighs. "I knew you made it before I even got here. But shit, now that I think of it, let's be glad my brain wasn't working well enough to go there right off the bat."

"Sure," Clint shakes his head, confused. "Only I wasn't trying to kill myself, why would you-"

"Oh. Clint, you're a moron and an asshole."

"-because I've been a headcase all week."

This actually gets a laugh out of him. Good to know. "So you're admitting it now?"

Maybe it's the adrenaline, or something. Maybe it's just the fact that in light of everything, owning up to his own bullshit wasn't the worst possible outcome.

"Yeah. Well. I didn't really want to get into it."

James comes just short of rolling his eyes, but he's nodding. And he's waiting, and it's just going to get more awkward the longer Clint drags this crap out.

"Um. About a year ago... like a year ago this Tuesday? It's when Barney died."

James' expression goes slack so quickly that it's almost comical. "Fuck," he says, after a minute. I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's cool." Well, it's. It's whatever it is.

After a beat, James says. "You could've told me, you know. I mean. I get it."

"Yeah." Now that he has, he's mostly just feeling ridiculous over the whole thing. "Um. So yeah. Not sure how wild I am about talking about it right now. Or possibly ever. "But I didn't mean to be so weird about it. And, ah, I'm sorry about this morning."

"Me too." James shrugs. "Didn't mean to nag."
"So we're good?"

"We're good."

"In that case, you want to go get some lunch? I'm fucking starved."

---

Tuesday comes, and it's not as bad as he'd been dreading. Diving headfirst into the administrative paperwork that's been piling up helps.

James showing up after work with a bottle of whiskey, pizza from down the street, and a stack of Redbox DVD's helps more.

---

**Seven Months Later...**

He'd been expecting the third degree, going in there, ever since talking with Kate about it two weeks ago. He'd been planning his answers out for weeks- some of them for months.

He'd been ready to explain to them that yes, he'd needed some time off after being a mentally enslaved assassin, and that it had taken him a while to actually start wanting to step back into the ring. Because it wasn't about killing targets, just the opposite. It was having Steve's back, and it was making sure Clint didn't fall off any more goddamned buildings because he was too busy scanning bullshit meaningless paperwork.

He'd figured on having a better way of saying it when Hill and Stark were grilling him.

He'd talked to Dr. Gupta, and she'd volunteered to write him a letter of support to send along to Hill with a summary of his progress and a copy his current treatment plan. She'd also pulled together a lengthy explanation of his weird metabolism regarding SSRI's, because even after dialing them back again last month, bringing him down to half of what he'd been taking a year ago, on paper he was still taking well over the recommended allowance for field agents, and would be for at least the next six months.

Even so, he'd gone into Hill's office prepared to address any and all of it. Even the stuff that Clint, Sam and Steve had all insisted wouldn't be covered. How he'd frozen when Winslow'd shot Steve and Clint. His Hydra record.

He'd gone in there, expecting to have to justify his interest in joining the team to Tony Stark, whose parents he'd killed.

He hadn't been ready for the meeting to be over with inside of ten minutes.

A full minute of which had consisted of Hill crowing to Stark that he owed her a hundred bucks.

Go figure.

The only part that really sucks about it is that Clint's on day two of a three day mission on a submarine in the Atlantic somewhere, and there'll be no getting word to him about it until he gets topside on Saturday.

Lucky seems happy for him, though.

---
How’d the interview go? Also Hi, we're pulling into the harbor now. Gotta go debrief but I should be home by three.

Are you texting me from the submarine? I start training on Monday. Gonna finish up my two weeks- I gave notice at the shop- than will be in training full time for another month, then field clearance testing.

The next picture is of Clint, gray wool hat pulled down over his ears with three days' worth of stubble shadowing his chin, sticking his tongue out on the deck of a Severodvinsk-class submarine. That looks entirely too familiar.

Congratulations! I'm taking you out for dinner tonight where do you want to go

Hey so did you know I stole the designs for that submarine back in 1980?

Seeing as how me and Nat just stole the ACTUAL submarine I say we win.

Fair point.

I gotta go. Decide where you want to go for dinner tonight, I'm taking you out.

---

Clint doesn't know what starts it, not really. Maybe it's the bottle of wine they'd split with dinner. Maybe it's just the fact that for once, Saturday night rolls around and one or both of them aren't completely exhausted.

Maybe- and he's not going to ask, it's a half-drunken thought anyway- James is just itching at the margins of where he's been and what he's doing next. But he's been so happy, so startlingly unwound all night, that he's just going along with it as the night winds down.

And maybe Clint's just hearing things, as they follow Lucky up the stairs to his door.

"Come again?"

Leave it to Clint to ruin it. Because James hesitates.

"Said, if you wanted, we could go upstairs instead. Leave Lucky for a bit."

It's not a request he's made before. And shit, that would've been smooth, too, if Clint hadn't made him repeat it. He doesn't ruin it by saying anything at all, this time. He just opens the door, tosses the leash in after Lucky, and closes it again.

He manages to hold out until they're inside James' apartment, which at least gives him a few minutes to figure out something resembling a game plan.

Kissing him the moment the door's closed seems a good place to start. He's not sure which one of them start edging them towards the bedroom, but it's not like he hasn't staggered around blindly in the dark here a dozen times before.

Still, it's entirely new. James is kissing him like he's telling him something- still easy but he's staying close, and yeah. Message received.

They've already talked about it, but that had been months ago. And it's not like it hasn't come up- he knows James has been dialing back the meds. He's known that yes, at some point, they'd get there.
They've never stumbled into bed together before, because that's never really what it had been about. But this is different. Even if it is awkward, trying not to fall over in the process of actually making it onto the bed with nothing but the street lights coming in through half-opened shades.

But there's only so far this can go before the elephant in the room starts stampeding. At least James is expecting it, smiling at him the moment he pulls back just enough to ask if he's sure.

"Yeah." James sighs, smiling. God, he's beautiful. "But you only get to ask me that once, okay?"

"All right." He runs his hand up James' side. It's not the first time, just the first time that he's let himself put any intent into it. And the first time he's done so with James practically straddling his lap while wondering just how strong this thread they're hanging on is. "Just. Same game rules still apply?"

---

He'd known Clint would be asking. It would be weirder if he didn't, especially since it's not like he's sat him down and had the whole it's not as bad as it was, but there's still an exceedingly good chance that I won't be able to get off, but I want to try anyway conversation. Recently.

"This would be weird if it wasn't horribly awkward, right?" Might as well, what's the term, lampshade it.

"I'm great at awkward," Clint smiles, hands on his lower back, dragging him forward.

Which makes absolutely one of them. Because sure, he'd come in here with all of these great ideas, thinking yeah, okay, tonight, but now Clint's kissing him and he's actually close enough to feel him starting to get hard, and he's got no idea what to do next.

Clint's leaning back, pulling him down with him, but, in the process, leaving his neck open, and he groans when James accidentally drags his teeth against it, so he does it again, before getting distracted by the hand that's trailing along his waistband, fingers brushing his bare spine. The tug on the hem of his shirt feels experimental and Clint's chin rasps his cheek when he says, "shirts off?"

"Yeah." He pushes himself up, and reaches down to grab at Clint's once he's up off the bed enough for it to do any good, and Clint lets him pull it up over his head before tossing it onto the floor himself. He's hair's sticking up everywhere, and his skin's hot under his fingers. Before James can do much exploring, though, Clint's running his hands up along his sides, rucking his shirt up as he goes, and in the brief moment where he's blinded by fabric, it hits him.

Clint's going to see. And it's gonna be different this time. God, at least his shirt hasn't chosen tonight to get stuck between the plates. Though at least it might've provided a little cover. A little distraction.

The scarring's worst right along the edges of the metal, so white and shiny in places that they look like they're gnarled and infected. They're not, they haven't been for years and he knows it. Just like he knows that Clint's seen them before. Just not when he's supposed to be at all turned on.

"Hey," Clint mutters, tugging him down again, and James is eager enough to distract him that he moves too fast, bites a divot into Clint's lip that he can feel when it drags back across his own. He's got both hands braced on Clint's bare chest, though his right's the only one that can fully appreciate it.

Clint's hands are sliding along his back. Whether they're running along the ridge of scar at his
shoulder out of curiosity or what, he doesn't know. By the second pass, he doesn't much care, either. And when Clint's fingernail scratches along his hip, he twitches so hard that the thought falls right out of his head completely.

---

God, James is-

Clint needs to shift, soon, or this is gonna be over with before it even gets interesting. So he rolls them over to the side. Their legs are still tangled up, but at least the friction's letting up enough that he's not going to embarrass himself.

He'd really like to take his jeans off, but maybe that's half the fun of it. Instead, he slides his knee up between James', because turnaround is fair play and lying here like this, he can just barely see it register in his eyes.

His entire chest is nothing but muscle, but his stomach twitches when he rests his hand below his navel while leaning over to press a kiss into his side.

His leg's got more room, slightly, and he closes the gap.

---

Thank God. So far, everything's actually working out, but it's not like he doesn't know exactly how small a window he's got, here.

And sue him. Maybe he's got something to prove.

He crushes into Clint's mouth, canting his hips up close as he can, and manages to shift his shoulder so that he can move his left hand just enough on the mattress to hook the thumb into Clint's waistband.

"These," he knows he's panting, but so too is Clint, "off." And then Clint just makes this sound at the back of his throat, and he wants to hear more of it, so he threads his right hand down between them, palm out.

"Fuck," Clint sighs, bumping him in the nose when he tries kissing him again and grinding against his fingers. "Yeah. Okay. You too, though" Somehow, he's already got his fingers looped over the fly of his jeans, and it's just inches from-

There's a tug, and the button gives way, so he gets to work on Clint's. The angle's all off, though, but Clint's patience isn't much greater than his own, and he bats his hands out of the way, takes care of it, and then returns to James' zipper.

Fuck, just that- the small vibration of teeth being parted, might just be the best thing he's ever felt.

Right up until Clint's hand eases in.

---

"Here, let me-

"Shove over, yeah-

There are probably strippers somewhere that can make clambering out of jeans look at all sexy, but they manage, though there's a moment where Clint nearly balks when James' shorts come off right
along with them. It's maybe sooner than it should've been. Or not; James is dragging at his boxers already while he's still trying to get his foot unstuck from his freakin' jeans. The only reason he's not toppling over is that James is pulling him back down onto the bed.

Fuck, skin. Cool where the air's hitting it, hot where there's no room between them. It's amazing, just.

It's weird. Being naked like this, stripped down to nothing, with bright purple hearing aids sticking out of the sides of his head.

Only. He needs them. James is quiet but his breath hitches, sometimes, and Clint doesn't want to miss out on anything.

It's still weird, though. Not an exposure he was prepared for.

"What?" James mutters, his hand trailing down his side, all the way down to his thigh.

"Should I take the aids out?"

James scowls. "Huh?"

"I mean. It's kind of ridiculous, right?"

"You're kind of ridiculous," James mutters, pulling him back down.

Now that the clothes are off and they're both still here, it seems that there's not much left to be shy about.

James' dick is hard against his own, which is a mild relief that he'll chide himself for later. This, he knows how to handle.

Ha. Puns are funny.

James freezes when his fingers ghost along his hip and wrap around him, but only for an instant before his hips shove closer, and it's all the encouragement Clint needs to capture his mouth again and, shifting his hand, starts to stroke.

It's the least coordinated he's ever seen James, like he's not sure what he's supposed to be paying attention to next; his spit-slick hand smacks out and hits him in the chest on the way down, trying to return the favor.

At first it's just a mess of fingers and thumbs, and a really bad angle. But he shifts his wrist, finds a loose grip, and pushes down, slowly. Clint manages to hold out for the drag on the upstroke before groaning. Embarrassingly loudly, though at least James seems amused enough to do it again.

And again.

He tries to give back as good as he's getting, but it's increasingly hard to concentrate on anything but James' hand. At this point, it's mostly just sweat smoothing his own way as he tightens his grip experimentally, then loosening it again.

James whines, just barely, the breath wheezing out between clenched teeth.

Everything, his spine, the backs of his knees, the arch of his feet, they're tingling, he's this close already, he's already drawing up and-
He's got his face pressed against James' shoulder, it's solid and steel and it doesn't give when he starts shaking apart completely, spilling against James' hand, his own hip, who knows where else.

The aftershocks are hard, and he's totally over-sensitized and out of breath, but it's James' turn, anyway. So he shifts, moves up to get a better angle.

So he does, because he can see it, right there, James is on that precipice like he's about to spill over, legs splayed out as much as their position will allow, just trying-

-at first he thinks he's imagining it, the way James is starting to go soft. Or that there'd been an orgasm he'd missed while whiting out on his own, but then he remembers.

"Fuck," James grinds out through gritted teeth, angry and beautiful. "Keep going."

He's just hovering there, eyes clenched and scowling, his breaths stabbing out erratic and short, and Clint can do this, he thinks. He can pull this off before James loses it completely

---

Fuck, he's going soft and Clint's getting careful with him like he thinks it's got to hurt, or something, and he wants to shout at him but he's trying to focus, here, just for a minute.

"Shh," Clint's muttering against his forehead. "What do you need?"

"Go harder," He'd meant to make it a question, but his chest is too tight to inhale and he can barely grit it out. He can feel Clint kissing his shoulder, then his chest as his grip tightens and he-

-there's a spark of something, and it's starting to turn into a buzz that he can feel deep in his spine and-

-and as soon as he starts trying to chase it down, it starts to fade, leaving him panting and spent. But not. Clint's watching him, though, and his rhythm falters the moment he glances at him, but he's got this whole hyper-focused, disheveled, hopeful-and-worried-and-turned on anyway look on his face, and it does something to his heart that so sudden and startling that if it's a consolation prize, he'll totally take it.

---

Ten Months Later...

It's late on a Tuesday night. Nothing special, really. Clint's only really stayed up this late because long ops and late flights tend to call for nightcaps and ten minutes to unwind before heading up to bed.

From what Sam had reported over the wire, the op had gone fine. It had come from Coulson's team, who were otherwise engaged in Australia. Some high school kid that could phase through walls and floors, but couldn't control it, and whose family life was shit enough that he'd be looking at some hard choices and easy opportunities once he eventually sussed it out. Hell, from what Sam had said, they'd barely started talking with him before the kid jumped at the chance to go to the Academy. As far as Clint can tell, it's the easiest op anyone's ever had.

So there's no clear explanation as to why James has been pacing in the living room for the entirety of the forty minutes since he'd kissed him hello. He's distracted, though, not troubled, because he keeps shooting Clint these apologetic glances like he knows he's acting strange and just hasn't shaken himself out of it. Maybe it's just the long flight and the odd hours.
Clint's already loitered over his drink, and he's got a meeting with Hill first thing in the morning, so he brushes his teeth, takes out his hearing aids, and starts heading up to bed. He stops at the foot of the stairs, though, when he notices James standing in the middle of the living room, staring at nothing.

Barnes' mouth is moving; he looks like he's talking to himself. He *is* talking to himself, staring across the room, scowling like he's deciding something. It's hard to see, from this angle; he's not in front of him so he can't read his lips, but then, he's turning towards Clint. *Forget*, maybe. Or *Fuck it*.

His hands come up, and Clint can't help noticing that he's biting his lip as he starts to sign.

[Will you marry me?]

---

**One Year Later...**

They get their ID's clipped and handed back to them, and wait for the clerk to sort out their paperwork.

God, they've been here for hours and the woman behind the counter seems to take pleasure in being *deliberately* slow, like it's some sort of karmic punishment for getting through their vows and their honeymoon without incident, international or otherwise. For having too much fun while the real world trudged on without them for two weeks.

But Kate's got Lucky for the rest of the day, and there's not a snowball's chance in hell that they're going to want to pull their jet-lagged assess off the couch to deal with any of this shit- DMV, groceries, post office- tomorrow.

Eventually, the woman returns with James' new ID, which at least means that Clint's should be ready before the end of the decade. Leaning over for a better look, he sees a picture of a tired-but-tan James glaring at the camera.

The signature on the bottom hasn't evened itself out yet; it gets a little shaky towards the end, and it's illegible anyway. But the machine-block letters printed above it translate well enough.

*Barnes-Barton, Buchanan James.*

"I love you," He rocks into him briefly, close enough that he can still smell the weird shampoo from the hotel, "but you gotta admit, that's a ridiculous name."

"Not my fault I fell for such an alliteratively named asshole," James snags Clint's new license from the woman who'd come back, in record time, to the counter, and scans it as he passes it over. "And you know what they say about people in glass houses, Mr. Clinton Francis Barton-Barnes."

He glances at his name, spelled out on the plastic, and back up to James smirking back at him, and thinks, *yeah, okay.*

This looks too good to be true.

Chapter End Notes
Wow. It's really done, now.

Thanks and kudos for all of you who've stuck with it (for, OMG, 9.5 months like BABIES HAVE BEEN CONCEIVED AND BORN since I started writing this thing), you all rock.

(And now I'm gonna go curl up in the sock drawer and sleep for days.) :D

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