Summary

"Where am I? Where is this?" and he was in Brooklyn, he was on a beach, the train was shaking around him. He was in the plane, ice splintering up onto the windshield. He was in a tank, tubes trailing from his face, from his groin. Christ, he was cold. There was still ice on his fingers. He was in the Grand Canyon. He was in Times Square. This couldn't be Times Square. Where the hell was this? "Tell me! Where am I, who are you, where's—" — Bucky?

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Part One.

"Steve?"

"Steve?"

"Steve?"

"Steve, is that you?"

“Steve, where are you?”

"Steve, are we dead?"

#

"We'll do tests afterwards," Dr. Erskine said, waving around his glass of schnapps. "Health,
stamina, capability, all that. There are several results we expect of the serum, though of course there may also be results we do not expect." He beamed reassuringly at Steve, who was getting that terrible hard knot in his stomach again. "But I think it will turn out all right. I have been extremely clever, if I say so myself. And God willing the serum will work and so we may yet be in time to change the direction of the war." Dr. Erskine reflected for a moment and then added: "Also there will likely be a Nobel prize for me, but that is absolutely a secondary consideration."

"Steve? Steve—?"

"B-Bucky," Steve whispered, though he didn't think Bucky would hear him; too far; too cold.

"Steve! Steve, where are you?"—and Bucky sounded panicked but Steve didn't have the strength to speak, so he closed his eyes and sent the picture: the Valkyrie, its nose tilting downward, the smash, chunks of ice flying up at him and the shotgun crack of the glass and the rush of the water, the long terrible slow sinking. Steve felt tears leaking out of his eyes and tried to squeeze them back; the agonizing pressure, the encasing ice.

"Jesus." Bucky was horrified. "Jesus Christ. Hang on—Steve, hang on—" and Steve felt the wetness flooding his eyes, because Bucky loved him and would do anything to save him, even though he was dead and Steve himself was dying and all of this was impossible anyhow.

"Leave him alone!" and that was Peggy. "Give him—get your bloody hands off him!—"

"It's all right," Steve said helplessly, letting them tug him across the cobblestones to the ambulance; the MPs looked like Martians or something in their helmets and rubber gloves. He had to duck down as he stepped up into the ambulance: why were these doors so small?

Peggy clambered up inside with him, then turned because the MP was still arguing with her: "Agent Carter, this is a massive breach of protocol: he hasn't been cleared for civilian contact! He could be a danger to others, or he himself could be vulnerable to—"

"Vulnerable?" Peggy, furious, glared down at the MP, using the extra height of the ambulance steps to full advantage. "Ridiculous." She turned to Steve and snapped, "How do you feel?"

"Fine," Steve replied instantly. "Ma'am. Agent C—"

"He's fine," Peggy informed the MP. "Which is remarkable as he has just run three miles and captured a submarine. Oh, what's the point…" She sat down on the red leatherette seat opposite the stretcher and added, irritably, brushing her brown curls away from her forehead, "Well, if we're going, let's go," and the MP swallowed and nodded and slammed the back doors shut.

Steve just managed to sit down on the edge of the stretcher before the ambulance pulled away with a jerk, knocking him sideways. Everything seemed—miniature. He didn't know where to put his knees. Across from him, Peggy was staring at her hands, her mouth quivering slightly.

"I—tried to get him," Steve told her. "I mean, I got him, he just—he—"

"You did get him," Peggy said quietly. "And he deserved to die. Abraham Erskine was a good man." She looked up at Steve. "I regret the loss of his work. But I'll miss the man himself more."

"Yeah," Steve said. "Yeah, me too."
Steve heard the faint sound in the darkness, the chink, chink, chink of—metal hitting ice. Impossible. It was—his brain conjured up the Valkyrie, its twisted hull sunk deep beneath the ice.

He remembered the ice hard against his back, the cold water washing over him, his fingers freezing first. Thick, white, spreading all over him—but then how could he still be alive? There—had to be air here somewhere—and suddenly he imagined himself in an ice-capsule, a coffin with thick walls but—there had to be air—and he opened his eyes (he could open his eyes) and there were a couple of inches between his face and the ice. He could move his fingers. He could feel the cold, hard-smooth slipperiness of the walls around him—and then there was light.

It lit up the ice. It was translucent now, frosted heavily in parts but Steve could see a shadow beyond, movement—and he gritted his teeth and struggled up, trying to bang on it, push it, break it, but he was trapped, he had only a couple of inches in any direction, he could barely move, he was going to use up all the air, he couldn't breathe. He wriggled and writhed, panic rising, hoping to crack it somehow—now that he could see a way out, he was awash in adrenaline, mouth flooded with it, metallic and coppery-tasting: hope. Bucky—Bucky was here—impossible, but—

There was a dark shape and the sound of a pick. Clink. Bits of ice fell onto his face, stinging and sharp.

Back at the lab, they took Steve’s blood and urine and samples of his hair and his fingernail clippings. They thought for a while that he had a fever, and put him in isolation, and then someone consulted Dr. Erskine's notes and found that he'd expected Steve to have a baseline body temperature of 101.4, which was nearly exactly right. It turned out that he could run a mile a minute and easily lift 1,000 pounds, which was all the weight that they had on hand. He had a resting heart rate of 20 beats per minute. The doctors stared at him, blank.

Then there were other tests, stranger ones. A serious-looking dame in glasses and a white lab coat took him into a room and sat him down at a table with a pack of playing cards.

"Gin rummy?" Steve asked gamely. "Or I'm pretty good at pinochle." The woman showed him a quick, indulgent smile, then dealt five cards out in a row in front of her, face down.

"These are Zener cards," she said.

Steve frowned. "I don't know how to play Zener," he said. "How does it—?"

"It's not a—" The woman had a little crease between her eyes. "Soldier, I'd like you to focus your attention on this card," she said, and tapped the first card in the line. "Concentrate." Steve had no idea what was going on, but he stared hard at the card. It was rectangular. Rounded edges. A red and white pattern on the back. "Now close your eyes," the woman said, and Steve did. "Picture the card in your mind," and Steve did. "Can you see it?"

"Yes," Steve said.

"Describe it," the woman said eagerly.

"It's red," Steve said, obligingly. "With little white—"

"No, I mean—the other side. Can you tell me what's on the other side of the card?" she asked.

Steve opened his eyes; he couldn't have heard that right. "The other side?"
"Yes," she said.

"The side that's face down," he clarified, and she nodded. He stared down at the cards again; were they see-through, somehow? Or was it one of those trick decks, marked, with a clue in the pattern on the back?

Finally he looked up. "I have no idea."

"Just try," she said. "Guess."

Steve stared, his mind a blank. "9 of clubs?" he asked finally, but he knew right away that it wasn't the answer she was looking for. She turned the card over: it had three wavy lines on it.

"Oh," Steve said, frowning.

He tried gamely to guess what was on the other cards, and failed, and then she tried a different experiment, telling him that someone nearby was thinking hard about one of the cards, could he guess which? He couldn't, as it turned out, even though he now knew what all five of the Zener cards looked like; in fact, the lady-doctor told him with a resigned sigh, he was a terrible guesser: he was doing less well than he should have done by sheer statistical chance.

For the last experiment, she handed him a pair of dice. "Try to throw a seven," she said.

Steve laughed and shook his head. "You want my friend Bucky for this."

"Just focus," she said. "Look at the dice. Picture them tumbling, and a seven coming up—" and he did, he tried, but when the dice finished rolling, it was a four. He tried a couple more times, and then finally the doctor sighed and said, "That's enough," and took some notes on a clipboard. "It's all right, Rogers," she said, glancing up as if to reassure him. "It was an outside chance anyway."

"What was?" Steve asked, now thoroughly confused.

"ESP. Extra sensory perception," she explained, "sometimes known as a sixth sense."

"You mean like—mind reading?" Steve asked, carefully keeping his face neutral. She didn't reply.

"Well," Peggy said later; she was sitting at a desk with her feet up, reviewing the clipboard; Steve tried not to stare at the little leather strap buckled across her slim ankle. "No ESP or clairvoyance, no psychokinesis, no signs of telepathy." She put the clipboard aside with a smile.

He felt he could be honest with her. "Were you really expecting...?"

She took the question seriously, swinging her legs down off the desk and looking up at him. "Dr. Erskine thought it was a possibility," she said. "Your brainwaves have shifted; you're literally not thinking on the same frequency as the rest of us. That should mean enhanced neural functioning—more acute senses, better and faster thinking—but we didn't know what else it could mean." She smiled at him, then raised her eyebrow. "I must confess I'm glad, though, that the tests came back normal. Bit terrifying if you could read minds on top of everything else."

"I'll say," Steve said, shuddering.

She was staring at him; she was lovely. "Can you see what I'm thinking?" she asked, flushing a little.

"No," Steve said, but maybe for the first time he was kind of disappointed about it.
Ice was falling into his face in big chunks, splintering and cracking all around him. The dark shadow was just above him, and then a hole appeared, streaming white light—and the sharp metal tip of a pick—and then a hand—and then a face, peering down—and it was Bucky, impossibly.

"Steve," Bucky gritted out, and Steve reached for him with cold-stiffened arms and numb fingers, but he couldn't hold a grip. "Back up," Bucky said, and then he was widening the hole with the pick, ice falling away on all sides, and when it was wide enough he bent in and began to haul Steve up and out into the brightest of white light. Steve had to close his eyes against it, it was so bright, and still the insides of his lids glowed painfully orange: he'd been in the dark and the cold for so long. But Bucky had him—Bucky was grunting and struggling to tug him up, out of the hole, into the light—and then they were falling together back onto the hard-packed snow. Steve felt the icy wind and pressed his face blindly into the crook of Bucky's neck, numbed fingers trying to close on the wool of Bucky's uniform jacket; Bucky was so warm; he'd been working so hard he was sweating, even out here on this ice.

"Steve," Bucky panted, "what the fuck is happening?"

"I don't know," Steve managed to reply. "I don't know, I don't know."

"Well, I don't need ESP to tell me what he's thinking," Steve said, forcing a smile at Peggy as Colonel Phillips walked off. You're an experiment. You're not enough.

"He's as heartbroken as the rest of us about Dr. Erskine," Peggy said. "That's just how he shows it. But he's wrong, you know," she added seriously. "There's a lot one man can do—"

"She's right," Senator Brandt interrupted. "All due respect to the Colonel," he said, "but you can't take a soldier like yourself, a symbol of hope and American ingenuity, and lock him in a lab. Do you want to serve your country, son?" and before Steve knew what hit him he was in the garment district, standing on a box with his arms stretched out and a tiny little mustachioed tailor crouching before him with pins in his mouth. Then Brandt took him to a rehearsal room downtown where they were all these girls milling around in leotards and tap shoes. They'd just finished an audition for a troupe of girl dancers, for some kind of show, some kind of—

"No," Steve said, turning, "look, please, you don't understand," but the director, Mr. Dexter, just said, "Steve, it's all going to be A-OK. We know you're not a dancer. You just have to come out, hit your mark, and say your lines."

"I won't remember my lines," Steve said.

"You'll remember your lines," Mr. Dexter said.

"I won't remember my lines," Steve insisted.

"We'll figure something out," Mr. Dexter said, and gripped Steve's shoulders. "We'll write 'em down for you. Steve. Baby. We're gonna work with you, all right? By the end of this, you'll be treading the boards like a pro."

It was a while before Steve could open his eyes and take in the vastness stretching out in every direction; an endless white tinted faintly pink and blue from the light in the sky. He was still
hanging on to Bucky, who was warm, chest heaving beneath the blue uniform jacket he'd fallen to his death in. Steve lifted his head to stare at him, then touched Bucky's cheek with numb fingers.

"Bucky, you're dead," Steve said.

"Says you," Bucky replied, frowning.

"No, I mean it," Steve insisted. "This is all impossible. You realize that this is impossible."

"I don't know, maybe?" Bucky asked irritably—and wasn't that just the way Bucky always got when he didn't understand something? Steve stared at him. "I mean, are you trying to convince me," Bucky asked, "or—?"

"No," Steve shot back, "but if I'm talking to a hallucination, I'd like to know it!"

"I'm not a hallucination. I don't think," Bucky added, but he was looking suspiciously at the empty landscape, the dark hole he'd made in the ice. "But this—I mean, this is strange, isn't it?"

"Right? This can't be real. Or—" The light. The climb. Bucky. "Buck, you think this is the afterlife?"

"Hell of a disappointment if it is," Bucky replied.

Steve ran his hands over Bucky's shoulders and down his arms, then squeezed, wanting to believe in the reality of him, the solid presence of him. He felt solid. "Bucky, where did you come from? You fell from the train, you—" and loss overwhelmed him all over again. He clutched Bucky's head and tugged their mouths together, wanting to feel him, taste him. Bucky's mouth was wide and familiar against his, lips faintly chapped: if this was a hallucination, it was a damn good one. Bucky kissed him gladly, then pulled back to stare at him, looking puzzled.

"I...didn't die," Bucky told him, and then he was raising a hand to his head and pressing fingers to his temples, like his head hurt, like his head was goddamned killing him. "I didn't. I fell, but—"

"No," Steve said, pulling away and shaking his head; this wasn't happening. He was under the ice, he was dying; this was a dying man's last dream. "This is wish-fulfillment," he told Bucky. "I want you to be here, this is what I want to be happening, so it can't possibly be happening—"

"Well, that's interesting reasoning," Bucky said, "but—"

"This isn't happening!" Steve insisted, a little desperately. "Stop arguing with—!"

"Would you just shut up?" Bucky shouted, a little redfaced. "It's the fucking afterlife and you still won't shut up! I'm not dead! I fell! And I was hurt, but—" and Bucky's face went tense, a muscle jumping in his jaw, "—they found me. Russians," he said. "A division of Soviets," and Steve blinked because if he was hallucinating, he was being pretty creative about it; he sure hadn't expected Bucky to say that. Bucky nodded rapidly, grimacing. "Yeah," he said. "They took me to some hospital, or at least...I mean, I think it was a hospital? I've been in and out of..." He waved his hand idly. "I've been awake and asleep. It's all pretty fuzzy. Just flashes and—flashes."

"But Buck, how the hell did you get here?" Steve asked, looking around. They were alone on the icy tundra.

"I don't know." Bucky sounded lost. "I guess I...heard you calling. So I came."
Buffalo. Milwaukee. Chicago. Philadelphia. He learned his lines, and went from hardly ever having talked to a girl who wasn’t his mother to being a kind of honorary girl himself, the other girls having decided that since there were thirty-six of them and one of him that he was officially off-limits, which was just as well, because they were often all crammed into one backstage area full of calloused feet and dirty stockings and cigarette smoke. But Steve found that if he kept his mouth shut they’d talk in front of him, and a lot of them told pretty hilarious stories and played cards just about as well as Bucky did. He came to like being on the bus, and eventually he got dealt into hands of pinochle and had a week’s pay taken off him by Sue Galsworthy, who was a goddamned card shark. The other girls taught him how to do his makeup and how to stretch before and after a show and how to deal with chafing, of which it turned out there was quite a lot because of the way all their outfits were cut.

In between shows at Radio City, he got to at least pretend to fight while filming a bunch of short pictures for the War Office at Astoria Studios; he was probably the only Allied soldier who got to invade Rome, Tokyo, and Berlin. He and a couple of the girls played a smaller version of their show at the Stage Door Canteen, where he met Tallulah Bankhead and Rita Hayworth, got kissed onstage to thunderous applause by Gypsy Rose Lee, and had the first and only cigarette of his life when Katherine Hepburn, who was smoking outside the stage door on 44th street, offered him one: he would have drunk poison if Katherine Hepburn had given it to him, and it gave him something to do with his trembling hands.

He kissed babies and had his picture taken with politicians and shook the hands of draftees at the enlistment center at Times Square, and he was relieved when Senator Brandt said they would be taking the show to Europe; it felt like one step closer to the troops, to the real war. They packed themselves onto the boat for England and did shows for American troops stationed in Swansea, Bristol, Eastleigh, and Southampton, and they were doing the second of their three shows in London when Steve, waiting behind the red velvet curtain for his entrance, felt woozy. He stumbled back, cold and sweating, into the wings, then pressed his back to the wall so he could raise his hands to his head, which was threatening to split with a scream that—Christ!—with a scream that wasn’t his.

“She’s dead,” Steve said finally; it seemed to be the only rational explanation. "And this
"He waved a hand between them. "This is whatever comes after, I guess."

"Did you really crash your plane?" Bucky asked.

"Yeah," Steve said.

"What the hell were you doing flying a plane? Did you get shot down, or—"

"I didn't get shot down; I crashed on purpose," Steve admitted, and when Bucky glared at him: "It was full of bombs! Atomic bombs, Bucky, aimed for New York! I had to put down somewhere in the Arctic, keep them away from—"

"Hang on," Bucky interrupted. "You're saying this is a real place?"

"Yeah," Steve replied, looking around; it was the Arctic, it looked just like it had through the windscreen. It was the last thing he thought he'd ever see in this life, so he'd tried to really look at it: to notice the sharp angles and planes of the ice, the way it took on colors in places.

"This is a real place," Bucky repeated, looking around.


"I was in a hospital," Bucky said slowly. "I couldn't move. My arms and legs were—broken." He looked at Steve with real fear in his eyes. "I'm not really here, am I."

"No, I don't think so," Steve agreed, swallowing back his own terror. Bucky wasn't alive, Bucky couldn't still be alive; Steve would have known if he was. He remembered clinging to the outside of the train and having the radio in his mind go silent: that sudden, terrible dead air. The loneliness, the internal emptiness, was unbearable.

"I'm in the hospital or I'm dead, but I'm not here," Bucky said. "And you're..."

They both looked down at the hole in the ice.

"I'm down there," Steve said. "I'm still under the ice."

#

The second seizure happened in Sicily, in a camp full of men drafted to replace the ones who'd just invaded the continent. They did a modified version of the show and Steve was nervous all through it, because this audience was all servicemen—his peers, the young men of America—though of course that wasn't true: his peers were behind him, dancing in bright blue and red pleated skirts. Backstage, he had just pulled off his cloth mask and reached for a canteen of water when the pain hit—and even as he stumbled, hands going to his head to stop his skull from splitting (the needles, Christ; the pain and the screaming) some part of him had the presence of mind to lurch through the canvas flap into the storage area and collapse on top of a costume trunk: this will pass this will pass this will—

He lay there, dizzy and swirling, and wondered if he was losing his mind after all. The screaming in his head wasn't his, but—(needles, clamps)—the pain was familiar: needles driving into bone, excruciating. He was in the VitaRay machine, screaming, needles plunging in everywhere—was this his voice after all? Was it—and the world turned over, parts of himself expanding, traveling away, his consciousness breaking apart, floating away from whatever small, frightened self he had left. He reached out and grasped nothing; he was nothing, he was dying.
The pain stopped. Steve went limp, panting like an animal, and wondered if he should—if he maybe should let them take him back to the lab, run a few tests. Maybe the serum was going wrong, driving him mad, somehow; maybe it was killing him. But...that was a fair trade, surely: the flame that burns twice as bright only burns half as long. And at least he was doing something in the war; he refused to give that up to become an invalid again; a case.

"You're not under the ice," Bucky said vehemently. "You're right here. Something's happening, something real is—"

Steve shook his head; he'd gone back to his first theory. "You're not real. I'm just imagining you because—"

"I'm going to pound you into this goddamned snow," Bucky said.

"Where'd you get the pick?" Steve asked suddenly. The ice pick was lying, discarded, on the snow beside them. They both turned to stare at it.

"It was here," Bucky said stupidly. "No, it wasn't. I got here, and I needed a pick, and I looked around for one and there it was." He looked at Steve and said, thinking it through, "I was in the hospital. I couldn't move. And then you came on the line. I heard you breathing—you know," he said, "like when the line's open but nobody's talking."

"Yeah," Steve said; he knew just what Bucky meant.

"You weren't there, and then you were," Bucky said. "I called to you, and you showed me the plane and—and I wished myself here, because that's where you were." He laughed suddenly. "And I wished myself a pick, apparently. And so here we are." He gestured at the vast nothingness. "So what do we do now? Build an igloo? Club a seal?"

"No, wait," Steve said, "let's think logically about—"

"You go for it, pal; I'll be over here, crying," Bucky said.

"You wished yourself here, you wished yourself a pick—Why don't you wish us someplace else?" Steve said.

"What?" Bucky said.

"I mean, sure, it's crazy, but—why stop now? Maybe you can just wish us somewhere else—except wait," Steve said, and grabbed Bucky's arms. "What if it's just you who can—? Don't go without me!"

"Steve, this is nuts," Bucky said seriously.

"We need to test it," Steve said, ignoring him. "Start with something small," and then he closed his eyes and said: "I wish I had a coat." He waited for a second, then looked around and shrugged: no coat. "You try," Steve said.

"Okay," Bucky said. "I wish you had a coat," and Steve blinked and looked down at his arms, his chest: he was now wearing a long army greatcoat of heavy gray-green wool.

"Uh," Steve said.
"You have to picture it," Bucky told him. "I could picture you in it," he said, and then: "Try again, you're the artist," and Steve nodded and looked hopefully up at the sky. There was nothing, and there was nothing, and just as Bucky shrugged sympathetically at him Steve heard the first low rumble of the plane's engines, and Bucky turned, mouth falling open, just as Howard Stark's small aeroplane appeared as a dark spot against the pink and white clouds.

He was asleep in a tent close to the Italian front, and the screams in his head brought him bolt upright, gasping and terrified, because this time he knew the voice, he knew it, this voice was—Jesus Christ—

"Bucky," Steve muttered, gaping sightlessly into the dark, "Bucky, hang on, just hang on, Bucky hang—" and he was half-asleep and half-awake but completely out of his mind, because it was like the voice had reached out and grabbed him, clawing and desperate and incoherent with pain. "Shout it out!" Steve cried, remembering the VitaRay machine, how the pain had slaughtered all his attempts to be stoic, how the screaming had helped. "Scream it out! Press back with your hands, if you can; lean back into it. Feel it between your shoulder blades," he had arched inside the VitaRay machine; the center of his back the only place that hadn't hurt, "and then take as deep a breath as you—"

Steve!—ohgodstevestevestevestevesteves—and tears pricked Steve's eyes because this was the worst form of madness he could imagine. Steve fell back onto his cot and wrapped his arms around his diseased brain and tried to chase this nightmare away with every happy good thing he could remember: warm summer days scaling the bleacher walls for a glimpse of green grass or Al Lopez, whole Saturdays spent at the pictures, images flickering across Bucky's face, having enough money for ice cream at Coney Island. We'll get back, we'll get back there somehow—

The screaming stopped. Steve nearly wept in relief; he was limp and exhausted and drenched with sweat. Why was this happening? Why was he imagining other people—imagining Bucky—enduring the tortures of the serum? Was he reliving his own suffering, or was he imagining himself as a real soldier among the troops: one of the dying and the dead? He had to tell someone. He had to go back to New Mexico, he couldn't stand having this obscenity in his—

Steve?

Steve stopped breathing; the voice was soft but audible in his mind. "Bucky?" he whispered. Yeah.

"Bucky, hang on," Steve said stupidly.

Yeah.

"Bucky, hang on," Steve repeated.

Okay, and then Steve closed his eyes and imagined himself lying beside Bucky Barnes in the mud of a trench, and wrapping himself around him, arms and legs both, to protect him from —everything.

The tiny plane buzzed overhead. Steve and Bucky stumbled to their feet in the snow, and Steve unbuttoned his coat to reach for the flare gun in his holster—only to see the very same gun already in Bucky's hand. Steve closed his hand on the grip and pulled it out—and noted that Bucky was as
surprised as he was. They held the guns together; they were identical, down to the scratches on the barrel. No: they were more than identical. They were the same gun.

"You gave it to me before we got on the train," Bucky said.

"...No, I didn't," Steve said slowly.

"You did. I was supposed to signal if you—"

"Okay, wait," Steve said. "I think I get it."

"I'm listening," Bucky said.

"I have the gun because I thought I had it. And you have it because you thought you had it. It's like the coats: it's just something we've imagined into being." He looked at Bucky, afraid all over again. "This isn't happening, Buck—"

"If it wasn't happening," Bucky said reasonably, "then neither of us would have it. Instead we have two, and we're arguing about it. So something's happening," Bucky concluded, and fired the flare gun up into the sky.

#

Steve fell asleep muttering comforting nonsense, and woke up scared: he needed to get help, he needed to tell someone before he lost touch with reality, but he wasn't sure who to tell, or how. There was still a voice in his head, whispering underneath his every thought: *Barnes, James Buchanan. 32557038. Barnes, James Buchanan*—

It was a rainy, cold day, miserable, and the soldiers assigned to this camp shot nasty looks at him and rest of the troupe as they set up their makeshift stage; normally the men were grateful for any distraction, even their piss poor offerings, but not these men; not this unit. Still, even these weary-looking guys brightened a little at the sight of the girls in their star-spangled skirts and tap shoes, even as they shouted and jeered and threw tomatoes at him. He cleared out fast and hurried backstage, leaving the girls do their thing—only to find Peggy Carter standing there.

"Hello, Steve," she said, and flashed a quick smile. "I heard you were here."

"I—yes, I am," Steve replied stupidly. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, officially I'm not here," Peggy replied. "But I've been up the road with the 107th—"

All thoughts flew from his head. "The 107th?" Steve repeated.

Peggy frowned. "Yes," she said. "Colonel Phillips is running operations from—"

"Come on," Steve said, taking her by the hand. "Hurry. Let's go."

#

The plane circled and came down on something like skis, and then the cockpit opened and Howard Stark's head popped out of the hatch. He looked at Steve and then at Bucky and said, "Well, well, well, well. I thought I was seeing double, and I try never to have more than a couple of cocktails before I fly. Hop on board, fellas."

Steve and Bucky looked at each other. "That's just what I thought he'd say," Steve sighed.
"You imagined this?" Bucky asked, and Steve nodded grimly. "So, do we get into the imaginary airplane, or—?"

"No we don't get into the imaginary plane! It's not real! He's not real," Steve said, flinging a hand out at Howard, who looked remarkably unperturbed for someone whose existence had just been questioned. "Take out the watch in your pocket," he commanded Howard, who shrugged and reached into his flight jacket to pull out a pocket watch. "See?" Steve said triumphantly, turning to Bucky. "He's got a pocket watch. Want to know the inscription?"

"No," Bucky said warily. "But if the plane's imaginary, so is the ground, right? The coat, the pick—" and then Bucky's face changed, went thunderous. "Don't you—don't, don't—I know just what you're going to say!"

"Oh God, that's worse!" Steve nearly shouted.

"You dumb little—now you think I'm not real because you know me so well you think you know everything I'm gonna say, but that is—just—you being a very obnoxious tiresome overthinking egotistical little—"

"Yeah, like that's surprising, coming from you," Steve said.

"You know, I wish I was dead," Bucky said earnestly, and Steve felt the words like a physical pain, bang in the chest. "Instead of stuck in the imaginary Arctic with you for the rest of my fucking—"

"I would never say that," Steve said around the lump in his throat. "Bucky. I would never even think that—"

"That's cause you've never been stuck with you," Bucky replied, but he was shrugging, his shoulders softening; he was sorry. "So can we at least admit I'm real? Or at least as real as you are, for whatever that's—"

"Take out the watch in your pocket," Steve said warily, and Bucky pulled his hand out of his pocket and gave him the finger. "Yeah, okay," Steve said, and then he felt a strange wriggling in his coat pocket and pulled out a frog.

"There." Bucky smirked at him and raised his eyebrows. "Didn't expect that, did you?" he asked. "I'm beginning to see possi—" and then his face changed and he reached into his own pocket and said, "Oh. Oh, you bastard."

#

"I'm sorry," Colonel Phillips said with terrible finality, but Steve just shook his head and said, "He's not dead, he's not," and then turned and strode out of the tent into the rain. He would break into the supply tent, maybe commandeer a Jeep and—Peggy reached out and grabbed his arm; she'd caught up. Rain was dripping from her hair.

She glared hotly up at him. "Whatever you're planning, it's stupid," she said.

"It doesn't matter," Steve said, yanking his arm back and pulling away. "I have to try; I have to."

He wondered if she would make an effort to stop him, and what he would do if she did. But Peggy just stood her ground, mud deepening around her ankles, and said, with grim sympathy, "Your friend is likely dead."

"He isn't," Steve said, and then, without meaning to say it: "I know it."
"You can't know it," Peggy retorted, and Steve swallowed and stared at her, because this was where the conversation ended, where they had to agree to disagree and either she would call the MPs or she wouldn’t—but the rain was soaking her hair, dripping from the tip of her chin, and she was standing there in the rain, drenched and lovely and arguing with him. He turned back to her, went back to her; came in close.

"Don't tell me I'm crazy," Steve said.

"All right," Peggy replied.

"I can hear him in my mind," Steve said. "He's talking to me. He's alive in my head."

He wasn't sure what he expected; disbelief, amusement, alarm? Not this, certainly. "Just him?"

Peggy asked.

"What do you mean?" Steve asked.

"What I say: is he the only voice in your head?" Peggy asked.

"Yes, he..." Steve thought he was catching her drift. "He is now," Steve replied meaningfully. "There were others—is that what you're asking?"

"Yes," Peggy said.

"There were others," Steve repeated. "Other—voices; prisoners. But—I think they died."

Peggy reached up absently and pushed her wet hair away from her forehead, her face clouding. "Hydra's in the area," she told Steve. "Schmidt is in the area." She hesitated for a moment and then said, with brutal honesty, "He might be experimenting on the prisoners. On your friend."

Nausea welled up in him, Bucky's screams echoing in his head. "I have to find him. I have to get to him before—"

"I can help you," Peggy said.

#

"Come on, fellas," Howard Stark said, "let's get going, and if you're not pressed for time, we could stop in Dublin for a pint of Guin—" Steve waved a hand at him and he went silent.

"How'd you get here?" Steve asked Howard.

"I don't know," Howard said with a shrug.

"What news from the front?" Steve asked.

Howard's smile didn't waver. "No idea."

"What day is it?" Steve pressed. "What year is it?" and he turned to Bucky ruefully as the plane and Howard both vanished behind him. "He doesn't know because we don't," Steve sighed. "Whatever kind of real we are, he ain't."

"We still could have taken the plane, though," Bucky objected. "I'm getting bored with the view here."

"If you're right, though," Steve said, "and this is just—I don't know, some kind of joint
hallucination—something we've imagined together—then we don't need the damn plane. We can just imagine ourselves anywhere."

"There's no place like home, huh?" Bucky asked with a smirk, but Steve nodded and said, "Yeah. Yeah," and then, "Wait,"—and he skittered up close and gripped Bucky's lapels, and then decided not to hedge his bets and slid his arms around Bucky's waist and locked his fingers together behind his back. Bucky raised his eyebrows.

"Dorothy held on to Toto," Steve explained.

Somehow Bucky managed to keep a straight face. "And you think I'm Toto in this scenario?"


Steve ran up the dank corridor throwing open door upon door, and it took him a moment to finally register that the voice mumbling inside his head was now outside of it, as well: "Barnes…James Buchanan…" It was one thing to know what had happened, but another thing entirely to see it: Bucky strapped down to the lab table and delirious, surrounded by trays of abandoned medical instruments and bloody syringes, left there to die.

"Bucky," Steve whispered, fingers clawing at the swollen leather straps. "Bucky, it's me. Steve," and he was hit by a wave of images and feelings that knocked him sideways—some of them the same feelings and images he'd recalled only recently: baseballmoviesboardwalkicecreamsummertime—except infused with a longing so fierce it left him breathless—Steve—and shaking like after an asthma attack. Steve swallowed hard and managed to undo the straps.

Bucky's eyes finally focused on him, and then Bucky lit up and clumsily reached out to touch him—and suddenly Steve was drenched: turned on and sweating and dizzy and hard, cock straining in his pants. He had to brace himself against the gurney and suck for air, because he was right on the edge of coming; hell, he was going to come in his—

Bucky's hands grasped along his arms. "Steve," and Steve jerked and came, weak-kneed and trembling. He half-collapsed onto Bucky, who moaned and shuddered beneath him, and Steve knew that he was coming, too. They lay there for a moment, shaking and gasping, and then Steve slid up Bucky's body and kissed him impulsively, awkwardly.

Bucky twitched in shock, but he clutched Steve's head and kissed him back—though when Steve pulled away, there was confusion in his eyes. Bucky's emotions began to shift rapidly as he came to consciousness: confusion fear terror—and then shame. "No," Steve blurted, "don't," because he could feel Bucky rebuilding the walls around himself, bricking himself in. He'd given Steve this glimpse of himself, or—maybe Steve had taken it.

"Steve?" Bucky managed, and Steve took a deep breath and said, "Yeah, Buck, it's me. We've got to get out of here." He straightened and tried to help Bucky off the gurney, and Bucky half-rose, clinging to him—Stop it, Steve thought at him fervently, because he could feel Bucky's shame seeping between them, like a poison.

"You're—huge," Bucky said, looking up at Steve in surprise as his boots touched the ground. "What—?"
"Yeah," Steve said, beginning to tow him toward the door. "Some things have happened," and he thought of the VitaRay machine, Erskine, Peggy, the USO tour—

"S-steve," Bucky stammered as they moved out, down the hall. "I'm having the strangest feeling, like—"

*Like I'm in your head*, Steve thought, and felt Bucky jerk in surprise. Steve tightened his grip. *That's because I am, Buck. I'm in your head, and you're in mine—*

*I've gone crazy*, Bucky thought. *I've fucking snapped, and this is all—this has all been—*

*This is cuckoo-crazy but you're not*, Steve thought back, and when Bucky whipped around to stare at him, Steve repeated it out loud. "This is crazy but you're not crazy, Buck," he said. "I can hear you thinking. I don't know why."

#

When Steve opened his eyes he was home, but he was alone. He was standing in their apartment in Red Hook, peering at the battered kitchen cabinets and the stained porcelain sink. He turned around, slowly, mesmerized—everything was as he remembered it, down to the ancient box of Ralston's Wheat Cereal on the counter that neither of them much liked but which they didn't dare throw out, just in case. There was the pair of armchairs they'd hauled up from the street and mended, and the kitchen table where they'd eaten their toast and jam in the mornings before—

*Steve!—* and Steve was tearing open the apartment door and racing down the splintered wood steps to the street before he'd even thought about it, propelled by the raw fear in Bucky's voice. *Steve, Jesus, where are—?!

*I'm coming!* Steve thought back wildly. *Don't move!—* and he knew where Bucky'd gone: home, which for Bucky was the corner of Turner and Grace, the heart of their Brooklyn: the street. Steve stopped abruptly as he got there, shocked, because Bucky'd collapsed on the stoop of the Porterman house, and he was—Christ, hurt, mangled, blood soaking his uniform jacket. His leg was twisted at an impossible angle, and his arm—Bucky's left arm was gone. "Steve," Bucky gasped, pale and blue-lipped. "Oh, thank God," and Steve's eyes blurred with tears as he hurried to him. Bucky pulled him into a tight hug with—and Steve blinked his tears away—both arms. He jerked back to look at Bucky, and Bucky was normal again: strong, all his limbs intact. Still, Steve couldn't help but smooth his hands across Bucky's shoulders and down his arms. "Where the hell were you?" Bucky asked. "I thought I'd lost you—"

"Bucky, are you hurt? You looked like you were..." and Bucky's face crossed with confusion as he looked down at himself, then turned his hands over and stared down at his palms. Steve felt his chest tightening as he remembered Bucky's words: *I fell, I was hurt; my arms and legs were broken*. That was the truth of things: Bucky was in a hospital somewhere, smashed to pieces, and this was the pretense: that they were both whole and alive and back home together. When Bucky looked at him, there were still traces of pain on his pale face. "I'm fine," Bucky said slowly. "That is... I think I...." and Steve distracted him with a kiss, wanting him to forget the pain again, because what was the point of remembering? And it worked, because Bucky jerked away and glanced nervously up and down the empty street, looking just like his old self. "Steve, we're in the street!" he hissed.

"Doesn't matter," Steve said, grinning. "This is our world, we can do anything we want here," but then he looked around the intersection and said, "You haven't got everything right, though."
Bucky's eyebrows lifted. "I don't?" he asked, and Steve pointed.

"Greenstein's closed," Steve said, pointing at the shop across the way where his ma'd bought all his clothes since he was a kid; he remembered the towering shelves of inventory, hand-labeled boxes of shirts and pajamas and vests in different sizes. It blurred and was replaced by a tobacconist's.

"And Morty took on a partner," and the sign became Cowley and Morton's Sanitary Lunch Room, and even as Steve looked up and down the street it seemed to sharpen and get more detailed: the result of more than one memory filling in the blanks, he supposed. He added the Coca-Cola sign to Morty's window, and the dingy white OPEN hanging askew on the door. He added chrome bumpers to parked cars and subtly adjusted their colors, and then beside him Bucky laughed and said, "Wait, there was a manhole, there, right?" and yeah, there had been a manhole and a deep crack in the concrete with weeds growing out of it, and it was Bucky who remembered that hydrant in front of the firehouse had been painted red, white, and blue.

#

"Captain America," Schmidt said, raising his gun. "I see that Dr. Erskine successfully weakened his formula."

Steve tried to shove Bucky behind him, to protect him, but Bucky was staring wide-eyed at Schmidt. "Steve, do you hear him?" Bucky whispered, a little hysterically. "He's buzzing. He's fried," and Steve knew just what he meant. Schmidt's mind was crackling with static, humming out waves of electricity that made the air around him taste burnt.

Bucky scrabbled at Steve's arm, trying to hold him back. "Don't touch him, he'll kill you—"

"Your friend is very perceptive," Schmidt told Steve, and then he glanced at the pudgy man cowering behind him and said, "Dr. Zola, I find false modesty unbecoming. You never said you'd had any success in your experiments."

Zola looked wonderingly at Bucky. "I didn't know I had. I thought he was dead. The others, they all—"

"Well, I suggest you learn to tell the difference," Schmidt said, and Steve broke out of Bucky's grip and rushed across the bridge to fight him. Steve reeled, as if electro-shocked, at the first punch—Bucky was right, Schmidt was a live wire—but he found that he could tune his own brain to static: find the same white-noise frequency channel and neutralize the effect.

He got in a couple of good punches before the bridge jerked under his feet and mechanically dragged them apart. Steve dragged Bucky up and up, away from the rising flames, desperate to get him out at any cost. And if Steve had had any doubts as to whether the mental communication went both ways with Bucky, he had no doubts any more.

Bucky's voice was crystal clear in his head: Don't even think about it. I won't leave you, you bastard.

#

The street got more and more perfect as they looked at it, their memories supplementing each other's, until it was perfectly detailed—and eerily empty, like they were the only two people left in New York. They were both of them too afraid to imagine the people, Steve guessed. It had been disheartening to have Howard not be Howard; he didn't think he could bear to see empty replicas of their friends and neighbors, let alone anyone he really cared about. He couldn't imagine having the shell of Bucky's Ma walking around—or Jesus, his Ma. It felt like too much to risk.
Still, it felt unnatural to walk home and see no one: their neighborhood had been so crowded. He put a hand on Bucky's arm. "Let me try some street traffic," Steve murmured. "No one we know, I swear," he added. "Okay?"

Bucky hesitated, and then nodded. "Okay," he said—and a woman carrying a paper bag pushed out of the grocery store as a bunch of kids came flying across the street. A car turned the corner and slowed to honk angrily at them.

"That's better, isn't it?" Steve asked, but Bucky was standing there, a frown creasing his face. He shook his head.

"It's off," Bucky said. "I don't know why...no, I do," he said, and then he turned to Steve and said, "Close your eyes." Steve shrugged agreeably and closed his eyes, waiting to see what Bucky put into the landscape—but it wasn't that at all. Instead Steve suddenly heard the pervasive crank of machinery at the shipyards and the low mooing of boat-horns in the canal. There was the rumbling cough of a truck engine and the screech of metal skate wheels on concrete, and the shout of the iceman and the bell on the Crosstown Line trolley as it came down Richards Street. Steve's eyes flooded with tears at the sound of ukulele, and he looked at Bucky and said, heartfelt, "That fucking ukulele," and Bucky nodded fervently and said, "I know! We could find him and kill him! We could make it stop!" and Steve burst out laughing because no, they couldn't; nobody'd been able to tell old Mr. Giardino, who had one leg and who sat by the window all day with his piles of sheet music, that he was no Ukelele Ike.

#

The other POWs and the remains of the 107th were waiting for them outside the burning base, and they formed a convoy, letting the worst of the wounded ride in the trucks and tanks they'd commandeered. Steve looked the question at Bucky, who pushed him away—fine; he was fine—and in fact, Bucky did seem to be fine, at least physically, though Steve could feel him struggling to keep Steve out of his mind, his ratcheting anxiety about what Steve might see there. Steve vowed to try to stay out of Bucky's mind as much as he could; he'd look away, avert his eyes. For his part, Bucky was keeping up a constant stream of mental noise: marking their pace, dividing the landscape with his eyes—no sign of enemy combatants at their 12, at their 9, at their 6—but beneath, Steve sensed a churn of lust and self-loathing so thick he felt he could choke on it.

He dropped back to keep pace with Bucky, trying to figure out what to say to reassure him, or whether he should say anything at all. He could feel Bucky clawing at strategies, protocols, throwing them over himself like earth—and then it was like a knife flashed out, and Steve halted and grabbed Bucky's arm because he was going to cut, to kill—

"Stop," Steve gasped, pained; but this pain wasn't his; Bucky was trying to murder something in himself; the part that liked—boys, that liked Steve; he would kill it rather than show it. "Don't. Jesus, what are you—" and around them the men were slowing, frowning, and so Steve whirled and shouted, "Keep going! We'll catch up!" even as he dragged Bucky off the march.

Bucky's eyes were furious. "Get out of my head, Steve. Get the fuck out of my—"

The pushback was almost physical, it was so forceful. "You could have told me," Steve said, half-pleading. "Did you think I wouldn't underst—"

"Understand what? That I'm—" and Bucky clamped down on the words but Steve got the emotions like a blast of poison, and this time he did stumble back. "Believe me, I'm trying," Bucky whispered, and Steve's head was full of lipsticked lips and perfumed earlobes and—he struggled for air—scratchy white lace bras and breasts with pink nipples, heavy and soft in his hands, and he
couldn't help but be turned on even as he could sense Bucky's desperation, his determination—and the faint underlying sense of revulsion. "I'm trying, and I wouldn't—I wouldn't ever have—You trusted me," Bucky managed, sounding strangled. "I would never have betrayed—but I was off-guard and," Bucky's anger was rising, "you went into my head and—"

"Bucky," and Steve ripped off his helmet and threw it to the ground. He dragged Bucky's hands to either side of his head and held them there, staring hard into Bucky's eyes. Look into my head, you dumbass. Just look, because he was pretty sure that if Bucky had the slightest idea as to how Steve saw him, he'd be an unbearable egomaniac for the rest of his life. Bucky's brows drew together and Steve tried to—stay open to him, to leave every door unlocked to him. All the ugly things in his mind tumbled like leaves in a whirlwind: his own sickliness and deformity, his fear of being left behind by the war, unmanned and pitied, not even good enough to die with the other men, with real men. And then there was Bucky, shining and beautiful and—(Bucky tried to pull away: "That's not," he began, but Steve wouldn't let go)—Steve's envy of his body, the curve of his biceps and his broad shoulders, straining the fabric of his shirt, the hard muscles of Bucky's thighs in wool trousers. Bucky laughing, dripping and brown-skinned, stumbling out of the surf at Coney Island, his strong feet caked with sand, water streaming out of his hair and—

Bucky looked taken aback. You want me? Really?

You dumbass, Steve thought.

#

Bucky surprised him by bursting out laughing as he stepped into their apartment, and then he clutched at his chest and laughed even harder, looking around. "What?" Steve asked, smiling confusedly, wanting to be in on the joke.

"Are you," Bucky gasped. "You don't see it?"

"No?" Steve glanced around again: battered cabinets, kitchen table, box of cereal—but he felt a flash of dizziness as he looked back at Bucky. It was Bucky, somehow, who was wrong. Bucky was—

"Since when do we have fifteen foot ceilings?" Bucky demanded. "And who's the hell's going to reach up to those cabinets? You've drawn it to scale, you freak—you've drawn it like you're five feet tall!" and wow, of course he had, and now Steve was laughing because, as a result, Bucky looked small, too; like a miniature version of himself.

Steve wept with laughter as Bucky tried to jump up, his arm extended, to reach the top shelf of the pantry. "Use a box," Steve advised. "A box is easier," but Bucky turned to look at him with a look of wonder on his face.

"Is this really what our place looks like to you?" Bucky asked, and Steve said, shrugging, "Yeah," even as he could now see it the way Bucky was seeing it: mirrors and hooks set too high in the wall, top shelves just out of reach.

"Wow," Bucky said, shaking his head. "What a pain in the ass," and then: "Close your eyes and I'll fix it."

"Okay," Steve said, and closed his eyes until Bucky said, "How's that?" and Steve had just a touch of vertigo when he looked around: everything seemed to have shrunk, but only for a moment; Steve blinked rapidly and felt his eyes adjusting, things going normal. Or at least he thought they were normal until he looked up at Bucky's face.
Bucky was staring at him openmouthed, like he'd seen a ghost. "Steve?" he whispered, and Steve looked down at himself—his thin chest, his bony wrists, his too-big brown leather shoes—and then up at Bucky; up at Bucky.

"Sorry," Steve said helplessly. "I guess I forgot."

#

Peggy studied Bucky's face intently, and Bucky flinched a little under her scrutiny but managed to stand tall. Then Peggy looked at Steve and said, "And you can still hear him?"

"Yeah," Steve said.

"Go over there," Peggy said, pointing. "Face the wall," and Steve obeyed, turning, his hands clasped behind his back. He stared down at the floor, but he didn't have to look to see: Peggy had dragged Bucky to the other side of the room and was writing something down in a notebook. Bucky wasn't paying attention; he was staring at Peggy's breasts. I don't even like girls, but this chick has an amazing—Fortinbras, parameters, sinecure, substantiate—

Steve shot back a wordless rebuke and repeated the words out loud: "Fortinbras, parameters, sinecure, substantiate," and he half-felt, half-saw Peggy's shocked expression and Bucky's apologetic half-shrug.

"Well," Peggy said briskly, "that seems definitive," and Steve turned around. "I'm surprised we didn't take account of this possibility," she mused, and when Steve looked the question at her, she elaborated: "That you were the only one on the line. It's like being first in the village to have a telephone." She smiled. "There's no one to call."

"I still don't understand why," Bucky began, and then the door flew open and Howard Stark came in, practically rubbing his hands together with glee. "Oh, I hear we got spooky stuff going on in here! Telekinesis, ESP—"

"Howard," Peggy said reprovingly, and then glanced meaningfully at the door, which Howard grudgingly closed behind him. "Let's keep this information close, shall we? No telekinetic abilities as far as I can see, but it does seem as if Sergeant Barnes is now working on the same brainwave frequency as Captain Rogers."

Howard Stark shoved his hands in his pockets and regarded Bucky smugly. "Well, that's lucky."

"Lucky?" Bucky repeated. "You think it's—"

"Sure," Howard replied. "You'd be dead, wouldn't you, if Steve hadn't heard you and hared off to save you," and Howard's voice was pleasant enough but there was an edge underneath, and Steve was shaken by the violence of Bucky's emotions, a complicated mix of gratitude and pain and anger and sorrow.

"Yeah. I guess I would," Bucky managed finally.

"I don't think it was luck—not exactly," Peggy said. "Zola told Schmidt that no one else survived his iteration of the serum. I think Sergeant Barnes survived because Captain Rogers recognized him and somehow—intervened."

"Telepathic booster shot," Howard said, smirking at Bucky. "Now don't tell me that's not lucky," and before Bucky could answer, Howard turned to Peggy and asked, "Any other superpowers, or is he just lucky to be alive?"
"He's got the same brainwave patterns as Captain Rogers, so he's likely to develop the same quick thinking and reflexes," Peggy replied, and then she added with a frown, "and he's warmer than normal, about four degrees. I imagine that extra energy will be used for something, but at the moment there's no extra strength or speed."

Bucky was staring narrowly at Howard. "Just lucky to be alive, I guess," he muttered.

"Still, I can only imagine that your mental connection would make you incalculably valuable to Captain Rogers," Peggy said quietly; she was addressing Bucky directly now, and he turned to her, "if you weren't already." She smiled, a little sadly, and said, "Captain Rogers is forming an elite unit: the Howling Commandos. Did he tell you?"

"No," Bucky replied softly. "But I knew," and of course he did, just as Steve knew that Bucky would go to the bottom of hell for him.

Bucky was trying to control his face, but the charge in the air was unmistakable, if—surprising. Steve looked down again at his scrawny body, his narrow wrists and too-large hands, and then up at Bucky. You want me? Like this?

Bucky swallowed and nodded wordlessly, and Steve could feel years of banked-up desire. Bucky was staring at him and for the first time Steve was able to understand that look as want and not as—pity, or worry or fear. You trusted me, Bucky told him, when their minds first opened to each other. I wouldn't ever have betrayed your trust, but now Steve understood that that meant; Bucky had shared a bed with him, had shared a bath with him, had loved him and would have made a life with him, but had held himself back; he would have gone to his grave without saying a word. For his own part, it had never occurred to Steve that Bucky could want him that way, or he would have—hell, he'd have been shameless about it; he would have climbed Bucky Barnes like a goddamned tree.

Bucky was close now, looming and huge, though that was familiar, too—Steve was used to looking up to Bucky in every possible way. Bucky hesitated for only a second, then put his hands on Steve—and then everything went out of control, and Steve was clutching him tight, his skinny arms wrapped around Bucky's shoulders, tugging roughly at his hair as they kissed, and Bucky was lifting him up off the ground, half-carrying him, half-dragging him to their small bed. It was weird, and weirdly exciting, to be manhandled like this—Steve had forgotten what it was like not to be the strongest person in the vicinity—but it gave him the freedom to be rough, too, and he was kissing and biting at Bucky's jawline as Bucky shoved him onto his back. Bucky dragged Steve's too-long shirttails loose, unzipped Steve's threadbare tweed pants. Bucky was breathing raggedly—so turned on he was shaking—and then he was bending down to kiss Steve's pale belly and to lick and kiss his cock, his balls, the insides of his thighs. Steve knotted his hands in the sheets and gasped wildly at the ceiling as Bucky tilted his hips up and spread him, going at him with teeth and tongue. He was so hard he was leaking, his thin chest heaving, fighting not to come, and when Bucky finally sat back he was sweating and shaking, strands of hair plastered to his forehead.

"I want—" Bucky began, but Steve was already launching himself up at him, straddling his thighs and kissing him, rubbing against him, hands stroking down all that firm muscle, that smooth warm skin. Steve began to nudge his erection needily against Bucky's belly, and Bucky groaned into Steve's neck and shifted underneath him, lifting him bodily and trying to get his dick lined up. Steve clutched at Bucky's shoulders and tried to help, straining his thighs and trying to push down and relax simultaneously. "I want," Bucky said breathlessly, "Christ, I want—"

"I know. God. Me too," and Steve bore down, breaking into a sweat and shuddering as the burn
fired along his nerves.

Bucky gasped and went still. "Steve, are you—I don't want to hurt—"

Steve gritted out, "It hurts, it's good, don't stop!" and then his body was opening and Bucky was sliding up into him with a moan that sent shivers up Steve's spine.

"Oh. Oh, Christ. Oh," Bucky managed, eyes squeezed tight shut as he thrust up, and Steve let his head roll back, his whole body was vibrating, shaking with it, he—stevestevestevesteve, a whine in his head—and Steve's cock jerked, cold and wet on his skin and on Bucky's. Bucky was trying so hard to be steady, but he just—couldn't—and he was thrusting up hard and fast, thigh muscles working—and coming hard, arms around Steve, clenching so tight it hurt.

"—Buck," Steve managed, and Bucky unclenched a little so he could breathe, and then carefully, slowly pulled out of him before tugging Steve down with him to the mattress. Steve smiled against Bucky's shoulder—he was blissed-out and tingling, awash in good feeling, Bucky's rough fingers tracing every rib on his narrow side—and it took him a moment to realize that what was happening in Bucky's head was more complicated. Bucky's body was zinging with pleasure, too, but his eyes were wet; he was happy and hurting and curving around Steve. I never thought I'd get you. I wasn't supposed to get to have you like this. It's not allowed, everybody knows it's not. Boys don't… and Steve's chest tightened, because those words had come to Bucky with a fist behind them. Boys don't go with boys. Steve pushed back his own flare of anger, and instead nudged his thigh against Bucky's dick and rubbed his hand across Bucky's nipple: tell me again what boys don't do. The late afternoon streamed over their ratty old bed.

#

The Howling Commandos got VIP accommodations now, with real beds, because their first mission against Hydra was coming up, and it was a doozy. Steve looked around his room, nicer than any of the hotels he and the USO had stayed at, and he didn't even have to bunk with Hitler. But it made him feel like they thought he was going to die.

He stripped down, got into bed, and switched off the light—and the thing was, he'd opened his mind to Bucky, given him access to everything no matter how dumb or embarrassing or personal, down to his jerking off helplessly to a dirty postcard of a topless French prostitute he'd found in a library book, her legs spread, her tangle of dark pubic hair visible beneath the veil of her clothes. But Bucky was trying to keep his mind off limits, even as he—Steve lay there and swallowed back desire—even as he reached out to Steve across the darkness; Steve could feel his longing like a living thing. Something in Bucky was calling to him, shouting for him, without meaning to do it. So he should pretend not to listen. He would ignore the tingling in his body. He—

Steve was up and shoving his legs into pants before he knew what he was doing, feeling tugged as if by a cord in the center of his chest. He got all the way to Bucky's room and then stopped and leaned against the wall by the door, because this was crazy, he felt crazy. He slid down the wall and sat there, rubbing his temples, pressing his fingers to his eyes. He felt out of control, lost, desperate for it, but if Bucky didn't want to, they shouldn't—

Bucky knew he was out there; Steve could feel the interrogatory press of his mind. Steve?

Steve rolled his head against the wall, half-formed words swelling up and almost voiced, a flurry: if you don't want us to be this—I don't want you to want it because of me—If you don't want—and now he understood why Bucky kept trying to slam the door shut between them, because the feelings said themselves and he couldn't stop— I love you anyway—I'll love you regardless— I don't need to touch you to touch you— your body is beautiful— I—
Steve looked up, quick, as the door opened; Bucky was standing there in his skivvies. "What the hell?"

A dim lamp kissed his edges with light; every groove, every line of him was beautiful. "I'm sorry," Steve said.

Bucky was glancing up and down the hallway, then he was grabbing Steve and hauling him up. "Get in here," Bucky said, and tugged him inside—and Steve had never felt weird being alone with Bucky before, but then there'd never been this kind of honesty between them: there was maybe such a thing as too much honesty.

"It's not my fault!" Steve blurted. "I didn't know this could happen, and I'm not sorry for saving your life—" and Bucky was staring at him, and Steve knew that he was feeling everything Steve felt, the whole strange conflict raging inside him, the fragments of jumbled desire: I didn't know you could want me, but if you want not to want me I understand that, and if you need me to hold the line against it I can do that but—I won't mean it, it will be a lie—

"What do you want?" Bucky asked, and Steve imagined Bucky naked in his arms, their bodies rolling together, Steve's fingers stroking through the sparse hair on Bucky's chest and rubbing his nipples till they hardened, then groping for Bucky's cock, jerking him off, sucking and biting at his lip, tongue in his mouth as they—and Bucky was stumbling back, gasping, cock obviously outlined in his shorts, shock rippling through his mind: You've imagined all that?

Steve nodded fervently, and then Bucky was coming to him and reaching out, and it was so strange to be the same size, to be able to look straight into Bucky's eyes. Bucky hesitated only for a moment before kissing him, and it was so right and so strange to have Bucky's mouth on his. Bucky moaned a little, then, and cupped his face, but Steve leaned in to it, eager and hungry, and willed take me, take every kind of virginity I have, and felt Bucky's breath catch.

#

"What time is it?" Bucky muttered sleepily, pressing a kiss to Steve's shoulder.

"Dunno," Steve said, stirring. They were all warm and pressed up together, and he realized with not much surprise that he'd woken up—normal, which was to say, big; sometime during the war big had become normal. He turned toward the window, the late-afternoon sunlight…and then frowned and sat up, because it had been late-afternoon hours ago, and they'd been fucking and sleeping and... "What time is it?" Steve asked, looking down at Bucky.

"I just asked you," Bucky said, smirking, and then he realized what Steve had just realized: that it was actually an interesting question. He frowned. "Do you have a watch?"

"I—" Steve looked down at his bare wrist; he'd had a watch tucked into his belt, but the belt had gone with the uniform, and now the even clothes crumpled on the floor by the bed were ten sizes too small. "No, do you?"

"No," Bucky said, and twisted to glance at the clock on the wall, which read six o'clock and wasn't ticking. Bucky pushed the covers off and scrambled, naked, down to the foot of the bed; he'd been trapped in on the wall side. "We didn't wind it," Bucky said, reaching up and sliding the key off the top; and of course there was a key there; that's where they'd always kept the key. They looked at each other. "How the fuck do I know?" Bucky said in reply to the unspoken question, and went to the window, and yanked up the sash, and stuck his head out.

"If you're looking for the drugstore clock—" Steve warned.
"I'm not looking for the drugstore clock," Bucky said, jerking back inside.

"Because we'd just be making it up," Steve said.

"I'm looking at the sun," Bucky said.

"We're just making up the sun too," Steve replied, and Bucky turned to him, naked and glaring, and said, "All right, Mr. Constructive—it looks to me like it's about four thirty."

"Yeah, but it's been four-thirty for hours," Steve pointed out.

"That's because we didn't wind the clock," Bucky said, and went to it with the key. "We weren't paying attention to time, so there was no time." He stuck out his finger and dialed the clock hands to 4:30. "Now there'll be time."

"Okay," Steve said doubtfully, "but that's kind of unnerving."

"Yeah, that's unnerving—that's just where I got unnerved, right there; all the rest has been fine," Bucky said, eyerolling, and Steve grinned into his hand at Bucky's sing-songed "fuck you," as he disappeared around the wall into the kitchen. "We should think about food, I guess," Bucky called after a moment. "Dinner."

Steve slid his legs over the side of the bed. "We should think about washing," he countered; his body was sticky, come-splattered. "Can you wish us up some hot water?"

He'd thrown it out, hopeful and half-joking, but when Bucky came back around the wall, Steve saw that he'd taken it as a serious question. "I don't think we should take shortcuts," Bucky said. "With the water or anything else."

"What do you mean?" Steve asked.

"I mean—you got somewhere to be?" Bucky asked, and then Steve understood: if this was the afterlife, it could be—well, a long time; this could be forever. "Whatever this is, it's..." and Bucky looked suddenly lost and sad and hopeful and vulnerable all at at once, standing there naked on their battered wood floor. "It's just us," he said.

"Yeah," Steve replied, nodding. "And—that's okay with me, actually. But I take your point."

"I'll heat some water," Bucky said slowly, looking back into the kitchen, "and we'll fill the tub, and we'll wash," and Steve stopped himself from reminding Bucky that this wasn't their old apartment, which had been a cold-water flat; their new place still had the tub in the kitchen but there had been hot and cold running water both. "And then maybe we'll take a walk, find a luncheonette, or—" He frowned. "Didn't they put an automat in next to the bakery?"

"They did, yeah. Food was pretty good, too. You think it'll still be there?"

"Yeah," Bucky said, holding his gaze. "I think it's gonna be there. You tell me what's good, okay?"

"Bucky," Steve answered seriously, "it's all gonna be good. You pick anything you like." #

They were midway through their second mission when they suddenly clicked—and then they were working on a whole other level, and every time Steve flung the shield, he knew where it would hit without looking, and the soldiers fell before him without him worrying about it, and sometimes he
ducked and something he couldn't see whizzed over his head, and sometimes he spotted soldiers
and they fell down dead before he'd ever lifted his gun, and that was Bucky, above him with a
teleoping rifle; and that was Bucky, somewhere on his right flank, and this was what it was like
to have eyes in the back of your head; he was living in six dimensions at once.

Afterwards, he would find Bucky, or Bucky would find him, and Bucky would be feeling it too—
he'd be flushed and buzzing, hands grasping the leather of Steve's jacket, breathless with it. "I made
the—Steve, did you see that shot I made?" and Steve would be nodding rapidly, because he'd have
_felt_ it, the zinging rightness of it: knowing it was a home run by the crack of the bat. They'd hug
hard and rub each other's heads, or, if there was privacy to be had, Steve would grab him by the
belt, or Bucky'd grab him by the cock, and they'd fall into each other, against each other, and bring
each other off with mouths and hands, knowing without speaking just what the other needed.

Almost everything was easier—Bucky wordlessly handing him rations before he knew he was
hungry, feeling Bucky's rising alertness and silently ordering everyone to raise their weapons.
Some things were harder: Steve tripped, crashing and rolling, knocked sideways by the unexpected
agony, but then he stumbled to his feet and moved blindly, instinctively, like the wounded animal
he was, to where the two Germans had ambushed Bucky, who was struggling between them, the
knife-handle sticking from his ribs. Steve snapped the neck of the first one and threw him aside
without thinking, and he still was savagely bent over the second, having not even realized he was
dead, when Dum Dum and Dernier began wrestling him back, muttering, "it's okay, Cap, it's okay;
you got him," except Bucky was still all fury, those fucking bastards, kill those fucking—even as
Gabe was gently and carefully sliding the knife out of his side and applying pressure to his, their,
the wound. Steve took several deep breaths, then stumbled over to Bucky and dropped to his knees.
"Are you—" _we; are we all right? Bucky, are we, yes, we're fine, we got them, we can breathe, our
ribs are healing, our hurt isn't so bad, come here and kiss me._

They could have people in their world so long as it wasn't anyone specific. The girl at the automat
did what they expected, smiling at them as she rang up their meals, and the guy driving the
streetcar spared them the barest glance as they dropped their nickels into the box, and nobody else
paid them any attention at all; they were chatting, or had their heads buried in newspapers. But it
began to feel real—maybe too real. Steve began to think that, if they weren't careful, they could
fool themselves; or maybe, if they were lucky, they could fool themselves. He wasn't sure.

When they got back, Steve stared at the kitchen cabinets for a moment and then pulled out a bottle
of whiskey that hadn't been in there; the same brand that Bucky'd taken to drinking in London;
Steve had drunk an entire bottle of the stuff after Bucky had been killed.

"Hey," Bucky protested goodnaturedly; he was sitting at the table, he'd drawn out a pack of cards,
"you can't do that; that's cheating."

"Except I _can_ do it." Steve came to the table with two glasses. "I just _did_ it. Do you want some?"

Bucky made a face at him. "Yeah, sure; what the hell," and Steve poured them each a glass. They
clinked and drank, and Bucky shuffled and began to deal out two hands of rummy. "That's great
stuff," Bucky said, taking another sip once he'd picked up and sorted his cards. "Shouldn't get used
to it, though," he said. "It's expensive and—"

Steve rolled his eyes. "What, are you going to work? Go down to the imaginary shipyard to build
imaginary ships?"

Bucky frowned and thought about that as Steve drew a seven and discarded a three. "We could, I
guess—if we wanted to," he said. "It wouldn't be the worst thing. Sense of purpose—"

"Hey, I'm all for a sense of purpose," Steve said, "but that's pointless," and then he snapped his hand of cards down onto the table; he held the ace of diamonds—ten of them. They winked up from the table in a row.

Bucky burst out laughing. "That's no good, you can't play cards with—ESP and whatever the fuck that is—"

"Telekinesis," Steve said, and flipped the cards over—now they were Zener cards, and he shuffled them and dealt them out: the circle, the plus, the star, the three wavy lines. "Gosh, I guess this is what they were testing me for," Steve said, blinking down, and then he flipped over every card so that it was the 9 of clubs. "Ha, see, I was right."

"You're crazy," Bucky said, but he was grinning.

"Yeah, but don't you want to see what we can—?" and Bucky flipped a card into the air and watched it vanish.

#

It's good, it's good—

Yes, it is good, Bucky agreed, staring up breathlessly at him, pinned beneath him on the bedroll, and it wasn't even the sex, or only the sex, that was good, because it was one kind of intimate to have Bucky's hand on him, thumb gently rubbing around the lip of his cock, and another to have Bucky touching his mind, gently turning over his agonies and insecurities with a kind of benevolent incomprehension. Bucky'd never thought he was pathetic or weak, and the pictures of himself he found in Bucky's head—shoulders tilted like a boxer, dirty blond hair falling into his face, scraped knuckles and a bloody mouth, lurching back up to kick some guy in the nuts—were strange and wonderful. Steve found himself almost bemusedly brushing his knuckles against Bucky's unshaven cheek, his open mouth, and he wasn't surprised when Bucky's eyes fluttered closed, his lips suckling, tongue licking at the scars, the hard ridge of bone, but he was still taken aback by the violence of his own feelings, how much he liked muscling Bucky over, and holding him down, and fucking inside of him hot and fast, Bucky's body flexed and shaking beneath him and the triumphant, jubilant rage in his mind—yes, do it, Steve, do me, fuck, yes. But sometimes they just lay together, staring, thoughts co-mingling, Steve trying not to pry but swearing heartfelt violence against anyone who'd ever dared hurt him, which made Bucky laugh and say no but thank you, thanks anyway.

#

"May the road rise to meet you," Bucky murmured, and so far it had. They started by sticking to the blocks they knew best, but soon found that if either of them had even been to a place, their memories would dredge up details that they hadn't known they remembered: butcher shops and newsagents and movie theatres. The streets that neither of them had ever chanced to walk down looked fuzzy and frightening at first ("What's that way?" Bucky asked him; "No idea," Steve replied) but eventually they took the plunge, sticking together, only to find that one building naturally followed another, and one street lead on to the next as expected. So you could get somewhere, anywhere, if you didn't look too close; then you noticed that the street signs were blank, the buildings unnumbered.

Bucky in particular had an outrageously good aural memory, which Steve should have figured from all the sotto voce muttering, drumming and toe-tapping; he hadn't needed ESP to know that
Bucky's head was full of music. But now, here, it was Bucky who put songs on the radio, who expected to hear music and for whom music miraculously came: mostly jazz and swing, but also songs that Steve remembered his ma singing: You Made Me Love You, My Blue Heaven, After You've Gone, Some Day, Melinda. It was Bucky, too, who filled the streets with sounds that Steve hadn't realized he'd been missing and hadn't really been able to appreciate before the war, half-deaf as he was. The rhythmic sound of girls sing-clapping on the street turned out to have words, "...all dressed in black, black, black / with silver buttons, buttons, buttons—" and Steve turned, wide-eyed, to Bucky, who said, "Steve, three sisters. The stuff I've got rattling inside my brain, you can't imagine. Miss Lucy, Miss Susie, the steamboat, the bell," and Steve didn't know what the hell he was talking about, but the clapping girls obviously did, immediately switching to pick up the new rhythm, "She put him in the bathtub, to see if he could swim..."

It was Steve whose memory fleshed out the library on Flatbush Avenue, where he'd spent hours, days, huge chunks of his life. Steve's steps echoed on the dirty marble floor just the way they used to, and the librarians at the elaborately carved circulation desk ignored him just the way they used to, and the books were all where he remembered them being and it was all as expected until he reached up and pulled a volume down off the shelf—and found that the pages were blank. "Oh my God," Steve breathed, genuinely shocked; he'd almost been enjoying the weird malleability of this world, this joint hallucination, but this—this was terrible! He dropped the book onto the table and reached for another, than another, feeling sick and panicked, a hard knot in his gut; blank, blank, blank—

"Hang on," Bucky said, suddenly appearing; "breathe. Take a second and breathe, Stevie," and Steve muttered okay, and stepped away from the library table. Big he might be, but his chest had gone all tight. Bucky was frowning and flipping through the large empty pages of the Phaidon books on Botticelli and Van Gogh, Kent Rockwell's World Famous Paintings. Then he cracked opened the books he'd been carrying—and Steve snatched them from him, because—print. Pages and pages of it, and Steve flipped to their dustjackets. Red Harvest, by Dashiell Hammett. The Mysterious Affair at Styles, by Agatha Christie. He turned to the front page of the Hammett and read, "I first heard Personville called Poisonville by a red-haired mucker named Hickey Dewey in the Big Ship in Butte," and felt a relief go through him that was almost orgasmic. He wanted to clutch the damn book to his chest: give it a kiss.

"How come you get books?" he asked Bucky, almost accusingly; Bucky had taken down another couple of art books from the shelves, but these were blank, too.

"Thinkin' about it," Bucky muttered, and then he pulled down another book and voila, there was a self-portrait of Rembrandt in a cap. Bucky grinned down at it, shaking his head, and then said, "Got it. You've read this one."

"What?" Steve said.

"You've read this one," Bucky said, closing the book and handing it to him. "You can read it cause you've read it. And you can read those because I've read them; I saw them and I wanted to read 'em again."

"But that's—" That was still horrible.

"We can't know what we don't know, same as the time, same as the war. Good thing for me you were kind of a bookworm—didn't you go on a Walpole kick at some point?"

"I did, yeah," Steve said. "Walpole, Priestly, Evelyn Waugh—"

"Guess that's what I'll be reading," Bucky said. "You, pal, are going to be reading a shitload of
detective fiction."

"Hey," Steve said, feeling more grateful than he'd ever felt in his life, "that's okay, that's—" He had an idea then, and looked down at the blank pages of Rockwell's *World Famous Paintings* before closing it. A moment later he opened the cover again and saw a picture of The Mona Lisa.

"Whoa," Bucky said, blinking, "how did you—"

"I put it there, cause it has to be in there—but now I'm thinking," and Steve turned, and there, on the wall of the library, was the Mona Lisa, or near enough.

"Holy shit," Bucky said, and let out a low whistle. "Is that really—"

"No, it's not really! We're making this up, but that's—that's what I think it looks like, that's how I remember it looking, but I…I'm sure it's wrong, it has to be wrong; I've never seen it in person." Steve went over to the painting and peered at it, the patrons around them continuing to mind their business, undisturbed by the masterpiece in their midst. "The paint, the brushstrokes, the dimensions—did DaVinci sign the Mona Lisa? I don't think so."

Bucky was staring at the painting, head-tilted. "I can't help you there, pal. I'm out of my depth."

"It's okay." Steve was realizing that he wouldn't ever see a painting he hadn't seen before; well, all right, fine. Stop with the pity party. Most people never got to see any paintings at all. "It's—a reproduction," he said. "But that's okay. Lots of artists only ever saw reproductions," and then he laughed. "Hell. It's a reproduction by me."

#

While on mission in occupied France, Steve found a pouch full of documents in the coat pocket of a high-ranking German officer; they were codes, he realized excitedly; he was sure they were. He radioed for immediate transport back to London for the Howling Commandos and brought the documents straight to Peggy, whose red mouth curved into a wider and wider grin she pored over them, bent over the desk with him, their heads pressed together.

"This is good, Steve," she said, grinning. "This is really good."

"I know it," Steve said, grinning back at her.

"Right, I'm taking these to Allied Force Headquarters," she said, gathering them up. Their eyes met, and then she gripped his arm and stretched up to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Come with me; it's your find, and—"

"No, no," Steve said, swallowing and shaking his head, face burning. "You go. I—don't need to talk to the brass—"

He stepped back, away from her, and collided with Bucky; Bucky was standing behind him, and Steve—Steve had known that, hadn't he—had felt the strange lurch of feelings even as he hadn't known what they—

Bucky was staring at Peggy with a look at Steve had never seen on his face before: naked longing. Bucky was usually so guarded with other people. "Agent Carter," Bucky said, choked, and Steve felt the twist in Bucky's gut as she turned her smile on him. "That's—some stuff we found there, huh?" and that didn't sound like Bucky at all.

"Yes," Peggy said; she was glowing with happiness. "It's wonderful."
"We should—have a drink later. Maybe. All three of us," he added, and dug his fingers into Steve's arm. "To—celebrate."

"That sounds fun." Peggy looked at Steve to see what he thought. Steve managed a noncommittal shrug. "I'll check in when I'm back," she said, looking from one to the other of them, and then, to Steve: "You're sure you won't come?"

"I'm—sure, yes." Steve managed a smile; Bucky looked flushed and mussed, but he was the one who was sweating. "I'll see you later," and when she was gone, he turned to Bucky, shocked and upset. "What the hell are you—?"

"You like her," Bucky said, and he didn't seem mad but Steve couldn't help but hear it as an accusation.

"Yeah," Steve admitted, "okay, I like her, but you— You know how I feel about—"

"You turn on for her," Bucky interrupted softly. "Your dick likes her."

"Yeah." It wasn't like he could lie about it. Bucky could see inside him, for Christ's sake. "But—"

"You don't understand," Bucky said tensely, and then suddenly Steve did; understanding came to him in floods of lust, longing, resentment. You like boys and girls, and okay, yes—but what did it matter? It wasn't important—except he had Bucky's answer to that too, before he could even ask the question.

"It's not important to you because you're—" normal, and that was so infuriating that Bucky jerked backwards, away from him, looking at him a little uncertainly. But Steve could feel desire steaming off him; not desire for Peggy, but— You like her. I feel it. I can feel what it feels like to want—but Steve was already shaking his head.

"No," Steve said.

'I don't mean—I'll leave," Bucky said imploringly. "One drink and I'll leave. But if you—and she—if you and she were to—" you like her, I know you do; I can feel it. You want her, your dick wants her, and I could—I'd know—"

"Fine," Steve said, shortly, crossing his arms, "but we'd have to tell her."

Bucky stared. "What?"

"We'd have to tell her; we'd have to say, 'Peggy, you know how Bucky and I are mentally linked? Well, he wants me to make love to you so he'll know what it feels like to want a woman.'"

Bucky thought about that and then blew out a long breath. "You think I'll feel it when she breaks your jaw?"

"Yeah, I think you will!" Steve shouted, glaring, and Bucky sighed and said, "Okay, yeah, sorry. It was stupid and selfish and—never mind," but he could feel Bucky's disappointment, his inner sadness—which tipped into hurt when he felt Steve thinking that he was upset for nothing. Steve closed his eyes and breathed, trying to project love and understanding like butter over a burn, and it turned out that maybe you couldn't tell someone else what was important to them, even if you were right about it. He could feel the hurt in Bucky like an open wound.

"I can't—we—can't go," Steve told Peggy later. "I want to, but—we just can't," and Peggy smiled a little sadly at him and said, "I understand, Steve. Really I do," but later that night Steve lay awake,
feeling like he'd failed both of them. No, you haven't—and that was Bucky, awake somewhere too—you stupid idiot, how can you account for this craziness? Except everything in this war was crazy, that was no excuse for—moron, dope, always trying to prove someth—and Steve pictured the leather strap crossing Peggy Carter's ankle: imagined rubbing his thumb over it and then sliding his hand up her smooth calf, and felt Bucky's breath catch. It's just the same, Steve thought; the feeling, the heat, the way you got hard and your skin prickled and tingled, the tightening in your balls when you—and then his brain spun into a tour of his most arousing thoughts: girls caught in the rain, laughing and running past his window with their hair and clothes soaked. Hurrying through the USO dressing rooms with his troupe laughing and chatting in various states of undress—a girl with beautiful rounded breasts and tan flat nipples putting her bra on backwards, hooking it in front and then twisting it around—and one of the usherettes in Cleveland breaking all the rules to pull him backstage after a show: she'd kissed him and touched him and put her hand in his pants, and then she'd let him feel her breasts while she straddled his thigh and bore down on him, biting her lip until she—

He lost his train of thought, gripped and shaken by— Bucky was coming; Bucky was gasping at the ceiling, at some other ceiling; he'd been stroking himself to the rhythm of Steve's thoughts. Steve's blood raced in time, but all that stuff in his head was old news, well-worn memories, nothing compared to Bucky himself, having Bucky himself—in the flesh, all sun-browned skin over lean, hard muscle, getting to touch him, kiss him, stroke down his sides, fingers caressing his ribs, following the hard curves of his back, his powerful thighs, Jesus, he—and no, yes, yes, do come, come now, Steve thought desperately, knowing it was a terrible idea, a needless risk, sneaking around HQ; in a day or two they'd be back in the field, out on their own and—but Bucky was already sneaking down the halls towards the officer's quarters, drawn to Steve by the force of Steve's desire for him, which transcended all rational thought.

Steve tumbled out of bed and went to stand, breathless, by the door. He felt when Bucky was close, then yanked the door open and pulled Bucky inside —and Bucky shoved him back against the closed door and kissed him, hands cupping his shoulders, his neck. Steve closed his eyes and opened his mouth: out of everything that they'd done, this was maybe still the most incredible to him. The most wonderful and the most shocking, that they could kiss like this: that you could kiss a man the same way you'd kiss a woman. It was all just the same, it was all just the—

Bucky broke away to glare at him, but he looked amused. "Not to me, it isn't," but then he was dragging Steve to the bed and pushing him down onto his back and crawling up over him, huge and hard and laughing down at him. "But you're something, you know that? I've been with women, but when you tell it? The way you tell it?" Bucky dragged his cock against Steve's and they both moaned. "I feel it, I really—" and then Bucky muttered, "—oh, look, your dick likes me, too," and then he was sliding his way down Steve's body to shape his mouth around Steve's cock.

#

They tried using a calendar to mark the time, to organize their expectations about the seasons and the weather, but it didn't work; they wanted it to be nice outside every day, so it was. And then one morning Bucky woke up after dreaming of snowballs and they went outside and pelted each other for three hours, laughing and skidding and tripping in the snow, and when their fingers were numb and their lips were blue they went to the corner luncheonette for big bowls of soup and hot cocoa. When they got home Bucky tore down the calendar.

"There's no point to it anyway," Bucky said. "We're just making it up like everything else. There's no saying that time in here corresponds to anything out there if there even is an out there still out there—" and Steve knew that was true; time could be funny like that. Sometimes you thought you'd only just closed your eyes and it turned out you'd slept hours and it was morning; other times
you were sure you'd slept all night but it had only been 15 minutes.

"Let's make it super hot tomorrow," Steve suggested, "and spend the day on Coney Island," and so that's what they did, trudging down to the train, heat blurring off the sidewalk and the side of the buildings. The train came as they expected, and took them down to Surf Avenue as they expected, and as they expected, the beach was packed—the heat had driven everyone out of their flats and tenements and down to the ocean. They fought their way down to the water and spread out a blanket, and, jumping into the cool water, Steve momentarily forgot he was big, and came out skinny and dripping, only realizing it upon seeing a shit-eating grin on Bucky's face and a wicked look in his eye.

"Oh, I like it, I like it," Bucky said, and Steve yelled out a laugh and turned and ran with Bucky right behind him, arms stretching out to grab him. Bucky wrestled him into the waves before picking him up bodily and throwing him hard—splash!—into the water. Steve laughed and rode the wave back, diving under at the last moment to take Bucky's legs out from under him. It was a long time since anyone had had him in a headlock. He kind of missed it.

After a while, they stumbled back to their blanket and ate salami sandwiches with sand-crusted fingers and took a long nap in the sun with their wet shirts draped over them to cool them off, and later, they stumbled, sunburned and happy, back to the train, and—

#

Peggy and Colonel Phillips and some other officers that Steve didn't know were all peering up at a large map on the wall of the briefing room. Peggy glanced over her shoulder, then smiled and came over. "Steve," she said warmly, and then, clearing her throat and speaking more formally, "Captain. We've just decoded a Hydra communiqué using the codes you found: Schmidt wants Zola back in Austria. They're sending him on a train through the Alps."

#

—it was unexpected when Bucky suddenly convulsed and collapsed on the BMT platform. Steve reacted without thinking, dropping everything and flailing to catch him—then recoiled in horror, because Bucky was—Bucky—the arm he'd grabbed for wasn't there anymore. There was just a—a stump—a white piece of bone hanging out of his sleeve—and Bucky on his side looking—different, older, paler, more pained—and then he disappeared.

Steve stared down at the stained concrete, shocked. Bucky was gone. Vanished, like he'd never been, and Steve felt his own legs going soft, and he sat down, hard, beside the place where Bucky'd fallen. Around him, the station continued to buzz: a train arrived, legs walked past him. Nobody stopped to check on him or to ask if he was okay; he didn't want them to. They were only fake people anyway. Bucky had been the only real person in the world.

Steve closed his eyes and took a breath.

"Bucky?"

"Bucky?"

"Come on, Buck, please? Answer me, pal."

"Bucky, are you out there?"

"Bucky, where are you? Tell me where you are. I'll come to you. Wherever you are, I'll—" but it was Peggy's voice that came back to him; Peggy saying that he and Bucky were on the same
wavelength post serum, which was why they could communicate mentally: their brains had been tuned to the same frequency. Like a telephone, she’d said; and Steve opened his eyes and stared at where Bucky had been—that was a hangup, he thought. Bucky'd hung up, or he'd been made to hang up. The connection had been severed. The line had gone dead.

Steve lay back on the platform and stared at the rusted metal overhang while the fake people walked around him. The truth of things, Steve thought, steeling himself for it, was that Bucky was hurt somewhere; badly hurt. In his mind, Bucky imagined himself whole and happy, just like sometimes Steve sometimes imagined himself as short and scrappy, but the truth of things was that Bucky's body had been smashed and battered by the fall from the train into the snow, just as surely as Steve's body was lying, crushed, beneath a flood of Arctic—

That was it. That was it—they were in some kind of coma, both of them—living some kind of nightmarish half-life, neither dead nor alive, not conscious but somehow still—thinking. Wherever they were, their brains were still on the same wavelengths—or they had been, until now, till the hangup. Maybe they were both slowly freezing to death in the snow; or maybe they'd both been found and were lying in twin hospital beds, unconscious and kept alive by tubes and wires, breathing machines. Steve knew you could live a long time inside an iron lung.

So maybe Bucky…was better, Steve thought, trying to avoid the real terror. Maybe he'd woken up, regained consciousness; maybe he was sitting in some hospital room with his head wrapped in bandages. That would be good, right? Steve didn't have it in him to be bitter about that. Or maybe, Steve thought, slowly working his way around to it, feeling his way to it, Bucky had…died. Maybe Bucky's injuries had been too much for him. That arm…hadn't looked good, hanging off like that; nothing about Bucky's condition had looked good.

What if Bucky didn't come back? Was life worth getting up off the ground for, this fake life of fake everything? Should he go back to their apartment and pretend—what? That it was 1942, and Bucky'd gone off to war and he was there, waiting for Bucky's fake letters? No. Better to throw himself off the Brooklyn Bridge—but would he even die, here, if he imagined his death? He hadn't been man enough to go to war. Was he real enough to die?

"This isn't payback, is it?" Bucky asked warily, and Steve had waggled his eyebrows, but this was a crazy thing even by the standards of the Howling Commandos: sliding down a cable onto a moving train, with numb fingers and everything ice-sheeted. Still, there was no fear in Bucky, just curiosity—he was absorbed by the logistics, the physics of the thing, which was fascinating to Steve because he never thought about stuff like that: angles and friction and the direction of the wind. But now Steve knew those things too, because Buck thought like an engineer.

Inside the train, it seemed to Steve that Hydra had taken pains to separate them—slamming the door shut between them and forcing them to fight separately, but he'd known when Bucky was running low on ammo and thrown him a gun, and he'd felt it when Bucky hefted his shield, and he'd felt the force and the heat of the blast—

Get up, and that was his mother's voice. Get up, Steven, and he'd always gotten up but he thought he was maybe down for the count this time. He felt the ice at his back, creeping over him.

—when it hit the shield, blowing Bucky back and out of the train and into the icy mountain air, and
Steve hurled himself after, because he could feel Bucky's hands clenching the train's grab bar, could feel Bucky's legs swinging wildly in the open air above the chasm, feel the strain in Bucky's arms and shoulders as he struggled to hang on, hang on, Bucky, hang on, grab "my hand! Grab my hand! Bucky!" and he felt the teeth-clenching burning strain ripping Bucky's muscles apart and the shrieking agony of friction on his skin and the weightless heart-stopping terror as Bucky let go. The moment stretched out endless and white as Bucky fell, the wind was a whip, a beater, his head snapped back, and Steve wrapped his mind around him, clutching, helpless to do anything but hold on, love, comfort, cushion, Jesus, he'd give anything for it to be him, his body taking the impact—and then suddenly the ice was stinging his eyes and he was clinging to the side of the train and everything had gone quiet, he was alone, deaf, riding broken and empty through the deep silence, and even his screams felt tinny and faraway to his own ears.

Get up, but that was when there'd been something to get up for; when his life could have impact, purpose—but he could imagine Peggy's reproving stare, the disapproving tone of her voice. He wasn't dead yet, or not quite anyway, and so he had to hang on, had to be ready to seize any opportunity that came to him. Where there's life, there's hope.

Steve groaned and hauled himself up, the ice melting and dripping off his arms. The Stillwell Avenue El station sharpened back into life around him. He should go home. He should eat something. He waited, a walking dead man, for the train to arrive, and when it did he got on and went back to their apartment. Bucky's jacket was on the hook, his clothes were still in the closet, a half-read paperback, *Vile Bodies*, was open, face down on the table.

The world had gone quiet. The city sounds were muffled without Bucky to bring them out, but worse yet was the numb quiet of his own head, like his skull'd been stuffed with cotton batting. It was like this when Bucky died: the Howling Commandos had had to pry him off the side of the train, and he'd been useless for the rest of the mission: he could barely walk, let alone fight; his limbs felt clumsy, stupid; he was uncoordinated; he was blind in one eye.

He had a sandwich and a glass of water and then threw them both up again when he reached for his own book, Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, and found all of the pages blank. He let himself go, then; let himself sob stupidly for a few minutes until all the damned self-pity had drained out of him, because if there was one benefit to this hellish situation, it was that there wasn't anybody to be proud for; ain't nobody here but us chickens.

Afterward, he wiped his face and had two large slugs of Bucky's whiskey and went to bed, and he was very near to dozing off when the whispering began in his head.

"Bucky?" Steve said, bolting up.

Steve?

Steve was out of bed immediately; he was surging with joy, his throat clogged with it. "Bucky, where are you?"

*I don't know.*

He was shoving his feet into shoes, pounding down the steps to the dark street. "I'll find you," Steve said, looking around. "I'm coming for you. Just hang on," and his impulse was to run, to just start running where his instincts took him, but then he remembered what Bucky had said: *I heard you calling, so I came. I wished myself where you were,* and so Steve closed his eyes and wished
himself to where Bucky was, and he was oddly unsurprised to find himself outside of the Brooklyn storefront that had disguised the lab that contained the Vita-Ray machine, and he went inside and pushed open the secret door and took the stairs down two at a time.

Bucky was there, strapped to a surgical table and surrounded by bloody instruments and syringes; it was the most terrible deja-vu, but at least he was getting to see Bucky again, to save him again. "Bucky," Steve said, rushing to him, and he'd already started to undo the straps when he looked away from Bucky's groggy, pained face to what he'd vaguely thought was a splint or some kind of cast—but it wasn't. It was—an arm, and Steve stared as Bucky absentely moved his hand and a series of metal plates shifted, whirring. Steve gently pulled at the bandages on Bucky's chest and shoulder and saw a series of terrible puffy red and white scars where the arm had been attached.

"Steve?" Bucky seemed disoriented. "Steve, is it really you? What—what's happening?"

"I don't know, Buck," Steve said quietly, pressing the bandages back down. "You were here and then you were gone—and now you're back. I guess they were fixing your arm. It looks like someone's given you a spiffy metal arm—"

"A what?" Bucky asked, and then he was raising his hands to his face and staring from one to the other—and Steve felt the revulsion wash over him even before Bucky went green and started shaking his head, no, no, no, no. And then, abruptly, Bucky's hand changed: Bucky himself changed before Steve's eyes, the lines of his face smoothing out, the bandages disappearing, and when Bucky reached out to lever himself up, both of his arms were made of flesh. "Get me out of here," he croaked. "I want to get out of here," and Steve nodded and helped him off the table.

"Where are we?" Bucky asked, looking around confusedly, and Steve said, "We're still in Brooklyn. This is the lab in Brooklyn where—they made me. Where they gave me the serum. That's—" Steve looked at it. "That's the Vita-Ray machine," except wait, no it wasn't. Steve stared: the front window was shaped differently, and the tubes leading it into it were different: they weren't power cables, but tubes of green fluid, some kind of coolant maybe—

Bucky went wide-eyed and jerked away from the machine. "Something bad is happening to me," he whispered. "It's like a dream but…it's a bad dream," and then he let out a soft, hurt sound. Steve hugged him and roughly kissed his mouth, and Bucky clutched back; he was cold, clammy. "Is this real?" Bucky muttered. "Please be real, Steve," and then he pulled back and stared at Steve with terrified eyes. "Steve—out there?" His voice cracked. "It hasn't been hours or days," and Steve knew it, understood the horror of it before Bucky could say it: "Steve. It's been years."

**Part Two.**

There seemed to be no pattern to Bucky's disappearances. He would just vanish, and sometimes he'd be back in an hour, and once it had been—by Steve's reckoning—nearly four days, though he had no idea what "four days" in here corresponded to in the outside world. Mostly Bucky would reappear right where he'd vanished, but sometimes he turned up somewhere else, collapsed on the sidewalk or in the park or once, in the middle of the street outside, and Steve felt him come on the line just before he heard the blare of horns and the screeching of tires.

It was always a race to get to Bucky as soon as possible, not just because Bucky was often bleary and sick, gray-faced with nausea, but because there were clues written on his body—in scars, in fresh wounds, in blood. In those first, delirious moments of Bucky's reappearance, Steve could see
that was he was unshaven and needed a haircut, that he'd been stabbed and sutured, that the scars were healing around his metal arm; the war clearly wasn't over. Then Bucky would swim back to consciousness and reassert himself, transforming back into the man Steve knew: short hair, clean-shaven, nattily dressed, two flesh arms—but with terrible dark shadows under his eyes.

He never asked Bucky what happened—not anymore. He'd tried at first, though it was just a formality; he could feel the churn of violent thoughts and the jagged, fragmented memories. He tried to put them together to form a coherent picture, but they melted quickly, like ice in the sun, leaving his fingers dripping. There was pain, screaming, blood—guns, so many guns; fuck this war—and once someone had broken Bucky's cheekbone, and once there was the face of a pretty red-haired girl, wide-eyed and scuttling away in terror, and then the cold blankness of a cinder block wall. Sometimes he could feel the traces of calculations in Bucky's mind, like algebra problems written on a chalkboard and only perfunctorily erased: *angles and friction and the direction of the wind*. But these thoughts broke apart as Bucky reeled back to equilibrium—"Steve? Is that—? Where am—?" and Steve couldn't wish him to remember.

"Bucky, wake up," Steve would whisper. "Wake up, Buck. It's just a bad dream." But they both knew it wasn't.

Bucky's disappearances—his kidnappings, Steve thought darkly; his abductions—gave structure to their lives in a way that the clock and the calendar hadn't. Steve found himself counting the days from Bucky's return—each return was Day 1—toward some unknown and unknowable future terror, and the more time passed, the more Steve worried, fearing the moment Bucky would be taken, ripped away from him. It made the time oddly precious, or at least stopped it from feeling meaningless. Because Bucky could die out there—this was perfectly clear from the way he came back battered and broken. Bucky was still at war and he could be killed at any time.

#

They had a lot of sex. They played a lot of cards. They saw a lot of movies—Bucky suggested they go to the big movie palace on DeKalb, which was just as they remembered it. They screened movies for each other, though the ones they'd seen together were always clearer, sharper somehow: two minds filling in the details. And then one day they were watching the final minutes of *Cobra Woman*, which Steve had never seen before but which Bucky claimed to have seen in London in the summer of 1944—claimed, because Steve began to smell a rat. It was a pretty good movie about an evil queen who danced with a cobra and threw her subjects into a volcano, plus hey, Sabu, but by the end of the movie, when the spaceships landed and the evil queen's twin sister arrived with a laser gun, Steve began sending Bucky narrow looks.

"This isn't—you never saw this movie," Steve accused.

"Did so," Bucky protested.

Sabu ran down the ramp of one of the alien ships wearing a loincloth and a space helmet. "You're making this up."

Bucky sighed, shrugged. "Just this part," he admitted, and then: "There was an air raid, they stopped the—"

The picture on the screen flickered. Steve reached out and gripped Bucky's arm. "Hey, I want to see how it turns out," which was that the good sister conquered the evil sister and then Jon Hall turned up and, uh, seemed to be on the verge of making it with both of them, which was something to see. Steve applauded, grinning as the credits rolled. Directed by Robert Siodmak and J.B. Barnes, Written by Gene Lewis and J.B. Barnes…
Steve leaned back, impressed. "You missed your calling, J.B."

Bucky laughed. "It sounds good, right?" Bucky asked. "Real Hollywood, right?"


He was able to return the favor a few days later when it turned out he had never read the last few pages of *It Can't Happen Here*. Bucky turned the page and, finding the next one blank, threw the book at Steve's head. Steve picked it up and frowned at it; he had the sudden, vivid memory of reading it in the sun, dust motes spinning—his mother had moved his bed into their one patch of strong sunlight—while lying on a threadbare blanket, and then he'd gotten the pneumonia and hadn't finished it. He supposed his mother had returned it to the library while he was ill.

Steve read:

"In his two years of dictatorship, Berzelius Windrip daily became more a miser of power. He continued to tell himself that his main ambition was to make all citizens healthy, in purse and mind, and that if he was brutal it was only toward fools and reactionaries who wanted the old clumsy systems. But after eighteen months of Presidency he was angry that—"

—and then he turned the page and that was all. He flipped through the pages, refreshing his memory as to the story and its characters—right, Buzz Windrip was an American Fascist, elected to the Presidency instead of Roosevelt. Well, he had to be beaten back somehow, and even as Steve stared the pages began to fill up with words. He handed the book to Bucky and watched him read, feeling smug. FDR and his newly-formed Jeffersonian party had made a comeback! Organized a committee and taken back the presidency after a fair and democratic elect—

Bucky looked up, glaring. "I gave you an alien attack and a love triangle. With twins."

Steve frowned. "Yeah, but—"

"You gave me a civics lesson. You gave me—why not make it the Minute Men? Or, you know—Captain America. Okay, wait, look, here's how it goes," Bucky said, hunching forward. "Windrip is President but he's a bastard, right? Getting us into all of these stupid wars, invading Alaska, Mexico, Cuba, just to make people feel patriotic. And his army, the Minute Men, they mostly do what he tells them because that's their job, he's Commander-In-Chief, but some are them are beginning to feel squirmy about it. But nobody wants to be the first to speak up." Bucky looked at him significantly and then raised one finger: "Until one man… One self-righteous man…"

"Oh, no." Steve groaned and let his head hang down.

"…one tiny little self-righteous man," Bucky continued, warming to it, "too dumb to keep his mouth shut and wearing the stupidest outfit known to mankind, stands up to fight against—eh, you know: nobody would believe it."

"Truth is stranger than fiction," Steve agreed.

"History has terrible writers," Bucky said, frowning. "I don't understand how—" and then he was grimacing with pain and seizing up, gagging, falling and Steve was there in a second, an instant, grabbing him and wrapping himself around him—wanting to hold him—or go with him—or—

Bucky vanished. Steve toppled, tripped, crashed to the wood floor, and then punched his fist through it, splintered planks flying like shrapnel. And then there was only him and the empty apartment and the ticking of the clock. He pressed his forehead to the floor.
He got up, washed his face, and went to make himself some lunch. After, he would pull out the easel and his artbox, maybe make a run over Pearl Paint for a new canvas—painting would make the time go, painting would absorb him, and if he worked quickly, he'd maybe have something to show Bucky whenever Bucky got back.

#

Four days. Five. Six. Bucky'd never been gone a whole week before. Steve tried to keep calm, to keep still, to just focus on living, on painting, on guiding his brush down a sharp, precise edge. He tried not to think about where Bucky was now. They'd made him into some kind of supersoldier, that was clear, and they'd fixed him up well enough that they could still use him when they needed him. But how long could the damn war go on? Years, Bucky had said. There'd been The Thirty Years War. The Hundred Years War. The war could outlive them all, could —

Steve's hand started to shake and he pulled the brush back. The war wouldn't outlive him. He couldn't get drunk. He couldn't get older. He couldn't— He blinked and tried to focus on the painting, to force the thought away. He couldn't die. Somewhere, out in the ice, his body was regenerating as fast as it deteriorated. If Bucky didn't come back—

It hit him like a slap. If he couldn't die, maybe Bucky couldn't either—but Bucky was at war, Bucky was still— Steve sat down slowly. Bucky was still fighting. Bucky was being pushed to the limit, nearly killed or really killed again and again—and then, what? Put into some kind of healing coma; something that brought his brainwaves down and made him strong enough to do it all over again. Christ. Steve pushed the back of his wrist against his forehead, his empty head. Paint stained his fingers. His mind thudded against a blank wall. There was no music in his head, no laughter, no dirty jokes, none of Bucky's rumbling calculations as to how they were going to manage this or that. Bucky's thoughts had thrummed in his mind like a heartbeat. He was disjointed. He couldn't breathe right.

Bucky would come back. He'd always come back before. Bucky would come back and they'd have more time together, continue their life together—

#

The person who came back was wearing black goggles and a mask that covered the whole rest of his face. Steve jerked back, startled and afraid, because it was Bucky, he knew it was, but at the same time—it wasn't. The tilt of his shoulders was different; the weight of metal arm, Steve realized, throwing off his balance. The angle of his head was—not different; Steve recognized it. It was the intense, almost animalistic attention Bucky had right before he made a difficult shot. But there was no music. It was hard not to put his hands over his ears, not that it would have helped. Bucky's head was full of static, the terrible scratching of a radio caught between stations, and Steve was just going to try adjusting the knob when the metal hand shot out fast and seized his throat.

Steve was so surprised that he didn't even think to fight back, and Bucky smashed two terrifically powerful punches into his face as the metal hand constricted his windpipe. "Bucky," Steve croaked, but the pressure didn't let up, and so instinctively, nearly whiting out, he struck out hard against the metal arm to break its grip and then kicked Bucky backwards the second the hard fingers unlocked. Bucky crashed back, smashing their table into matchsticks, but didn't hesitate, rolling with absurd grace and unholstering a huge silver gun from his belt. Steve stared, raising his hands in protest, placating, as if his hands could stop bullets—though who knew: hell, maybe in here they could.

"Bucky," Steve said, hands still raised, trying to ignore the terrible metallic screeching in his head. "Bucky, it's me; it's Steve." The man in the mask raised the gun, aimed at him; Bucky couldn't
miss, not at this range. "Bucky," Steve said again; should he grab his shield? Should he let Bucky shoot him? He didn't think he would die, even if Bucky expected him to—but he couldn't risk it. He couldn't leave Bucky—not again, not ever: certainly not like this. "Bucky, you're having a bad dream," Steve pleaded. "Look around you. Look—you're home," and he couldn't tell if the eyes behind the black goggles moved or not, but the gun wavered a fraction of an inch—just enough to give Steve hope.

"Bucky," Steve said again, "wake up. It's me. It's Steve. Look," and he spread his arms apart, hands going to each side of his head, surrendering and introducing himself both—and giving Bucky a clear shot as his chest. And he hadn't noticed when it happened, he'd been so focused on Bucky, but somewhere in there he'd gone small again, clothes hanging off him the way they used to. You can take the kid out of Brooklyn, Steve thought despairingly—but maybe that was backwards; maybe he looked like this because this was what Bucky needed him to look like.

The high-pitched whine slowed and became—mere terror, and Steve was already moving forward, ignoring the shiny gun as if it wasn't there, because that was Bucky, that was. "Steve?" Bucky said, muffled, and Steve reached up and pulled the black goggles free, tugged the awful mask off—and it was Bucky, then, long-haired and unshaved, his eyes so dilated with panic so that there was no blue in them. Bucky stared him like he was seeing a ghost.

"Yeah, Buck. Yeah," Steve said, nodding and then Bucky's hands were on him, strange but familiar: one metal, one gloved in black leather. Bucky was touching him like he was blind—touching his face, ears, shoulders. "It's me."

The confusion in Bucky's head was settling like flakes falling to the bottom of a snowglobe, and Steve tried to see whatever he could before it melted—an explosion, fire, blood, but not Bucky's blood, Bucky wasn't the one who—

Bucky frowned as his metal fingers touched Steve's throat. Steve winced; he'd left bruises.

—been hurt, killed. It had been others. A battle, maybe, but it didn't seem like a battle. An operation, then; maybe something like they'd done with the Howling Commandos—and then there was a flash of a date: September 1961.

"1961?" Steve repeated, shocked and numb: could it really be 1961? That was science fiction, that was—

"Yeah," Bucky said, seeming distant and far away. "I went to Rhodesia. I—"

Rhodesia? "Where are you now?" Steve asked, and the tank appeared, massive and terrifying, in their small kitchen, a gray, metal-riveted cylinder hooked up to tubes of fluid, its small window thickly frosted over; the same tank Steve had seen in the place of the VitaRay machine.

"Cryostasis," Bucky said, almost without thinking, and then his eyes widened and Steve could feel the terror of the gas rising and freezing the air, and all around them frost was climbing up the faded wallpaper, creeping over everything, encasing them in darkness and shadow, and he could feel Bucky's bloody fingertips scrabbling at the window and then freezing over, freezing solid.

"Bucky, stop," Steve said, looking around nervously; the place was fast becoming a tomb. "Stop." Panic overtook him and he turned, willing a door-shaped crack in the ice. He gripped the knob—it was slippery, cold—and opened it, and Bucky slid past him, fast, gun raised and roughly tucking Steve behind him, methodically clearing the corridor and the staircase outside their apartment like he was expecting Germans or Hydra or who knows what.
"Bucky, listen to me," Steve pleaded, "this is all in your—" but Bucky yanked a rifle from his back and turned, aimed, fired, and Steve gasped as a man fell off the roof of the building opposite theirs and plummeted to the street in a heap of bloody limbs. "Bucky!" and Steve was shocked and outraged enough to snatch the gun right out Bucky's hands; Bucky stared at him blankly. "These are Americans!" Steve shouted. "This is Brooklyn! None of this is even real!" and it took him a second to realize that those statements contradicted each other, and then he sat down on the curb, overwhelmed and disgusted, and put his head in his hands.

Bucky stayed still, for a moment; continuing surveillance, Steve supposed. "Brooklyn?" he said finally.

Steve lifted his head. "Yeah," he said.

A moment later, Bucky sat down on the cracked curb beside him. He was wearing black armor over black fatigues, combat boots with fancy treads—and guns, lots of them, camouflaged against his clothes. "Brooklyn," he repeated.

"Yeah," Steve said.

Bucky turned to stare down their street like he'd never seen it before, then he was looking down at his hands; his metal fingertips. It took Steve a moment to process what he said next, it was so quiet. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, Bucky, no," Steve replied hastily. "This is la la land, remember? You can't hurt me. Hell," Steve added, rubbing his eyes, "I should have just wished us out of there but—I don't know, I panicked."

"Yeah, I—" Bucky's voice was uncertain, like he'd forgotten how to use it. "I guess I panicked, too."

Steve was suddenly overcome with shame; whatever nightmare that had just been, those were just Bucky's rapidly fading memories of it—Bucky'd been living in whatever hell that was. He looked down at Bucky's metal hand, then curled his own hand around it; maybe it was that he was still small, but Bucky seemed bigger to Steve than he had been; bulkier, stronger somehow. He supposed that it was a side effect of whatever superserum they'd given him.

"They've—frozen you, somehow?" Steve asked softly, trying to be casual about it.

Bucky jerked a nod. "Cryofreeze," he said, and then: "I don't know what that means."

Now it was Steve's turn to nod slowly. "And...Rhodesia, you said?"

Bucky was frowning deeply. "Is that what I said? I don't..."

"Christ," Steve said, choking up, "is it the same war? It can't be the same war."

He felt bad for asking the question, could feel Bucky trying to sort through memories that were like pieces of a broken mirror, smashed and jagged. The Howling Commandos had fought in North Africa, but those fragments didn't match the ones in Bucky's head. "I don't know," Bucky said finally. "I—shot down an airplane," he confessed.

"Okay," Steve said, concealing his shock.

"They asked me to shoot down a plane," Bucky said; the lanky dark hair hung down his face. "Asked," he repeated, and then he laughed, and Steve could hear that high-pitched whine starting
up in his head. He gripped Bucky's hand—metal hand, metal fingers—and then moved impulsively, taking advantage of his small size relative to Bucky's sudden bulk to turn and sling his knee over Bucky's lap so that he was more or less sitting astride him, gripping his shoulders. Bucky steadied him with his hands and tilted his head back to look at him.

"Let's go dancing," Steve said. "We haven't done that yet. One of those dance halls down Myrtle Avenue—"

"You hate that," Bucky said, and he was Bucky enough to remember that.

"I'm feeling sentimental," Steve said. "Come on, we could get dressed, go out, have a drink. What's your favorite band, I bet they'll be playing. Take me to one of those bars on Franklin Street. Or just—" and when Bucky's hand reached his face, it was warm; Bucky became Bucky again between one kiss and the next.

#

"God—no—again," Steve gritted out, barely able to speak, "do it again; come on, again," and Bucky half-laughed and muttered, "pushy little bastard" even as he yanked Steve's hips up and thrust down again. Christ, and Steve sucked for air and came messily all over himself. Bucky stared down at him, then squeezed his eyes shut, but it was too late; his smooth, pale hips were jerking forward erratically. Their bodies thumped together, and pleasure burned up Steve's spine. It was too much, too much, if Bucky stopped he would—Christ, please don't let him stop.

Bucky's hips stuttered, then he went still, breathing hard, before collapsing heavily on top of Steve. Steve closed his eyes and hooked his leg over Bucky's, luxuriating in the feel of all that warm skin against his.

"Dancing's great and all," Bucky dragged his face against Steve's, "but there's better ways to get sweaty."

"No argument here." Heat was steaming off them as they lay together, sweating and panting. Steve's hand drifted down Bucky's back, where the scars weren't—not anymore. Bucky made a low, guttural sound of pleasure, and Steve closed his eyes and turned his face into Bucky's hair, happy and grateful for his happiness. He let himself drift, only half surprised to find himself in Bucky's mind—though Bucky's memory was terrible, he'd turned Steve's dirty blond hair practically to gold, and his pale skin was glowing and his bony elbows were clean and even his black eye looked prettied up, all black and purple and yellow. It had only ever been Bucky—Bucky and Peggy—

"—that you know of." Bucky murmured.

—who liked him as he was before the serum, who'd ever looked at him with frank liking. Everyone else had shown him thin smiles and averted eyes, or worse; Sandra Cooper'd lip had practically curled with scorn when Steve—

There was what's her name, that pretty Jewish girl from the library—

—Flora Rosenthal, but that was impossible; Flora Rosenthal had taken a flight to Rhodesia, and they'd spent weeks exchanging awkward smiles before Steve could even work up the courage to introduce himself. The shoulder-fired missile had been waiting for him, disassembled, in a locked metal case, and then Flora said she couldn't talk to him anymore. Her father, she said sadly. He had to be killed, though she looked sorry about it. Steve had understood—he wouldn't ever have asked her to break with her family—but if he could get to the kill-site on his own, if he could get to
Rhodesia and then to the extraction point in Johannesburg, then why not the Arctic?

"Wait, what?" Steve said.

Bucky lifted his head. "Rhodesia. I went to Rhodesia. So maybe I could get to the Arctic. Maybe I could find you—"

"You're crazy," Steve said. "You'll die. The real Arctic is 50 below zero, Buck—"

"I've been to the Arctic." Bucky was frowning, struggling to remember. "There are bases there. Soviet." He shook his head and said, "Cold isn't the problem—the problem is getting there, getting away from them long enough to get there. They don't give me a lot of leeway." A vein in his temple was throbbing. "But I think I could—if the right mission comes up, I might—I could try to make a break for it, head north and try to find you in the ice—"

Steve pushed Bucky off him, and sat up. "Wait a minute," Steve said, "if you think you can run, you should run. You should run away," and even as he said it, his stomach clenched hard enough that he thought he might vomit, because of course Bucky should run, and then he'd be left here, alone; forever. "Go AWOL. Go home. You can get a real life—"

Bucky stared at him. "Are you—this is my real life. If I run, I lose the door to here. I lose you, I lose everything—"

Steve felt like he was being ripped apart. "But what they're doing to you—it's not right. If you can get free—"

"Not without you," Bucky said.

#

They argued about it, though it was pointless—the only thing more pointless, Steve thought in angry frustration, glaring at Bucky over the checkerboard, than arguing with your best friend of a million years who also happened to be the stubbornest, most pigheaded bastard in all the world, was arguing with him when you had ESP—

"I couldn't agree more," Bucky muttered. "King me."

Still, it meant that, even furious and frustrated as he was, Steve kept having to stop what he was doing and drag Bucky in for a kiss, because this could be the last time; or this; or this; this could totally be the last time. Time had gone from being worthless, to measurable, to precious, because so many things could go wrong: it wasn't bad enough that Bucky might be snatched from him any time and be killed in battle; now he had to worry that Bucky might be shot for going AWOL, or freeze to death in the Arctic. Or what if Bucky actually found him? Steve stared up at the ceiling while Bucky slept, mumbling and fitful, beside him, and remembered the icy tomb of the Valkyrie, the faint chink-chink-chink of Bucky's pick from above. But that had been a fantasy, his dream of rescue: more likely he'd be barely alive. And even if his brain—his consciousness, this consciousness—could survive the ice, his body— Steve pushed away thoughts of gangrene, frostbite—amputations—and rolled over to snug close to Bucky.

It didn't matter, he told himself. Even if he couldn't hold Bucky with his body, he'd hold him with his mind—he was holding him with his mind now, in fact; Bucky's real body was in a cryotank somewhere. He'd hold Bucky in his mind so long as he lived, and if he died—well, everybody died, didn't they. Most people he knew had died already.

#
It was harder to be calm about it when Bucky was gone, taken from him by—well, who exactly? Bucky's memories were confused fragments—the pain of the fall, broken bones and smashed organs, had bled into the pain of surgeries, training, cryostasis, deployment, had burned into the pain of missions. But whoever had Bucky seemed to want to conserve him somehow. Bucky seemed to spend most of his time in the cryostasis tank being healed and preserved; he was being used only for specific targeted missions: Steve had caught fragments from Paris, Jerusalem, North Korea (North Korea?), somewhere in India. Maybe Bucky was more fragile than he appeared, and couldn't stay out in the world for too long at once. That was a new thing to worry about; Bucky collapsed in the snow, too many days out of the tank. Maybe Bucky could no longer breathe on his own or eat on his own.

He'd kissed Bucky, anyway, this last time; he'd kissed Bucky twenty seconds before he stumbled and went ghostly, so that was something.

#

He jerked up, heart in his throat. Bucky was sprawled across the floor, his boots splayed and his metal arm twisted at an unnatural angle: so badly beaten that his eyes were gummed shut. Steve stumbled over to him, horrified and helpless—because this was happening there, in the real world; someone beyond his reach had done this to Bucky. The metal fingers moved, opened and closed. "Bucky," Steve began, but he couldn't get the rest of it out.


Bucky's lips moved, cracked and bloody, and Steve instinctively bent closer to listen before reaching out with his mind. "I'm sorry," Bucky scraped out, barely speaking. "I couldn't—I'm not here for long," and then Steve turned and lurched back, fists raised, because there were men all around them, standing over Bucky's battered body. Men in white lab coats, men in suits and bow ties, men in olive drab fatigues with guns slung across their bodies.

The blow was unexpected: a man in a bow tie backhanded one of the soldiers hard enough to knock him down. The soldier fell right through Steve, who'd lifted up his hands defensively—but this wasn't real, this wasn't happening: not here, at least. "Are you stupid?" the man in the bow tie asked; the soldier looked up at him, crouching and defensive. "If your expensive gun jams, do you bang the barrel against the table until it dents? Well, do you?"

"No," the soldier said sullenly.

"No," the man agreed with a thin smile. "Do you have any idea of the resources it took to produce him? No. Understand me," the man added, "this asset is unique; there's just one of him in the world. Whereas you," and it happened so smoothly that no one had time to react; he just pulled the handgun out of the holster of the soldier beside him and shot the cowering soldier in the face. A rose bloomed on the soldier's forehead as he dropped back. "You are eminently expendable," the man in the bow tie concluded; he was addressing himself to the other soldiers now. "A dime a dozen. Am I making myself clear? I really hope I'm making myself clear."

"Good. Put him back in the tank before he bleeds out on the goddamned floor. We'll fix him up later. Jesus Christ," he said, shaking his head as two of the soldiers carefully lifted Bucky upright between them. "If the tiger bites you, you don't shoot the tiger." He turned his attention to one of the men in the white coats. "I want a solution for this. The asset went off the reservation; we can't have that. I want a solution and I want it now."
White Coat nodded. "I have some thoughts on the matter," he said and Steve frowned; White Coat's accent was German, the dead soldier's patches were Soviet, the sergeant who'd stepped forward was British; Bow Tie was American—what kind of unit was this? Steve hadn't heard this many different accents since the SSR: was this the SSR? "But I need time to develop new protocols. And the asset needs to be strong enough to withstand tests."

"Right, okay," the man in the bow tie said, "but time is of the...we have...mission in..." All the doors in the apartment slammed shut with the ring of metal as the room went black. Steve rushed over and barely caught Bucky before he collapsed onto the bare wooden floorboards of their Brooklyn apartment, his injuries flickering across his face.

Bucky kissed him fast and hard. "I made it as far as Danborg, Greenland. Your plane must have crashed in one of the glaciers on the southeast—" He went wide-eyed in—shock or pain, Steve couldn't tell—and then went on, faster, "Steve, I didn't make it but I'm glad I didn't make it, this isn't a world you want to—"

And then he was gone again.

#

It was selfish and stupid but all Steve could do after he'd stopped staring at his empty arms was to sit down at the table and try to figure out an exit strategy—for himself, since he was clearly of no goddamned use to Bucky. If this was it, if these "new protocols" meant Bucky didn't come back, he couldn't sit here for all eternity thinking about it; he'd go nuts, he'd— He dragged his sketchbook over and started sketching furiously, letting his pencil think for him. He sketched a tomb, and then a bomb, and then a bomb-vest and then a cave and a noose and an electric chair and a gas chamber— The point of the pencil snapped. It wouldn't work. There was no exit; he couldn't kill a body that wasn't real, that wasn't here. But he might be able to lose time, burn time. His pencil sketched a bed, a pole, the curved tube of a morphine drip. Could he inject dope if he'd never done it before? Would he feel the effects he imagined? It was probably worth trying; he could probably imagine himself into a stupor of some kind while he waited for something, anything, to change. That was probably the best he could achieve, under the circum—

His pencil skidded as the table lurched under his hands, and Steve grabbed at it, to steady it, even as everything in the room shook and rattled. The clock fell off the wall and smashed, the cabinet doors flew open and vomited their contents out onto the floor, and Steve lurched up and stood in the doorway: an earthquake? Plaster fell into his face, and then Bucky's armchair vanished, and Steve turned and ran for it, taking the staircase in two jumps. He ran out into the street to get away from crumbling masonry and falling tiles, and that's when he saw that the other buildings on their block were shuddering, too, and then the building across the street disappeared, leaving—nothing, not even a crater; just a blank space. Two more buildings disappeared further down, and then another, until the skyline around him was full of holes like London's had been during the war.

His mind was full enough of London that he thought at first that the screech was an air raid siren. It was only when he turned and saw Bucky standing there in full facemask and goggles that he realized—except it couldn't be. It wasn't like any other sound he'd ever—Steve's blood ran cold as the memory came back to him: Red Skull, his head crackling with static, and Bucky whispering, terrified, "Steve, do you hear him? He's buzzing. He's fried."

Steve reached out tentatively with his mind, with his hands; it was like going near an electrified fence. "Bucky?" he said uncertainly, wanting to rip those black things from his face, wanting to see his eyes. "Are you—"
The high-pitched whine grew louder, like a warning, setting him on edge, and so he was ready when Bucky came at him, swift and graceful and deadly with a knife. Steve ducked beneath the blade and grabbed Bucky's wrists, but Bucky broke his grip easily and then it was all Steve could do to block and dodge as Bucky sliced at him. Steve managed a blow that sent the knife flying, but Bucky went for his throat without missing a beat. He doesn't know he can control reality, Steve realized, or he'd imagine his knife back, or worse—but instead, Bucky grabbed him and slammed his head against the hood of a parked car—bang!—before dragging him up again.

And then Bucky said, his voice muffled and distorted by the mask: "Where's Steve?"

That stopped him. "What?" Steve asked, blinking—and that was a mistake, because Bucky flipped him backwards and smashed him hard against the pavement—ow—before landing on him hard, one leather-padded knee on his chest, and pointing a gun at his face. Steve thought of the rose that had bloomed on the Soviet soldier's forehead.

"Where's Steve?" Bucky repeated.

"I'm Steve," Steve said.

Bucky's mask gave nothing away, but a moment later, he fired a bullet into Steve's shoulder. Steve gasped—the pain was excruciating—but it wasn't permanent, no real damage, he could make it go away if he—

"Where's Steve?" Bucky asked.

"I'm Steve," Steve repeated, and then, groaning a little with the pain: "Steven Rogers, 804 Alameda Avenue, P.S. 9, G.W. High School, U.S. Army, Captain, 54987750. I like to paint. I like sappy music—says you anyway. I can usually beat you at checkers; you always beat me at cards. I like corned beef and chop suey and—"

The mask tilted, just slightly, to one side. "Who are you to me?"

A million memories exploded in Steve's mind like fireworks; he'd lived his whole life within arm's reach of Bucky. Bucky was his best friend, his sergeant, his lover, his partner in crime, his schoolmate and soulmate and tombmate; his better half and his worse half, both; his brother—but that hadn't been the question. Who was he to Bucky?

"I'm Steve," he said finally.

He could see himself reflected in Bucky's goggles as he looked around. "What is this place?"

That was a good question too. Steve turned, wincing, and looked at the broken skyline, the crumble of buildings. "It's Brooklyn," he said. "It's home. It's—looked better." The metallic screech was slowing, dying down—the man in the mask was calming inside, getting his bearings—and Steve reached out, again, tentatively, looking for something of Bucky in the mind opposite his. It seemed raw, blank, numbed by trauma, a mere shadow of—

The black mask turned sharply back toward Steve, who stilled. "Is that you in my mind?"

"Yes," Steve said immediately. "Sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"Can I go into your mind?" and that was a matter-of-fact question rather than a request for permission, but the answer was the same.

"Yes," Steve said, taking a breath and forcing himself to relax, banishing the pain of his shoulder
from his thoughts; Bucky didn't need any more pain. "Sure, go ahea—" but he was unprepared for the roughness, the sense of invasion, desperation, with which the shadow rummaged through his mind, through his memories. He could only lie there, gasping and hiding nothing; of course the shadow wanted to look at parts of him that Bucky would never have bothered with; Bucky had been there; Bucky knew him better than he knew himself. But the shadow was digging into him for —for what? Steve let himself just breathe in and out, waiting it out, and found he was daydreaming about Bucky throwing baseballs to him in the street. Bucky'd been a pretty decent pitcher, and Steve viscerally remembered the ball's satisfying thunk in his glove. Fastball—thunk. Steve yanked the ball out and threw it back—a weaker throw; he had good aim but he just didn't have Bucky's arm. Curveball—Steve stretched for it—thunk. He yanked the ball out, threw it back. The rhythm of it was soothing. Thunk. Throw. Thunk. Again and again, whole hours of it, arms warming up and loosening up and your mind wandering as the sun—

"Steve," the man in the mask said, and lay down like a dog beside him.

"Yeah, Buck," Steve replied, and stared up at the sky.

#

Bucky didn't care about rebuilding Brooklyn; he just wanted to rebuild himself, and so he and Steve spent long hours sitting or lying together, head to head and mind to mind. It took a long time for even a blurry picture to emerge; Steve didn't know exactly what they'd done to him, but they'd short-circuited his brain somehow, dampening his memories, his taste and personality, without destroying his abilities or the sharpness of his eye. But Bucky's mind was beginning to compensate—he was remembering things, pieces of things—and Steve offered him all his memories to fill in the gaps. Bits of Brooklyn began to reappear around them, here and there.

Bucky remembered things out of order, like pages torn out of a book. Habits flickered in and out like the distant skyscrapers. Their apartment was still cracked and bare when he trailed his hand down Steve's chest and tugged him close by the belt. Steve shivered and hardened as Bucky brushed their mouths experimentally together, and then they were kissing and then lurching, still kissing, to the bed. They unzipped and pushed their hands into each other's pants and they didn't need their minds for this; their bodies knew everything worth knowing. Steve knew how to make Bucky moan and sweat and come, shuddering, across his belly, and whatever else Bucky'd forgotten, he remembered how Steve liked being kissed behind the ear and how he gasped when you caressed his inner thigh.

Some things didn't come back. Bucky's body didn't come back: he now had deep lines of pain etched across his forehead, and thick scarring on his chest, and a metal arm. Steve tried not to think about it, but he couldn't not think about it, and one day Bucky stopped him with a hand and said, quietly, "I'm sorry. I know you think I should change it—"

"I don't," Steve protested, guilty and ashamed because it was true. "I don't think you—you should do what you—"

"—but I can't." He smiled at Steve a bit sadly. "It's not about what I want. It's just, it's my arm."

"I understand," Steve managed a bit thickly, and then he gestured at himself: a foot taller, a hundred pounds heavier. "I've had my own adjustments to make," he added, forcing a smile and carefully not mentioning that he sometimes still forgot he was big. Bucky could no longer forget he'd been hurt, though Steve wished that he could, if just for a while: he missed Bucky's unlined face, he missed Bucky's body, he missed Bucky's smile, he missed—

"There used to be music in your head all the time," Steve blurted one day.
Bucky looked up. "Oh yeah?" He looked interested, but not convinced.

"Yeah. Just. It was funny, that's all. Like having a radio on all the time. Forget it, it doesn't matter," but Bucky came over and put his arms around him—which was terrible because that was the wrong way around, but it was wonderful, too, because it meant that Bucky was still Bucky after all; despite the mask, despite everything.

Steve was so focused on helping Bucky regain as much of himself as possible after the earthquake that he'd somehow forgotten that they could just take him whenever they wanted and do it again, and so this time it was Steve who smashed all their furniture and ran out, ran and kept running, as far as he could go, until his lungs were bursting or at least until the time he thought his lungs should be bursting, because they weren't real lungs; he wasn't a real man; nothing was real except the fact that they were torturing Bucky and he couldn't do a single goddamn fucking thing about it.

Steve stopped, panting, and looked out over the Shore Road balustrade at—what? Water, blue water stretching as far as the eye could see, and was that really the view from here or was it just that he didn't know what the view was? Did Bucky even know? They'd never spent much time in this part of Brooklyn. Maybe Bucky would know.

If he leaped over the railing and just started swimming, how far could he go? Pretty far, he imagined. It had been at least fifteen years out there and he was still alive in the ice without food or water, so pretty goddamned far. He could maybe walk along the ocean floor. That would be something. Steve doubled over, bracing his hands on his thighs and just breathed in and out. In. Out. He was losing it. He was going to go out of his mind pretty goddamned soon.

"Are you Steve?" the shadow said, when he next appeared. "I need to find Steve," but things went much smoother this time: he had his gun drawn but he didn't shoot Steve, and he let Steve come up to him and touch him and open up his mind to him—which meant not only that Bucky began to put himself together more quickly but also that Steve was able to quickly sift through the fragments of the shadow's thin memories: West Germany (West Germany?) les négociations entamées secrètement and a black limousine, two bullets in the head and a glimpse of newspaper, 19 Octobre 1970, l'avenir du Canada en péril après le crime des extrémist québecois—"1970." Steve sat down on the curb between two parked cars. "Jesus. 1970." He put his head between his knees.

The shadow's expressionless mask didn't move. "I know you," he said finally, softly. "Who are you?"

"I'm Steve," Steve said. "I've loved you my whole life," and to his surprise, the shadow hesitated for only a moment before lowering his gun and staggering into his arms. Steve hugged him hard and saw—

—men in white coats, men in suits with long, narrow ties, men in fatigues with guns slung across their bodies and patches from different nations, and in the center of the room a terrible chair like an electric chair, with restraints on the arms and the legs and three or four IV poles all around. He watched in horror as the shadow-Bucky let himself be sat down in it, let them slide needles into the veins in his right hand and arm and then, worse, someone pulled a circular metal crown studded
with electrodes, and a sponge soaked in brine, and "Prep him. Wipe him—"

The shadow's metal hand was clutching Steve's chin, turning Steve's face towards his and relentlessly pushing him out of his mind at the same time. He was still wearing his black-lensed goggles. "Don't look at that," the shadow said slowly. "They're bad men. But they're the only way I can get to you. I don't know who you are but I love you."

"Steve. I'm Steve," Steve said hoarsely.

#

"Did...did I ever tell you I wanted to go to the Grand Canyon?" Bucky asked; Steve had brought him to Shore Road, and according to Bucky, the view from here was actually mostly clear blue water but if you looked left you could see the tip of Coney Island jutting out into the water a few miles away, and a lighthouse—so there it was.

Steve turned, jolted and joyful that Bucky remembered; that was an old memory. "Yeah," he said. "You said it a lot."

"Do you want to go?" Bucky asked, and Steve blinked.

"To the Canyon? How?" Steve asked. "I've never been there. You've never been there—"

"Sure, but," Bucky's brow furrowed in a familiar, calculating way, "we can figure it out, right? Train to Chicago's maybe 20 hours—I went through there to Camp McCoy—and then I bet we can get a train down through the Rockies—"

"Superchief," Steve interrupted. "Goes from Chicago to Pasadena but it stops in Arizona," and when Bucky looked at him, "I only went as far as Kansas City. With the USO. But it goes on to Arizona. I saw the schedule."

"There you go. And if we can get that far, there's a special train that takes you right to the rim of the canyon, the Grand Canyon Railway—I've seen picture-postcards of it," Bucky said. "It's just trains, we know trains."

"Journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step," Steve said, thinking it through.

"More like two thousand," Bucky said, gnawing his lip. "Maybe twenty-five hundred. Four or five days traveling, going fifty miles an hour; more if we stop—"

"Okay," Steve said, getting excited now, because okay, yeah, he could see it. Train out of Grand Central, "Hey, we could take the fancy train, the 20th Century Limited," which was like a rolling hotel with a dining car and a club car and real bedrooms, he'd seen pictures, and then there'd be platforms and people—"Next Stop—Syracuse!"—and out the window, bridges and rivers, factories, trees, and then farmland, at least until they got to the mountains—"But when we get there," Steve asked, his imagination stuttering. "Arizona..." He couldn't imagine Arizona. "The canyon—"

"I can picture it," and something about the tone of Bucky's voice made Steve look at him. Bucky showed him another of those sad smiles; all Bucky's smiles seemed a bit sad now. "You think it'll be as good as I imagine?"

"Yeah, Bucky, yeah," Steve said, meaning it. "I think it'll be just like you picture."
It was only when they were on the El and rattling over the Brooklyn Bridge toward Grand Central that it occurred to Steve, "Hey, you know: we could probably just wish ourselves there."

Bucky turned back; he'd been looking out at the harbor, the Manhattan skyline: all the buildings were back now. "Why the hell would we want to do that?"

"Well, just..." The truth was that it suddenly felt to Steve like a dangerously large expansion of their world. If they took Bucky from him—no, better to face it straight on. When they took the Bucky from him, and when the shadow came back, confused, amnesiac, hurt, would he know where to go? What if he reappeared in Chicago or Topeka, hundreds of miles from wherever Steve was? The shadow was a thin, dark blank—they kept ripping the details out of his mind—but he knew enough to shrink away from the men in white coats and find Steve, whether he knew Steve was Steve or not. It was muscle memory now; instinct; something outside his brain.

"Don't worry, I'll find you," Bucky said, frowning, reading everything off the inside of him. "Wherever you are, I'll— But this here: this is it, this is our life." Like Steve, Bucky had put on a suit jacket for the trip, though he had his tie stuffed into his pocket on the sweltering train; a bit of metal peeked out from the open neck. "This is my life, such as it is. I want to live it with you. I don't want to sit around Brooklyn waiting to be fucked over, pardon my French. Besides," he said, and cracked a wry smile, "the 20th Century Limited has mahogany club chairs and a line of specialty cocktails." He let his head roll back. "I'm going to try every goddamned one of them."

They wandered Grand Central till they found the platform where the 20th Century Limited was boarding, and then they were bumping shoulders and elbowing each other like schoolboys to the point that Steve had to avert his eyes or burst out laughing—because okay, that was an amazing train, with a silver bullet of a nose like something out of Flash Gordon. A red carpet led up to the running board, and standing next to it was a conductor with epaulettes and a braided hat, and Steve didn't know if it was him or Bucky imagining the swell-looking folks strolling up and presenting their tickets, but they were something to see, too. "This is nothing like the train to Camp McCoy," Bucky whispered, and Steve whispered back, "Hats. We need—" just as Bucky slammed the brim of one against his face.

"Tickets, sirs?" and Steve reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out two tickets. "Very good."

On the train they passed through a formal salon and then a dining car and club car and then another dining car, and then a bunch of sleeper compartments with heavy curtains and then, in the next car, Bucky was fumbling with the latch on a narrow door—"Might as well go first class"—and they stepped into a roomette. It was paneled with inlaid wood, with a bench on each side that folded down into a bed and a wide window between them. There was barely room for them both to stand—they weren't small men—but they stood there and grinned at each other.

"I saw this in a magazine," Bucky said.

"Me too," Steve said, and loosened his tie.

They spent most of their time in the observation car—the last on the train: a curved oval of glass with sofas positioned to take advantage of the view. They didn't want anyone else to come in and so no one did—except the barman, who appeared regularly to give Bucky a fresh whiskey and soda. They sprawled on the sofa together, Steve with his sketchbook and Bucky with his tumbler of ice, and watched the scenery go by. Steve himself quite enjoyed sketching the industrial sprawl
along the Hudson as they headed into upstate New York—all the boats and piers and warehouses and water towers and cliffs, and was kind of disappointed when the view changed to trees and farms.

He made it interesting for himself for a while—a dilapidated barn here, a flock of sheep there—sketching them out with quick strokes, in different styles, challenging himself to remember them with his pencil as Bucky lounged beside him, warm on his left side. When Steve next glanced up, he saw that the view, while pretty, had fallen into the sort of numbing regularity familiar to train travel—trees and fields, the occasional barn, the occasional stream—and his pencil was moving before he even thought about it, sketching the thick body, the long neck, the tiny ears—

Beside him, Bucky jolted and lurched upright. "Was that," he said, "did you see—" and then he looked down at Steve's sketchbook and saw the giraffe and burst out laughing, the first real laughter Steve had heard from him in ages. "You bastard," Bucky said, still laughing as he sank back. "I thought I was having the goddamned DTs," and so then of course Steve had to draw a literal pink elephant, placidly feeding itself with its trunk in a field outside of Schenectady. And then—because why not—he drew an enormous brontosaurus, and by this time Bucky'd put his glass down and was egging him on, "Oh, that's aces—wait, can you make it crush that barn?" and they both grinned as the dinosaur smashed its enormous foot down on the roof, crushing it, and then came loping clumsily up alongside the train. It ran past the Eiffel Tower and Big Ben and when it reached the pyramids of Giza, Bucky muttered, "you crazy genius," and darted in to snatch a kiss from Steve's mouth. Steve clutched his head and kissed back, the sketchbook sliding off his lap, and he was so distracted and turned on by Bucky's tongue that he didn't notice the fleet of tiny spaceships with their rounded bubble cockpits until they zipped past the window.

"Hey!" Steve protested, "Don't scare my dinosaur!" and sent a couple more dinosaurs lumbering over the hill as reinforcements, and then it was on, with the spaceships buzzing round the dinosaurs' heads, and then a T-Rex took a bite out of the front of a spaceship and sent it spinning and crashing into the Colosseum, and Bucky sank back and raised his scotch glass and said, with dazed admiration, "This really is the most amazing train in the world."

#

They went to the dining compartment when the sun went down and had dinner: stuffed celery and pimento olives, oxtail soup and fresh shrimp cocktail, and then for main course, steak and onions. And then there was salad, and deep dish cherry pie with whipped cream, and coffee, and then they staggered, full and happy, to their compartment.

They had a great hour inspecting all the little fold-out tables and cabinets and hooks—the room was a marvel of engineering, not an inch of space wasted—before they got ready for bed. Steve figured they'd just sleep in their own narrow bunks, which were neat as a pin and made up with crisp linens. But there was only a breath of space between them, which meant they kept bumping into each other as they moved around, Bucky's body knocking into his as he tried to shrug off his jacket, hand brushing his back as he opened the tiny closet door to hang it up. The walls edged closer, or maybe they just felt that way as they danced around each other, light touches, accidental, deniable contact. Bucky smoothly unbuttoned his shirt, eyes down, until Steve slid free his belt, running the leather under his fingertips, and Bucky's fingers tripped and fumbled. Bucky was breathing heavier; Steve could hear it, could feel heated breath moving in the air, sense the pounding of Bucky's blood as clearly as he could sense the flickering, teasing excitement in his mind. Bucky turned away to unzip his pants, then bent to slide them off his legs, and Steve turned away from the curve of his ass, hands stilling at his own waistband; he was hard, he couldn't—though Bucky must know, had to know. And then he turned and saw Bucky standing there in his white undershirt and shorts, the metal arm hanging through the hemmed cotton sleeve, and
suddenly wanted him so badly he was sick with it.

He reached for him with clumsy hands, and Bucky mumbled into his mouth, "You should, I want you to—" and then, stuttering it out low and fast, "—do me, f-fuck me; I always want you to fuck me," and he'd never said it like that, all dirty like that, and Steve lost control, then—trying to pull Bucky's undershirt off while still kissing him and shoving him back onto the narrow cot and dragging his shorts down his thighs and hauling his legs up.

And Jesus, Bucky's cock was so hard it was shiny and curving back over his belly, which hollowed in and out with his rapid-fire breaths. Steve was hastily lubing up and pushing in, jerking awkwardly to one side as the train took a sharp increase in speed and only then recognizing that the bed was really too small to fuck on. There was no room to maneuver and Bucky was crammed back against the wall, arms over his head to protect it. If Steve had been thinking clearly, he'd've just shoved the walls back or made the bed bigger or something, but instead he just gave a couple of desperate, ragged thrusts that left Bucky gasping and needily jerking his hips up, and then impulsively dragged Bucky up and over so that he could fuck him from behind, braced half-on and half-off the tiny bed.

Beneath him, Bucky's muscular back glistened with sweat as he cursed and moaned—*in me, get in me, faster, more*—though Steve couldn't tell if he was saying or thinking it. His thighs were hard against Bucky's and he kissed up along the scar of Bucky's metal shoulder to his neck and sucked at it, kissing Bucky's face when he turned, thinking: *I love you, you stupid bastard; I love all of you; every bit.*

He came without meaning to, pleasure boiling over in him unexpectedly, and collapsed, groaning and trembling and rubbing his cheek along the broad warmth of Bucky's back. Bucky gave him only a few moments before lurching up and knocking him down between their two beds. The carpet had felt soft under his feet, but it was rough on his bare skin, rasping against his back, scraping a thrill up his spine. Bucky crawled over him, dragging Steve's mouth up to his for almost savage kisses while he jacked himself furiously, and then his mouth skittered off Steve's as he gasped and came, splattering wetness on Steve before collapsing heavily on top of him. His hand traced Steve's muscles, trailing a teasing finger into the soft hidden places: the sensitive, vulnerable skin on his inner arm. Steve felt himself getting hard again.

In the morning, Steve woke up dazed and sticky on the ruined sheets. Bucky's cot was empty; behind him, he heard the faint hiss of the shower in their tiny en-suite bathroom. And something else, so familiar he hadn't noticed it at first: singing. "I'm a wild and reckless hobo," Bucky sang. "Why I left my happy home," and Steve grinned and snuggled back down in the wrecked bed and let himself doze to the soft chuga-chuga of the train cars.

#

In Chicago, Bucky insisted on taking Steve to the steak restaurant he'd stopped in to on his way to Wisconsin. "It was amazing," he insisted, "like nothing you've ever—" and it was true, the steak was nothing like Steve had ever seen; it was an enormous pink slab the size of a dinner plate, with a baked potato like a football.

"That's...a lot of cow," Steve said, shaking his head.

"I know! You ever see the like?" Bucky said, boggling down at it with a kind of hostile delight. "And it's like they didn't even prepare it—they just set it on fire and give it to you. This is the Midwest, pal; this is meat country."

"I'm not even sure how to eat it," Steve said.
"With a knife," Bucky said. "With maybe three or four knives."

After dinner it was Steve's turn; he took Bucky to a bustling bar on the North Side and dragged him through to the back room, and then up a staircase and through a paneled corridor. Bucky's eyebrows went up and up as Steve went through a heavy curtain and knocked on a big, wooden door, and up even further when a little panel on the door opened.

"Ziegfeld," Steve said, and the little panel slammed shut. A moment later the door opened and they walked into a second bar, which was crowded with servicemen and girls in pretty clothes.

At the back, a band was playing. Bucky whistled. "How'd you find this?"

Steve smiled wryly. "Not me. The girls—the USO girls," he said. "Used to be a speak-easy, but now it's a kind of after-hours club for theatre people: showgirls, musicians and the like. It gets crowded after everything else closes. Come on, I'll buy you a drink," Steve said, tugging on Bucky's sleeve and wading in toward the bar, and possibly the best thing about their shared world was that whiskey always lived up to his pre-serum expectations, back when he'd been 100 pounds and an easy drunk. He was drunk enough that he didn't even protest when Bucky dragged him up to dance—there were girls partnering girls amidst the swirling couples, but some of the guys were dancing with each other too, like they used to do overseas—this bar was blurring with his memories of the front, the USO shows.

His attention was tugged back and his head followed. "Would you focus?" Bucky teased. "You can't really be this clumsy," but Steve just smiled and pressed close and let Bucky steer him, feeling the grip and tightening of Bucky's hand on his waist, the heat of his body. His blood pounded, tension ratcheting up through him as his mind filled with lust: the bed, the tangle of the sheets, the way Bucky was going to look, naked, sprawled next to him. We could just wish ourselves there, but he felt Bucky's answer even before Bucky pulled their bodies together, close enough that he could feel Bucky's cock against his hip: but what about the stolen kisses, the quick gropes, the frantic cab ride across town? Steve turned his head to smile into Bucky's hair: Bucky was imagining walking past the conductor, then tugging Steve up the corridor and fumbling with the lock to their stateroom. Getting there is half the fun, and Steve pressed in and dropped a teasing lick on the shell of Bucky's ear just as Bucky's hand smoothed down his waist to the top curve of his ass, and Bucky was right, of course; Bucky was always right.

Later, curled on top of him, Bucky lifted his head—he'd been blowing Steve, taking him to the edge again and again, and his mouth was red with it, shining and little swollen—and just stared at him. Steve, gasping, pushed himself up on his elbow, his brain leaking out his ears. "Are you—all right?" he managed, feeling a little worried now; there was suddenly something a little shadowy in Bucky's thousand yard stare. "Buck? Are you—"

"Yeah," Bucky said, after a moment; he was still staring up Steve's body. "Fine. I just—I want to remember," and Steve tried to push up for a kiss, but Bucky just grinned crookedly and pushed him down onto the bed again.

#

It was Steve who'd taken the Superchief, which wasn't as luxurious as the 20th Century Limited but was still pretty spiffy. Of course, when Steve had been on it he'd ridden in coach with 36 rowdy showgirls, so it was a slightly different experience to be traveling first class, in a stateroom, lying with Bucky in bed. "Train of the Stars, they call it," Steve told him. When he'd been on with the USO, there'd been a rumor that Bogart had been spotted in the club car.

He remembered the scenery pretty well between Chicago and Kansas City; the huge, flat plains,
the endless skies, fields of wheat and sunflowers so gorgeous he'd found himself aching for paint, or at least colored pencils. He and Bucky lay in their rumpled bed together, his freckled shoulder against Bucky's metal one, and watched the scenery pass by through the window. His imagination failed when they chugged further west—to the mountains, Bucky prompted softly; the Rockies, which were said to be majestic—and they were, too, as Bucky conjured them up. Steve stared, and then, ever the visual perfectionist, he added the final touches: snow at the summit, and flashes of red and pink-tinted light.

"Beautiful," Bucky murmured appreciatively. "You've still got the eye. You're a wonderful—" and then he was jerking up and looking at Steve with alarmed eyes. "Shit, pal," he said, reaching out helplessly. "Steve—" and then he was gone, just gone.

Around Steve the train contracted and shook, the walls shuddering. Steve stared at the empty space where Bucky had been and was gripped with the desire to stop the train, just stop it on the tracks and freeze this moment, keep everything just as it was. The canyon was Bucky's dream, and, for the first time in forever, time was passing because they were enjoying themselves—they were living, they were finally alive—and he didn't want to be alive without Bucky. But he couldn't bear to stop the train; if he stopped the train he would kill this tiny little flicker of life they'd just breathed into being. So Steve carried on, hoping that if he kept moving, Bucky would reappear along the journey. He let the train carry him down into New Mexico and Arizona, or a cheap painted backdrop of them; he didn't have the heart to make it beautiful. Through the windows the bare desert and scrub unrolled itself for mile after mile, an American West that looked about as real as the backdrop to the Captain America movies.

#

Bucky came back onto the line ten seconds before the screaming started, and then Steve was leaping out of bed and dragging on his pants and bursting out of the stateroom and running up the narrow corridors toward the front of the train, or trying to, because people were fleeing in the other direction, toward him and away from the chaos and the—Steve cringed—gunshots. Bucky, Steve thought, sending the name hurtling toward him like flinging his shield. Bucky, stop. It's all right. You're back, you're home, it's okay—and in the dining car he leapt up onto a chair and then across the tables, then ducked down through the narrow doorway into the next car.

Steve had to shove himself past the shrieking, fleeing people; there were were three dead in the next car and four people dead in the car after that. And even though Steve knew that nobody'd really been killed—people were dying, screaming, because that was what Bucky expected—it was still unnerving, because that was what Bucky expected. Was this what Bucky's missions were like? Steve gritted his teeth and broke through to the next car, and there he was, in head to toe black, calmly striding down the aisle with an enormous gun.

"Bucky," Steve said, and the shadow turned in a swift, graceful movement, the gun raised and aimed. He was muzzled in his black mask, but his blue eyes were visible and fixed on Steve. "It's over," Steve said. "You're back."

"My mission..." the shadow began, and stopped. Steve let him feel his way to the emptiness at the end of that thought.

Steve reached out with his mind. "We're going to the Grand Canyon. You always wanted to go to the Grand Canyon. We're riding the Superchief. On the Atchinson, Topeka, and—"

"—and the Santa Fe," the shadow said, almost mechanically. "To Williams Junction."

"That's right, Buck." Steve came forward slowly, hands raised. "Then we're gonna change for the
Grand Canyon Railway, ride up to the canyon." Steve was close enough now that the barrel of the gun was practically flush against his chest; the shadow's eyes were like Bucky's but iced over, blue-gray. "We'll make camp on the rim, then maybe hike down to the river," and Steve wanted it so bad he could die for it: to lie on a bedroll with Bucky under a skyful of stars. "You remember, don't you," Steve added softly. "You said you were going to try to remember."

Bucky had to shoot him or stand down. He lowered the gun. "I remember," he said.

Steve reached up and gently pulled the black face-mask off. "Hiya, Buck," he said sadly, and smiled.

Bucky was always unsteady after a mission, so when they got to Williams Junction Steve took a room in the station hotel to let him recover; he could tell that Bucky's grip on their reality was a little tenuous. Bucky stretched out on the bed, metal arm draped over his eyes—there were the usual fragments floating through his mind and disintegrating like ashes, though Steve couldn't quite tell the date—could it be the 1980s?—and then Steve had an idea.

He stretched out on the bed and then tugged at Bucky until they were lying together on their sides, face to face. "Can I," Steve began, and then he hesitated and said, "Bucky, do you trust me?" and Bucky's mouth curved in a sad smile: only you in all the world. "Will you—can I go into your mind? More than I—further in," Steve explained, remembering how the shadow had pushed deep inside to memories that were far beneath the surface. He wondered if Bucky knew more than he remembered about the outside world; his missions and his captors.

Bucky nodded and closed his eyes, and Steve bent until his forehead touched Bucky's. For a moment they just breathed together, and then Steve felt it like a door opening—Bucky was letting him in. He went gingerly, imagining himself as a guest in a house full of treasured things and wanting to be careful about what he touched, what he moved. Bucky's mind had been shaken by earthquakes; everything seemed askew, jolted. The architecture was odd: doors came out of nowhere, or opened onto walls. Staircases intersected in odd ways and then disappeared into nothingness, Bucky's brain rerouting itself after shock. And he himself was everywhere in Bucky's mind: curled up in bed and sketching by the window. Playing ball and snoozing in the sun and fighting bullies in the far distance. All those memories were cocooned, protected, and Steve understood then, viscerally, that he was as precious to Bucky as Bucky was to him.

Steve went further in and saw the smashed fragments of the things Bucky couldn't be bothered to reconstruct—his fights with his father, and his sexual shame; fists flying at him out of nowhere; childhood slights and his own fear of inadequacy—mothballed, all of it; a collection of useless junk he didn't need. But Bucky'd carefully pieced together an early memory of his mother, her belly enormous with—it had to be Rebecca—and knitting in a chair beside his bed while he tried to go to sleep, back when he'd still been small and afraid of the shadows that moved in the dark.

Steve was carefully turning over these memories to see if there was anything underneath, when suddenly he felt Bucky's terror and alarm—shit, pal; Steve! Steve!—and everything was shaking hard enough that his teeth rattled, and instead of pulling out of Bucky's mind Steve impulsively went deeper, holding on and hiding himself as—as—

muscles, moving your blood around; shoulders, back, arms, legs. The cold swab of alcohol, needles inserted into arteries and veins; IV tubing. A white room, the bustle of nurses. On your other side, technicians, doing something to your metal arm that you don't understand; a screen flashes; sparks.

A man in a suit, a wide tie: blue with white dots. A thin smile. "Good to see you; you're looking well," and then, "How long till we're mission ready?" and someone's mumbled answer, couple of hours, then you'll have to ask General Solkoff. "Fair enough," Wide Tie says, and then another smile, this one more sincere. "Do your best, soldier. We need you," and you do try your best, ignoring the pain-sweat as they get you upright, get you moving; as whatever drugs they've pumped into your bloodstream get you running; you lift the weights they ask you to lift.

They bathe you and shave you and dress you for battle: combat trousers and boots, a thin cotton shift, an armored vest. Does he want a woman? They will bring him a woman if he wants one. No, he doesn't want a woman.

A guy in fatigues and little gold-rimmed glasses runs you through your weapons: four knives, three deadly looking black handguns, handheld explosives. Then he gives you an L115 sniper rifle, a British gun with a .338 cartridge and a Schmidt and Bender scope. You run it through your hands, assembling it and disassembling it and loading it and unloading it until it feels like a part of you, and then you fire until you can hit a four-inch target at 3000 meters. It doesn't take long; you don't remember much, but you remember this; your hands remember.

Then the man with the wide tie comes back; by now he feels like an old friend. He sits down opposite and shows you a brown folder, explains earnestly that you're in Nicaragua, where the democratically-elected government is under attack by a cabal of right-wing generals. He shows you a picture, a man with a thick, white mustache; General Victor Montero, a man of some influence among the rebels, and then a map. Montero is under heavy guard, but his green, chauffeur-driven Mercedes will pass within 3000 meters of several places where you can establish a sniper's nest. Your mission is to shoot the passenger and proceed to the extraction point.

Do you understand?

Yes, you understand.

Can they count on you?

You do not reply; reassurance is not your business. Shooting targets at 3000 meters is your business.

You tuck the map into your pocket even though you have the route burned into your mind. They give you a helmet and a motorcycle, and you take off at speed. You follow the route the Mercedes will take along the coast and drive it several times, calculating the best position for the shot. There will be wind off the water; there is elevation and air density to consider. You make a decision, then you park the motorcycle and take to the rooftops to wait.

Waiting feels...dangerous. All your senses are alert. Waiting, you feel the wind against your skin, whipping your hair. Waiting reminds you of rooftops covered in black tarpaper, rooftops overlooking brownstones and wrought-iron fire escapes, the distant blinking of neon lights. You wish you were smoking a cigarette, lying back on a towel and having a beer with —— and the distant sound of the Nicaraguan fishermen calling to each other reminds you of the senoritas calling to each other across the alley as they hung out the washing, and —— has taken off his shirt to try to get some sunlight on his thin pale chest; the sun will be good for him, it will dry up the mucus inside his—
Something itches at him; a name; his name; someone's name—

He brushes it away; there is only the mission. He must not disappoint his friend with the wide tie.

He sees the green Mercedes coming along the curves of the seaside road; it is fixed in his scope. He has already calculated the angle of the shot, and so it only remains for the car to wend its way toward him. When it reaches the designated spot, he pulls the trigger twice and watches as the car jerks and swerves, brakes squealing, the tinted window shattered. He knows he's made the shot, and so he quickly disassembles his rifle and heads back to his motorcycle. He is sure the car will have sped away—well-trained chauffeurs know to get out from under fire—but finds when he reaches the street that it has not. The Mercedes has pulled up awkwardly on the lush foliage of the embankment, and the chauffeur has flung open the back door of the car and dragged its passenger onto the grass.

It is not General Victor Montero. It is a woman. She is thin, blonde, very dead, wearing a blue dress.

He stares, his heart beating with unfamiliar emotion; of course, all emotions are unfamiliar to him; he is nine hours old. Your mission is to shoot the passenger: they did not say that the General was the passenger. And indeed he is not; the passenger is a woman—thin, blonde, very dead, wearing a blue dress. Shoot the passenger and proceed to the extraction point, but he sits astride his motorcycle and watches armored trucks arrive and armed men pour out of them; men carrying American weapons and executing American military maneuvers. He puts on his helmet.

"Mission report," the man in the wide tie says.

For a moment he cannot think what to say. "It was a woman," he says finally. "In the car."

"Yes," the man agrees, nodding as if this was the plan all along. "She is the General's mistress."

He tries not to think. But he cannot help but think. "They are carrying American weapons."

The man nods, more slowly this time. "The CIA is supporting the rebels, supplying them with guns, training."

His head is pounding. "Why?"

"They want to overthrow the government," the man says.

"Is it a bad government?" he asks.

"No," the man says, and then, frowning: "You're asking an awful lot of questions."

Bile is rising in his throat; betrayal creeps up his spine like moss. "Whose side are we on?"

"We're on our side," the man in the wide tie says easily, smiling; it's the last word on the subject. He raises his arm; he's holding another brown folder. "One more bullet and there'll be war in the streets by tonight," he says, like that's a good thing, but the asset knows a thing or two about war. "One more mission and you can rest." The man opens the folder. "Armando Posada, head of the—"

The asset shakes his head.

The man stops, frowning—then raises his hand and makes a gesture. Armed men flood into the room and take up positions on the perimeter, and then the doctors come in. The man begins again. "Armando Posada," he says.
The asset shakes his head.

The man in the wide tie lets out a sigh; he looks almost petulant. "I haven't got time for this," he snaps at the doctors, who are crowding around him: *Eyelid strength—normal. Eyelid function—normal. Visual function—normal.* "I need him to do his goddamned job," but he won't do it; they can't make him; Steve wouldn't—Steve.

One of the doctors looks up unhappily. "Increased activity in the hippocampus; he's rerouting." They push him back into the chair and the clamps seize his arms. "We'll have to run him through the machine—"

The man interrupts, looks at his watch. "How long will that take?"

"Not long," the doctor replies. "He won't need any physical re-conditioning," and he has fierce and terrible deja vu: he has been here before, ten times, a hundred, and the metal circlet coming down around his head used to have a wet sponge in it but it doesn't anymore, and a computer system has replaced the thick white switches and knobs on the machine that controls what he remembers, and they can make him do things, they have already made him do things he doesn't remember, because he is nothing inside; a hollow man. He won't remember this, or any of it. *This has all already happened.* He bites down on the metal bit between his teeth, tears stinging his eyes as his soul rips apart—

"Eyelid strength—normal. Eyelid function—normal. Visual function—normal. Pupilary light reflexes—normal. Eye muscle movement—normal." A click, and the white light vanishes. Behind the doctors, a man in a suit, a wide-tie; blue with white dots. "Good to see you; you're looking well," and then, "How long till we're mission ready?"

The mumbled answer: "Not long, perhaps 45 minutes."

"Good, good," the man in the wide tie says, and then he clasps you on the shoulder. "We need you, soldier," and later, calmly, you blow open a steel reinforced door with a grenade launcher. It's not a cigar factory, as the sign says, but a safehouse, and you kill sixteen armed guards before you find Armando Posada cowering in a back room.

"Mission report," the man in the wide tie says; he is smiling at you.

"It's finished," the asset replies, though this is obvious; even if it were not all over the television that men are fighting in the streets, you can still hear quick bursts of gunfire through the window.

The man's smile widens. "Good," he says. "Fantastic work," and then, more seriously, "Do you want anything?" and then he laughs. This is a joke, the asset understands suddenly; there is no point in giving him anything; he won't remember it. But he does want something; he wants the tank. He wants it like food; he's homesick for it.

"I want to go back in the tank," the asset says.

The man's smile becomes uneasy, then falls off his face. "Yeah, you've said that, I've heard you say that," and then he leans in and asks, "What's it like, that you like it so much?"

"It's like Death," the asset says. "You should try it."

#

The world narrowed to a little round window and ice and pain and yet—somehow—hope, though when he opened his eyes again he didn't know where he was or who he was, only that there was a
man lying across the bed with terrified blue eyes and a metal arm. Who are you? he thought. Where are we? Who am I? and it was strange but the first question was the easiest to answer. "Bucky," he said, knowing his man better than he knew himself. The man's brow furrowed. "Bucky," he repeated, more certainly. "You're James Buchanan Barnes," and that, at least, was right; something in this world had clicked into its rightful place. "Bucky Barnes," he repeated. "And I'm—"

"Steve," the man said.

"Steve," he repeated, unconvinced; was he Steve? "I'm Steve, I guess."

"You're Steve, all right. If I know anything, I know that," and there were fragments floating through his mind, a green Mercedes and a cigar factory, and suddenly Steve gasped and jerked up and went tumbling out of Bucky's mind, clutching the whole picture, all of it: Nicaragua, the General's mistress, Armando Posado, and Christ, what they'd done to him, to Bucky, what they'd done and Steve was grabbing at him and hauling him up into his arms.

#

The Grand Canyon Railway set off at noon, and with Bucky back, the view from the observation car emerged vibrant and startling: Bucky'd always dreamed of the West. Orange-red sand and tall cactuses with their arms outstretched and the bluest, biggest sky Steve had ever seen—the sky of his dreams, or of Bucky's dreams: a freedom sky. Steve put his sketchbook aside; he couldn't tear his eyes away from the terrible rugged beauty of the landscape.

Steve didn't know if the West was really like this, but it didn't matter: by the time the train pulled up at the tiny wooden depot at the south rim he was profoundly in love with it. Bucky produced a pack from nowhere and handed it to him, and together they wandered the hard-packed trail that led away from the station. There was some rough scrub along the top, and then suddenly it was there, sprawling out for miles, so many colors and so large that you couldn't see any bottom to it, and Steve, who'd always been susceptible to visual beauty, unshouldered his pack and sat down, had to feast his eyes on it. He lost track of time, but at some point he turned to look at Bucky, who was standing there, gape-mouthed. Wonder had smoothed the pain-lines off his face.

"Is it everything you wanted it to be, pal?" Steve asked hoarsely. Bucky nodded but couldn't speak.

#

They hiked the canyon for days, walking and talking and making camp whenever they were tired or the view was too spectacular not to linger on. They meandered down to the river and stared up at striated walls of color. They lay on their bedrolls at night and looked up at skies that were wall to wall stars; city boys that they were, they'd never seen stars like this: they'd had always been leached out by the city lights. Bucky was as happy as he'd ever been, sitting there with the firelight playing over his upturned face—he was so happy that Steve felt drunk on it and had to lie back, overwhelmed; Bucky's happiness went straight to his head like champagne.

#

"Well," Bucky said finally, a bit breathlessly; Steve had pushed him onto his back and given him a long, slow blowjob, "that's my dream, done. Grand Central to the Grand Canyon. What should we do next?"

Steve wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "We should keep going, I guess. California? Maybe Mexico." He let himself fall next to Bucky and smiled as Bucky affectionately brushed his hair back from his forehead, an instinct from years ago, when his hair had always been in his eyes.
"Somewhere warm. With water—blue water and white sand, what do you think?"

"I like it," Bucky said. "How do we get there?"

"I don't know. We could go back up to the train station, grab a train going south or..." Steve stared up at the blue sky. "Conjure up a car, I guess. Drive south until—" The idea hit him and he sat up. "Oh, motorcycles."

"Oh God," Bucky groaned. "You and your fucking motorcycles—"

"Best part of the army," Steve said definitively. "Wind in your hair, all that power humming between your legs—"

Bucky laughed. "You wish," he said, and Steve swung a leg over him and pinned his wrists down.

"I'd like to ride you like a motorcycle," Steve said earnestly.

"It's funny, you say that like I'd object," Bucky replied.

#

Steve won on the motorcycle, though Bucky refused to take his own and just slid onto the bike behind him, arms around his waist, thighs gripping his hips, which was its own sort of win. Bucky's idea of fun, though, was to steer them through one Western town after another—Tombstone, Dry Gulch, Dodge City, Indian Creek, Diablo Canyon—each of them straight out of the movies, with horses tied up outside a saloon with bat-wing doors, and a piano player tinkling on the keyboard inside, until finally Bucky conjured up an actual gunfight in the street at high noon between a cowboy in a white hat and one in a black hat, and by then Steve was laughing so hard that he was having trouble steering the motorcycle, so he pulled up in front of the saloon and said, "Come on, Buck; let's get a drink."

The saloon was crowded, but Steve managed to push his way to the bar and buy them each a whisky. There was a sign pinned up near the piano, Do Not Shoot The Piano Player. He Is Doing His Best. They found a scarred wooden table and sat down, surreptitiously marveling at the people around them: mostly leather-faced cowboys right out of central casting, with a couple of saloon girls in bright red and purple dresses. Steve expected Gene Autry or John Wayne to come striding through the batwing doors any time now: he and Bucky had seen about a zillion Westerns before the war: Ghost Town Gold and Riders of Destiny and Red River Valley and Billy The Kid.

Bucky finished his whiskey and then licked his lips. "You wanna stick around?" he asked Steve. "Get a room?"

"Sure thing, partner," Steve drawled and that's when the screaming started.

The cowboys all pulled their guns and burst out the batwing doors onto the street while the saloon girls high-tailed it up the wooden steps to the brothel upstairs. Steve looked the question at Bucky.

"Beats me," Bucky said, and so they had to go out to the street to see what it was about.

Steve had seen enough of these movies to know Bucky was probably going to stage either a bank robbery or an Indian attack, and so he was prepared for whooping and hollering and gunshots—but what he was not prepared for was a giant green monster roaring at the sky and then tearing the roof off a nearby church. People ran for their lives.

"Jesus, Bucky!" Steve said, jerking back, half-laughing. "What the hell kind of horror movie are
"Don't look at me!" Bucky shouted back; his eyes were wide and fixed on the creature. "That's not—I didn't—!"

"What?" Steve looked again at the rampaging green monster, now halfway down Main Street.

"If this is you, you win," Bucky said, backing away. "Good one, Stevie! Now just make it go—"

The monster stopped and roared again with such force that the timbers of the storefronts rattled, and Steve realized that he could feel the creature's rage and terror: it was real, the green monster was real. He grabbed Bucky's arm and shouted, "Do you hear it?" Bucky stared at him in wide-eyed incomprehension; of course he could hear it, it was horrifically loud, it was— "In your mind," Steve hastily added. "Listen!" and it wasn't like the buzzing and popping of the Red Skull's fried brain; it was like being in the center of a tsunami of emotion, totally out of control.

"I swear to God," Bucky said desperately, "it's not me, I didn't make it, I—" but he raised his hands and took a step forward bravely and shouted, "C'mon, stop! Quit it! You can't—!" but the giant green thing howled with enough force that Bucky's hair blew back. "Jesus H. Christ," Bucky muttered, grabbing Steve's arm. "Let's get out of here—"

But Steve was rooted in place, listening, trying to reach out to it, even as the green thing smashed the Diablo Canyon Post Office to splinters. He tried to stay calm in the face of the waves of emotion—HIT, SMASH—and then had an idea and scooped out the ground from under it, putting it into a giant hole like a bear trap. Steve shivered as the creature's frustrated roar echoed up through the canyon and hoped he hadn't made a colossal mistake: he hadn't wanted Bucky's shadow to know he could control the environment, so hadn't risked doing this kind of magic near him, but he had to hope that this angry green monster wasn't much of a rational thinker.

"What the hell is it?" Bucky asked, flushed and gasping.

They looked at each other nervously, then edged toward the hole to peer down at the beast.

"I don't know," Steve said, though he was beginning to think that maybe he did know. There was something... familiar in the creature's mind, even as it was alien to theirs in so many respects.

Bucky stopped and stared at him, reading his mind. "You think it's an experiment? You think it's like us?"

Steve waggled his head. "Maybe it's an experiment gone wrong," he said. "Like the Red Skull. Except," he frowned, "not evil like that." He met Bucky's eyes, asking him to feel it, and after a moment Bucky took a breath and opened himself up. They stood together and tried to make sense of the creature's howling thoughts.

"It's intelligent," Steve ventured, after a moment. "But it's..."

"He's," Bucky amended, and frowned. "He's afraid, is what he is."

"He's—yeah," Steve said. "And angry."

"Real angry," Bucky agreed. "About what they did to him—"

"—in the lab," Steve finished. They looked at each other; they both knew this picture well enough to recognize it from the fragments in the green man-monster's mind: injections, radiation. The poor bastard had been given some version of the superserum, and this was the result.
"Well, you can't blame him for being ticked off," Bucky said reasonably, though when they next looked over the edge of the hole, the giant green creature was gone—vanished as swiftly and completely as he had come.

#

He came back, though—his comings and goings always unexpected enough to be startling and regular enough that he became kind of a bizarre fixture of their landscape. They learned it was best to just let him stomp around and yell and break things for a while, and then he'd calm down and vanish; he never stuck around long once he calmed down.

Bucky seemed prepared to just accept him like a thunderstorm or a passing hurricane, but Steve felt like he ought to try to make some meaningful contact. "Hey, big guy," he said. "I'm Steve. This is Bucky. We—well, I guess we live here."

The creature stared at them inquisitively; Steve wondered if he'd been reading their thoughts too.

"I'm Steve," he repeated, pointing theatrically to himself. "This is Bucky." Bucky sketched out a dubious salute.

The green monster looked from one of them to the other. "Hulk smash," he said.

Steve looked at Bucky excitedly; shit, he could talk! He tried to think of what to say next, but his mind was blank.

Bucky seemed to have no such problem. "Yeah," Bucky said with grim sympathy. "Bucky smash, too."

#

"He's a weapon," Bucky told Steve. "He's got to be."

"You think?" Steve asked; he didn't see how anybody could control that, all fury and rage like that.

"Sure." Bucky looked away. "Shock and awe: they probably send him in first, scare everyone into submission. They must use him all the time; he's hardly ever in cryo or however they hold him." Bucky'd gone far away in his own mind; the last few times he'd been taken, he'd remembered even less than usual about the missions, but he'd clung to Steve during the nights afterwards. "They've made him a blunt instrument," Bucky concluded softly, "a battle axe or a mace. I'm more like a scalpel. They must be building a whole arsenal of us: men, captive—"

"Come into the water with me," Steve said; they had reached the blue, blue waters of Mexico, and when Bucky didn't move, Steve kicked sand at him and said, "You'll never catch me, you loser." Then Bucky cracked a grin and it was on.

#

They waited until the giant green creature had exhausted himself rampaging along the coastline before approaching him to see if he was okay. "Hey, big fella," Bucky said, surprisingly gentle; the Hulk bared his teeth but otherwise didn't protest; he was angry all right, but not at them. The Hulk's mind was all jumbled images and noise, but somewhere in there Steve could see a tranquilizer gun and some kind of containment chamber, and he knew that Bucky could see them too. "You all right?" Bucky asked sympathetically. "They messing with you out there?"

"Hulk angry, Hulk smash," the monster sighed in a tone Steve had no trouble recognizing as
"another day, another dollar." Then the green beast frowned at Bucky and softly rumbled, "Bucky hurt. Bucky trapped," and Steve had to look away, because it was terrible to hear it put so simply like that. And then the Hulk poked into Steve's chest with an enormous green finger, hard enough to knock him back on his ass in the sand. "Steve crash," he said. "Steve lost."

Steve swallowed his feelings down. "Yeah, well, that's just about the size of it," he replied, and made himself smile; he felt Bucky's distress and deliberately didn't look at him. But Hulk could feel their emotions, puny as they no doubt were, as surely as they could feel his, and the green creature was all outrage on their behalf.

#

They decided to live as beach bums for a while. The cove Steve had created was as beautiful as anything he'd ever drawn: a curving shore of blue sea and white sand, with their bleached wood cottage set back a ways from the water, though every now and then the Hulk showed up and smashed it to bits. They built a rowboat by hand and fished for the fun of it, cooking and eating what they caught over a firepit in the sand. They took long walks and their limbs got very brown, and the powerful white sunlight seemed to be a strong trigger for the shadow, who blinked and cringed when the light hit his face and seemed to get to "Steve" much faster than usual.

They were walking along the beach when Steve suddenly felt a strange tug at his midsection, and the ground lurched and spun under his feet. He turned and grabbed for Bucky, just catching a glimpse of his alarmed face, "Steve!" and—

### Part Three.

"Captain Rogers?"

Quiet. It was so quiet.

"It's all right, sir. We've got you, sir. Christ, it's a fucking miracle. Pardon my French, sir; I'm sorry."

#

In the belly of a submarine off the coast of Cuba, the asset slept on.

#


He dreamed of Bucky on the beach. Bucky was sitting on the sand in a white shirt, unbuttoned. He looked so happy.

#

"Is he alive? He can't be alive."

"What are you talking about? Look at the fucking monitors on the tank. He's alive, all right."

"He might be just—a collection of cells. Floating in biometric antifreeze."
"You're just a collection of cells. We're all just a collection of—"

"Jesus, back off, all of you. Give him some room. And show a little respect. This is Captain America," and he was pushing his way to the back of the train, past clouds of smoke and girls laughing and Carrie Southern entertaining everyone on the ukelele, and then he reached the game in the club car. "C'mon, Sue, deal me in. Give me a chance to win some of my money back," and then he saw that Bucky was already there, frowning down at his hand and saying, "No worries, pal; no worries. I've got it covered." They dealt him in. They were Zener cards.

#

"I don't know what they think is going to happen. Do they think he's going to wake up, put on his costume, and wave to kids at parades? Poor bastard's not going to wake up. Better if he doesn't; seventy years without—"

"He'll wake up," and then there were hands, shaking him. "Steve, wake up—come on! We're gonna miss the train!" and Steve, panicked, shoved his legs into his pants and shouted: "I don't have a hat! Bucky! We need hats!"

#

"I thought you'd want to see this. I can hardly believe it. Look at those readings; he's coming out of it."

"How soon?"

"Hard to say. Could be any time."

"All right—let's play it safe. Get him out of the tank. Dry him off, get him washed and dressed—"

"You're moving him?"

"Imagine you went to sleep in 1945 and woke up in the middle of this."

#

Code 13! All Agents, Code 13!" and he'd knocked over a medical cart and smashed through a wall and two doors to reach the street before they'd surrounded him in their black tanks, with their black body armor and guns.

"Where am I? Where is this?" and he was in Brooklyn, he was on a beach, the train was shaking around him. He was in the plane, ice splintering up onto the windshield. He was in a tank, tubes trailing from his face, from his groin. Christ, he was cold. There was still ice on his fingers. He was in the Grand Canyon. He was in Times Square. This couldn't be Times Square. Where the hell was this? "Tell me! Where am I, who are you, where's—" —Bucky? Bucky, where are you? Why is my mind so quiet? He stared around, overwhelmed by the level of detail, things he could never have imagined, and realized he was awake—he was really awake—he was awake and Bucky wasn't—Bucky wasn't—

He was dizzy, stumbling, and hands were on him, white coats with concerned voices. "Captain Rogers, it's all right. You're all right, you're going to be—"

"Where's Bucky? He—" but in his heart he knew already, because his mind was so goddamned quiet. "Please—I've got to find him, he's with the Soviets, an international unit, frozen, he's in a tank, he's..." but that was him, wasn't it, and his words were twisting up: reality was all twisted up.
He tried to change it, willed the world around him to change, but it didn't; everything stayed as it was. Steve looked at the pitying faces of the men and women in the white coats, and at the blaring reality of Times Square all around him: the city was vibrant, loud, real as all hell; nothing like—They were all watching him warily, giving him time to work his way through it.

"I've been dreaming, haven't I?" Steve said, brain still swimming. "Just. I was having the most incredible dream."

#

"Traumas to the brain engender all kinds of weird states. Dream states, hallucinatory states — someone will probably get you to go over it for a paper." A click, and the white light turned off.

The military doctor smiled at him through the dancing spots in his eyes. "Seriously, Captain, you're a medical miracle. There's observable tissue damage but you're regenerating at an amazing rate. Increased activity in the hippocampus: you're rerouting your memory—"

Steve's blood froze; around him, the monitors reacted. "I've heard—Someone said that before."

The doctor traced his finger over a display and said, matter of factly, "You might have overheard us talking. Deja vu is also not uncommon—the neuroplastic nature of the... you're connecting up in unpredictable ways."

"But it was so real. Strange, but..." Steve's head was beginning to ache again. "I understood why; it made sense."

The doctor was writing on a plastic box and saying, "Uh huh, yep. We don't really have good neuroscience on why." He looked up. "The best I can say is the brain must have something to do. Was there any particular thing you—"

—and Steve was swimming in disjointed, crazy memories: he and Bucky were having sex in a movie house, fighting a man in a black mask, riding a train through an earthquake, being attacked by a green dinosaur in the Old West—

There were hands on him, pressing him back, and someone was inserting an IV into his hand, and the military doctor was saying, steadily, "Okay, Captain Rogers, take a deep breath. Another. Deeper," and someone else was muttering, "Whoa, those are some readings," and then the doctor said, "It's okay, Cap. You're fine. You're all right."

#

He tried to tell them the truth; he'd always tried to be a good patient. "I put the plane into the water," he began, "but I was awake, and then Bucky—Bucky came and dug me out of the ice..."

He never really got to tell them the whole story, because a neuropsychologist showed up and sat down by the bed and earnestly explained to him that an injury like his could prevent the brain from integrating the body's internal and external perceptions, which resulted in a corrupted sense of self. "The brain tries to solve this conflict by coming up with the most plausible explanation: a second self. A doppleganger, if you will. A projection, an embodiment of your external states."

He felt a wave of nausea; seasick. "Bucky," he managed.

"Right. Think about it, Captain. You were frozen—but incredibly, your brain was still working. Talk about a discrepancy in your internal and external perceptions!" She smiled a little sadly. "And so you imagine another man—another you, in fact—being trapped, held prisoner and repeatedly..."
frozen. And you, yourself: what were you doing during this time?"

"I was waiting," Steve whispered; his heart was pounding. "Just waiting."

"Right," the neuropsychologist said.

Was it him, were they both him all along? Steve remembered how cold he had been, sinking, dying, how terrified. If there was anyone he would have called into being to comfort him, it was Bucky; of course Bucky. Bucky'd always been there for him, always cared for him. Bucky had always been his other self, the other, better half of him.

She took him to see the elaborate equipment they'd used to bring him out of the ice: a massive room of displays and monitors with a large glass tank at the center, completely unlike the one he'd imagined Bucky in. This one was low and rectangular, like a fish-tank, with all sorts of tubes and waterproof wires coiled at the bottom. It was empty now.

#

"It's a funny story, how we found you," the man with one eye, Nick Fury, said; he was the head of the SSR now, except they called it SHIELD —-all this was SHIELD: the hospital, the labs, the tanks, the gray-suited agents hurrying up and down the halls. It didn't feel like the SSR, though; the SSR had always been scrambling, messy, underfunded. This SHIELD was slick, full of juice: more organized and better supplied than the U.S. Army, even.

"Is it?" Steve asked; there didn't seem a lot that was funny to him now.

"A search and rescue team found you. But they weren't looking for you." Director Fury cracked a humorless smile. "Not after seventy years, they weren't. No, they were looking for someone else—a scientist, a genius, really. Dr. Bruce Banner. A man of incredible talents. We were following him, and he led us straight to you. But do you want to hear the funny thing?" Fury regarded him thoughtfully. "He claims to have no idea why he went there. Not a clue. Just woke up and found himself in the middle of the Arctic. Do you think that's strange, Cap?"

"I think everything's strange," Steve said.

"Yeah," Fury said with hard sympathy. "I guess you do. Look, when they release you—we've got a facility upstate, a cabin in the woods, right on the lake. Maybe you want to go there for a while, rest and recover. You could catch up with the world, read your briefing materials: go fishing if it all becomes too much," but Steve frowned; he remembered going fishing with Bucky. They'd built a rowboat together. Except none of that had happened.

"Captain Rogers, I haven't given up hoping that you'll decide to serve your country again." Fury's voice was low and serious. "You're still a young man in—many respects," and Steve ran a hand over his jaw; even Fury couldn't get that out with a straight face. He was old as the hills; old as dirt; old bones.

He was saying it before he'd fully had the thought: "I want to go to the Grand Canyon," and in this world, he couldn't make it happen with a wish: he couldn't make anything happen. But having asked, it felt right: like a way of coping with the terrible silence in his head, with Bucky's terrible absence; with his own grief, interrupted by seventy years. "I want to go to the Grand Canyon," he told Fury. "I've—never been there," and it wasn't strictly speaking, a lie; not literally, anyway.

Fury looked at him for what seemed like a long time. "All right, Cap," he said finally. “Sure. I can arrange that.”
Fury’s arrangements involved a plane and an escort of four armed SHIELD agents who were instructed to keep their distance unless he looked like he wanted conversation, which he didn’t. The trip took fewer than four hours. They landed at a small airport, and then there was an armored car waiting for them, and then they were driving along a road and there were signs for the national park and then a parking lot—a parking lot! Steve stared at the blacktop, criss-crossed with yellow lines, the special area for tour buses, the little huts selling water and t-shirts, the public amenities and bathrooms—he hadn't dreamed any of this. And the people: families with their children, and couples strolling side by side, groups of hikers wearing hats and boots and carrying heavy packs—and then Steve moved, in slow motion, to the railing. The crowds parted and he got his first glimpse of the Grand Canyon: the real thing.

It was grand, all right; massive beyond what he’d had imagined, and it was shaped differently than the canyon he remembered, that Bucky—that Bucky had—that he'd dreamed. The colors were different, and some of them surprising—there were beautiful streaks of purple in it—and it was, really, quite a striking, quite a majestic—

Steve clenched his hands on the railing and stared down at the toes of his shoes, not wanting to look anymore: he didn't want to lose the canyon in his head, which he was irrationally, painfully sure was Bucky's canyon: it was the canyon that James Barnes had dreamed of, had dreamed up. He closed his eyes and thought of that canyon, with its almost-terrifying loveliness, and then fought with himself—he had to accept the reality of things, if he was going to survive; what did the doctor say? Coma dreams, the brain had to do something, a projection of the self—but he couldn't make himself believe he had simply dreamed up all those things by himself, if only because he wasn't that creative a person. What he remembered—a single mind hadn't invented all that. He knew the kinds of things he made when he set out to make things: he'd seen his own paintings, he knew his own visual style. He wouldn't have imagined alien spaceships attacking a dinosaur; Bucky was the one who loved science fiction. And that orange-red sand, that bluest of all possible skies—Bucky's freedom sky—all of that hadn't come from inside him alone.

He opened his eyes and squinted at the Grand Canyon. It was still just a hole in the ground.

Steve turned, quickly, and walked away, head tucked down, back toward the parking lot. He sensed, rather than saw, his escort hurrying after him. One of them, a competent girl in a brown ponytail who reminded him a bit of Peggy, sprinted up beside him and ventured, "Captain Rogers, is everything all right?"

She couldn't read his mind; thank God. "Yeah," he said, and made himself smile. "Thanks. We can go back now."

Her eyebrows flew up. "Back? Sir?" she added hastily. "I mean—do you want to take a tour, or—"

"No thanks, I'm good. I wanted to see it, that's all. And now I've seen it. I've seen—enough of it, thanks."

In the plane, one of the agents was telephoning someone while shooting him worried glances, though he couldn't quite hear what the man was saying; turning around, coming back, sir; now; yes, now. Steve closed his eyes: if they thought he was crazy, he couldn't really defend himself. He remembered things that hadn't happened, places that didn't exist. But his coma dreams had Bucky in them, and that seemed to him so much better to him than this world, now.
The agent cleared his throat and Steve opened his eyes. "Director Fury wants to know if you'd like to go to the lakehouse now," and Steve said, "Yes. Yes, I would, thank you," but they never made it there; another hour into the trip there was a message: they were being diverted to an aircraft carrier in the middle of the Atlantic.

#

"You've caused quite a stir around here," the woman said, cool and amused; her name was Natasha Romanov, and Steve was sure that she could see right through him. "You're something of a legend, you know."

"Yeah. Like the Loch Ness monster," Steve agreed. "Or Bigfoot," and something slight changed, warmed in her smile; she hadn't expected him to mock himself.

"Just like that," Agent Romanov said, and then she stopped and turned to draw in a gentle-looking man who was wandering around behind them, looking lost. "Doctor Banner," she said. "This is Captain Steve Rogers. Captain Rogers, this is Doctor Bruce Banner, and Steve frowned at the name; they shook hands.

"Doctor Banner," Steve said. "I guess I owe you a debt of gratitude."

"You don't owe me anything," Banner said inexplicably, and then Agent Romanov was saying, "Oh, hey, this is cool," and there were engines churning, spraying water, and the aircraft carrier was lifting off, into the sky.

#

They told him that the search and rescue team that recovered him also recovered the cube Hydra'd used to power its weapons. They told him the cube was of alien origin. They told him that the aliens were coming to get it back. That one was here already. Thor's brother, Loki; Thor was an alien too. Steve smiled helplessly into his hands.

"What's so funny?" Tony Stark demanded; he was a firebrand, the spitting image of his father. "You think that's funny, Rogers?" He pointed at him and said: "Ten points from Gryffindor!"

"No, I—" He'd only smiled because it sounded like something Bucky would have written; reality, as scripted by J.B. Barnes. "I mean, it isn't funny. Not at all. It's just—"

"You're damn right it's not funny," Stark said. "I'd need a four year head start even to begin to fight these guys—we've got nothing, technologically speaking, that competes with this."

"We've got you," Director Fury said.

"Yeah, and I'm good, but I can't—" Stark said.

"That you was plural," Director Fury said levelly. "You, Agent Romanov, Captain Rogers, Doctor —"

"You haven't got me," Steve heard himself saying. "I mean, I just came to listen—" and Fury looked like he'd expected Steve to say that, but Stark was wheeling on him with a kind of malicious delight.

"Well, well," Stark said, grinning like a shark, "someone wants to renegotiate their contract. What are you looking for, Rogers? Top billing, bigger dressing room, only green M&Ms?"
"You haven't got me, either," Banner awkwardly interjected. "I'm 194 days without an outbreak. I can't risk…"

A plain-faced fellow in a dark suit came in, his brow furrowed. "We've got a hit on Loki. He's in Stuttgart and…" His eyes landed on Steve and he lost track of what he was saying. "Captain Rogers. I'm Phil Coulson. I'm—it's an honor to meet you, sir," and Steve caught the faint twitch of Agent Romanov's eyebrow. "I'm an enormous fan—"

"You're an enormous something," Stark said, and then, shooting a hard look at Steve, "There's an alien threatening to enslave the entire planet. Are you coming or what?" and put like that, how could he say no?

#

Tony Stark wore a suit of armor that made him look like he'd been trapped inside one of his father's flying cars, which Steve supposed was true, in a way. The suit they gave him resembled his old Captain America outfit, but with modern fabric and lots of sophisticated bits of equipment tucked into the belt—everyone he met seemed to be carrying advanced electronic devices now, so he was going to have to work hard to catch up.

They brought Loki back to the helicarrier. Romanov went in to do the interrogation while he and Stark watched from behind a two-way mirror. Or at least, Steve was watching the interrogation: Romanov, he saw with a slight knotting of fear in his stomach, was a master manipulator. Tony Stark appeared to be watching him.

"That was too easy, don't you think?" Steve said finally, uncomfortably, looking at him. "Loki's powerful, he—"

Stark leaned in close; his eyes were very black. "Do you know what I'm thinking?" he asked.

Steve blinked. "What?"

Stark waggled his fingers in front of Steve's eyes. "I'm thinking of a number from one to ten—"

Steve's heart was suddenly pounding hard enough to hurt; relief, excitement, terror. "You—you know about that?"

"I know about everything," Stark replied, smiling and a little threatening. "Some guys build engines with their fathers, others play golf. Dad and me, we had you," and then: "Can you read my mind or can't you?"

Steve couldn't breathe. "No."

"What about the others, are you reading the others?" Stark demanded.

"No," Steve said.

"It was just Barnes?" Stark asked, and Steve's heart stopped at the sound of Bucky's name.

"Yes," Steve managed.

"So it's serum-related," Stark said, gnawing his lip and nodding to himself. "Dad always figured it was serum related, but he never ran any—" Stark cut himself off. "What about Banner, then: can you read Banner?"
"What?" Steve asked. "Why?" and then, catching Stark's meaning: "Doctor Banner was given the serum?"

For the first time, Stark seemed taken off-guard. "Nobody's told you about Banner? You're in for a —" and just then Romanov came bolting in, a little breathless, and said: "His plan is to unleash the Hulk. We've got to—"

"The Hulk?" Steve repeated, astounded; they couldn't possible mean—

"—get to Banner," Romanov finished, "fast. We've got to isolate him from—"

Stark said tensely, "Banner's in the lab. With Loki's scepter—"

Steve looked from one to the other of them. "What does Banner have to do with—" and then the floor lurched and a wall exploded into fire, blowing out into the sky. White foam sprayed everywhere, and the helicarrier tilted precariously, dropped rapidly; stabilized. A hundred klaxons and alarms went off, code red, code red: lights flashing and sirens wailing.

"We're under attack," Stark said.

"Banner," Romanov gasped, and took off at a run.

#

It was the Hulk, and the moment he came online, Steve was knocked sideways into the engine control panel, overwhelmed by the Hulk's outsized emotions: rage! smash! kill! Buzzing around his head like gnats—

"Cap!" Stark was shouting into his earpiece, "I need you to tell me which relays are in the overload position!"

Steve held on to the railing for a second, wind whipping his hair, and just breathed. Then he said, "Copy that!" and as he worked, he sent Hulk pictures of the attacking jetfighters: go get 'em, pal; Hulk smash! Confusion broke through Hulk's anger—Steve?—and Steve thought back, Yeah, it's me—you found me—help us out, okay? and he knew without seeing that the Hulk had thrown himself at the plane and was punching it down to the ground.

#

By the time Steve laid actual eyes on the Hulk the Chitauri army was invading—flying monkeys and enormous writhing Leviathans smashing up the city Steve had already died once to protect. Hulk was glad to see him! Hulk was furious at him! Where had he been? Where was—and Hulk understood immediately from Steve's huge and terrible disappointment that he didn't know where Bucky was either; that Steve had been hoping that the Hulk knew.

"Steve," the Hulk rumbled, as Tony Stark did a shocked double-take between them.

Steve looked up at the Hulk's enormous face; he had to focus them both on the battle plan, or there'd never be time for anything else. "Hulk," he directed. "Smash!" and the Hulk showed him a mouthful of white teeth and took an enormous leap towards an oncoming Leviathan.

#

He relearned the brutality of physical pain. The fighting was hard-going, and Steve watched Romanov take a blow that should have crippled her and stagger up like a champion. He himself
took a gut-shot that should have blown his mid-section open, but the new armor held. He lay there
gasping, his organs smashed and aching, but then Thor looked down at him with sympathetic eyes
and a smirk on his lips and Steve was able to get up again, and go on.

Near the end of the battle Steve watched in horror as Tony Stark, looking tiny and infinitely frail
even in his armor, plummeted from an impossible height—and then felt the Hulk's mirroring
emotion as he leaped up and up and somehow, miraculously, broke his fall—catching him,
frantically tugging at his faceplate—Stark wasn't moving, wasn't breathing. "Come on," he
muttered. "Stark. Tony—" and then the Hulk roared and Tony startled, his eyes flying open.

#

By the time Steve got a chance talk to the Hulk, he wasn't there anymore—it was just Banner,
sitting shirtless and disheveled in a pile of rubble. "Hi, uh. Do you know me?" Steve asked
awkwardly.

Banner fumbled on his spectacles, which seemed to be in his oversized pants pocket. "Um, in what
sense?"

Steve frowned and tried to read his mind; couldn't. "I guess you don't share memories with, uh—?"
"—with the other guy? No," Banner sighed. "The other guy's kind of his own man."

"Oh," Steve said. "Well." He stood there, helplessly, in the ruins of Park Avenue South. "Can I talk
to him?"

Banner shook his head despairingly. "I have to live with the consequences of his actions." He wore
an expression of pure misery. "It's not a party trick, or a thing I can do casually."

"I understand," Steve said, and he did, but he couldn't help adding: "Next time, maybe I can get a
word with—"

Banner's mouth twisted. "I don't control his social calendar. I don't control much of anything, I'm
afraid."

Steve nodded, trying to conceal his disappointment, and when he turned away, Tony was standing
there, dented and dusty. "You can read the Hulk?" Tony asked and Steve nodded slowly.

"Tony, please," Steve said; he felt close to breaking. "I need to know what you know," and he
could see the wisecrack shaping itself on Tony's lips: you haven't the time; you haven't the brains,
Rogers, but he pushed on, desperate. "I need to know what your father told you. About me. You
can't know," Steve said wretchedly, thinking of Bucky, the cryo-chamber, the drugs and the
mindwipes, which were maybe not mere nightmares after all, "how important, what it could mean
to——" and the terror must have been on his face, in his voice, because Stark frowned and said, "All
right, Cap. Come back to the Tower when everything's over and we'll talk it all through."

#

When Steve finished telling everything he remembered, bizarre and fragmentary as it was, Tony
Stark looked at him and said, almost tactfully: "You know every history book in the world says
that James Barnes died in 1945."

"But they said that about me, too, didn't they?" Steve pointed out. "Did they ever find his body?"
"No," Stark admitted. "No, they didn't." He looked over at Banner and said, "I don't know, what do you think?"

Banner made a face. "I'm not sure. I certainly don't remember any of that, but that doesn't mean it didn't happen."

"The Hulk was never frozen, though, was he?" Stark pointed out.

"Not frozen, no," Banner agreed, "but he's certainly been...tranquilized, made comatose." He took off his glasses and considered this. "That could produce similar effects to freezing if the ESP connection is based on—"

"—brainwaves, sure," Stark finished. "Which is what my father and Peggy thought." He looked back at Steve and said, "None of this is in the official record, you understand—you can thank Peggy for that. Nobody knows that you and Barnes had ESP—not the history books, not Fury or SHIELD; nobody. The SSR developed protocols in case you began to manifest mental powers, which I guess they thought there was a decent chance you might, but Peggy didn't like them. She didn't want you locked up in New Mexico, or worse. So she confided in Dad, but no one else."

"Smart lady," Banner muttered.

"I wish I could thank her," Steve said.

Stark looked at him strangely. "You can: she's in the Roosevelt Home down in D.C. Visiting hours are 10-12, 4-6."

Steve stared at him. "Peggy's alive?"

"And kicking, boy howdy," Stark said. "Jesus, you were poorly briefed."

"I think they were trying to break things to me slowly," Steve said bitterly. "Since they thought I was crazy."

"Also, to be fair," Banner said, "the planet had just been invaded by aliens."

"You should go, though," Stark said. "If nobody told her you were alive before, she'll have seen you on TV by now."

"Of course I'll go," Steve sputtered. "She—she and I—"

Stark looked at him shrewdly. "You and Barnes, my father said. Is that true?" and Steve didn't know what to say, couldn't say anything for a long time. Finally he jerked a nod. Yes. Stark seemed surprised that he'd admit it. "Well. That being the case," Stark said slowly, "are you sure that these dreams of yours aren't just..."

"Wish-fulfillment?" Steve clenched his jaw. "An external projection of my internal self? No, I'm not sure. But the Hulk is real, and my ESP is real—so why shouldn't Bucky be real?" He looked from one to the other of them and pressed on: "And while I'm asking questions: how sure are you that Hydra isn't still operating?" He seemed to feel their influence everywhere in this new world, like the scent of poison flowers. "That cube was Hydra's primary fuel source. And SHIELD had an awful big collection of Hydra weapons cached on that helicarrier; I saw them."

Banner and Stark exchanged glances. "Yeah," Stark admitted, face hardening. "I saw them too. But I can't believe..."
"I can believe," Banner muttered.

Stark shot him a tense look. "I've never heard anything that leads me to believe that Hydra's still active," he said. But..." He looked back at Steve and sighed. "I'll keep an ear to the ground; see what I can find out."

#

"Steve," Peggy said, and she still had the most beautiful smile in the world, he thought. "When I first saw you, I thought it had to be one of your movies, playing on the television. Then I realized that the picture was in color, and besides—" The corners of her mouth curved wryly. "—none of your films were ever in such terrible taste."

He'd expected seeing Peggy would affect him, but he hadn't expected to be blindsided like this.

"Steve," Peggy said again, more softly now, gently stroking his hair as he tried not to weep against her neck. "I'm so sorry. Please say you forgive me," and then she was crying too and he was kissing salty tears off her mouth, kissing her face and God, how had they come to this; how in the world had they ever come to this?

"Forgive? Peg, there's nothing to—"

"We looked for you. Howard—we sent planes. We did reconnaissance—evidently not well enough. You haven't aged a day," Peggy said wonderingly, her cool, wrinkled hand pressed to his face. "Was it really seventy years in the ice?"

Steve nodded, holding her hand to his cheek when her expression grew grave. "But Peg—I wasn't asleep. And I wasn't alone." Her eyes widened and he said, "Bucky was there; he was there with me. Nobody believes me, but—" and her face twisted with such pity that he had to look away for a moment. "Peg, I'm not crazy. Please listen. You remember how he was in my mind, and I in his—like the telephone, you said: except we were the only ones on the wire."

"Yes," Peggy said with terrible sympathy. "But Steve, he died. You must remember, you were wrecked with grief, undone by it—"

"I remember," Steve said tightly. "It was terrible because he'd been with me, in my head; he'd been part of me."

"I know," Peggy said.

"But he came back," Steve said, and his voice seemed pathetic even to his own ears; how desperate he was for it to be true. He felt a stab of doubt—coma dreams, the brain has to do something—and then remembered that Bucky'd once magicked a frog into his pocket, and he laughed and was sure again. "He came back, Peg. He wasn't killed, he was captured, by the Soviets, I think, and they put him into—he called it cryostasis or cryofreeze. And when he was frozen—he came back on the line." He had Peggy's attention now; her eyebrows sharpened.

"It was a tank," Steve went on; sculpting it in the air with his hands. "He was in my mind, I saw it—Metal, with a window in front and tubes coming out the—" He didn't have words; his words weren't enough, so he grabbed a pad and a pen off the desk and started sketching, drawing the tank with its tubes and wires, and then the terrible chair with its restraints and circlet of electrodes and IV poles—the metal bit, the sponge; he drew it all.

Steve handed the paper to her and said, tapping it with a finger, "Like that, they put him in that, and when he was inside it, he could—" and then he stopped talking because he saw the look on Peggy's
"Peg, are you...?"

She was shaking her head minutely. "This is impossible. This—" She looked up at him with watery eyes. "Steve, I've seen this," Peggy said, and then, shockingly: "We built this. SHIELD. Years ago, it—" She stared down at the paper again and said, "It didn't work, they said—it didn't...They destroyed it, they said."

"Peg, what was it for?" Steve asked, low and urgent; he pointed to the chair. "This machine...?"

She took a deep, shuddering breath. "You won't like it."

"I already don't like it!" Steve said. "Peg, was it for mindwipes? For instigating amnesia?"

She looked ashamed but met his gaze head on. "Acute behavioral restructuring as a treatment for combat fatigue."

"Oh, Jesus," Steve said, and he had to get up and stand by the window; he didn't trust himself to speak.

"But it didn't work." Peggy dropped her eyes to his drawing again. "There was research; they remembered: the soldiers always remembered in the end. Even when they couldn't form memories, they remembered being hurt and they remembered who had hurt them. And they remembered their pals, their wives and their mothers—"

"He always remembered me. Even when he didn't know who I was, he knew I was for him."

"Steve, if this is true, it's..." She looked up and said, "Have you told anyone else about this?"

Steve frowned. "About what? The tank, the machine—?"

"Any of it," Peggy said. "I never told anybody about your ESP, or that Barnes had it; only Howard knew, and he's—"

"I tried to tell them at the hospital, but they didn't believe me; they told me about coma dreams and—doppelgangers. Tony Stark knows. And Dr. Banner—he's the Hulk, he—the Hulk has it, too, you know; the ESP." Peggy's eyebrows flew up and Steve nodded fervently. "He does, but he's like I was, before Bucky; he never had anyone else to—you know, talk to."

"Well. That's pretty bloody useful," Peggy said, and then she rubbed her eyes. "All right. I'll ask some questions very quietly, see if I can find out—" Her eyes wandered down to the drawing again. "—if we're still running a super soldier program. Or if the Russians are. Or—" Her lips clamped together. "—if someone else is."

Her eyes were knowing and worried. "Peggy," Steve began, low and serious, "could it possibly be—" and her thin hand gripped his wrist, stopped the word from escaping his mouth. —Hydra. Could it be Hydra? She met his eyes.

"Pass me the matches, dear," and Steve watched as she carefully set his drawing ablaze.

"Nick Fury wants me to join SHIELD," Steve said as it burned. "Should I join SHIELD?"

"Yes, darling, I think so. That will put you right at the center of things—where we need you."

#

They gave him a slim silver machine about the size and shape of a book, except it opened
horizontally onto a single blank page and a set of typewriter keys. You could use it to write with, but also to read all sorts of books, and it also gave you pictures and filmstrips from a library called the internet. The internet didn't use the Dewey decimal system; instead it used something called Google, and you could type up whatever you wanted to know about.

Bucky's face, in old photographs, stared back at him: there was one taken of him in uniform before he'd shipped out, and another of him posed with the other members of the 107th at Camp McCoy (James Buchanan aka "Bucky" Barnes, back row, third from left). There were pictures of Bucky he'd never seen before—it turned out that the Brooklyn Museum had done an exhibit in the mid-1960s called "Wartime! Brooklyn Boys" and someone had gone and unearthed all these old, blurry photographs of Bucky: Bucky, standing shirtless and in black swim trunks with a bunch of other boys at the WPA pool in Red Hook; Bucky, shirtless and wearing bigger trunks, throwing a punch in a boxing ring ("Amateur boxing lessons at the Police Athletic League, September 13, 1936") There were frames taken from footage of the Howling Commandos shot by PR men during the war; Steve recognized a picture of him and Bucky standing near a Jeep, and then found the clip itself: only 18 seconds, but Steve's heart stopped, because he was all come to life in the movie: the barely-concealed smirk, the tolerant, eye-rolling vitality of him.

But that was all—nothing after 1945; the world was sure that James Barnes had died in 1945. His name always came with closed-off parentheses (10 March 1917—April 14, 1945) and portentous voiceovers. Bucky in grainy black and white slow motion, turning away from the camera and walking away—he was probably going to take a piss or something, Steve thought.

He racked his brain for details from the dream, anything from after 1945. 1961: a plane crash, Bucky'd shot down a plane in Rhodesia, he said—and "1961 plane crash Rhodesia" brought up stories of someone called Dag Hammarskjold, the secretary-general of the United Nations, the new League of Nations, whose plane had in fact crashed in Rhodesia, though nobody seemed to know why. An investigation found no evidence of an assassination, though Hamarskjold had been on his way to negotiate a cease-fire between UN forces and Katangese troops.

Where had Bucky shot the passenger of the green Mercedes? Nicaragua? He searched "car crash, green Mercedes, Nicaragua, blue dress, General's mistress" (he couldn't remember the General's name) and got nothing, then rubbed his face and tried to remember the name of the other man Bucky had killed, the one at the cigar shop. Arturo? Armondo? Pisaro? Posado? Google brought up information—Connect with Arturo Pizarro on Facebook! Artur Pizarro, Portugese pianist. Armondo Pisaro, owner of a Pizza Hut in—Steve kept trying variations, but nothing was right. He didn't know who the man was, or why he had to be killed, or what the fight even was.

Feeling more desperate, he started typing in anything he could think of: he described the tank, the international unit, cryofreeze—which seemed to be largely experimental? or at least only really successful with plants and embryos? He got lost in a story about Walt Disney's head—Walt Disney had had his head frozen? It was bizarre, and after a while he closed the lid of the laptop and shoved it away; he was drowning in information, but he had no leads at all.

#

Fury usually partnered him with Romanov, whom he respected but didn't quite trust; he wasn't entirely sure if she was his partner or his handler—there was something about the way she looked at him. Still, they worked well together: they were physically well-matched, and she knew how to make use of his strength and particular skills. And maybe it was because she was his handler, but he felt safer when she was on the squad. It wasn't like it had been with Bucky, where he felt he had a second pair of eyes, a second pair of hands, but she had good instincts.
This time it was black-ops in North Korea; a defector, a high-ranking intelligence minister had sent word that—


—he would be willing to switch sides if they could get him out of the country, which was more difficult than it sounded; he was living in an armed compound in Pyongyang under heavy surveillance, and he and Natasha—

"It's good to see you, soldier. You're looking well," the man said; he was wearing a red tie with gold stripes.

—and a team of six other…six…. They'd already broken into the compound when Steve stopped, cold and sweating, and steadied himself against the thick concrete wall, which was topped with barbed wire and—

Someone was there. There was noise on the line.

The man in the red tie sat across from him. "We need your help," he said. "A mission in—"

"Steve," the asset said.

"Bucky," Steve replied; he was gasping, sightless. "Bucky, I hear you—"

"What?" Natasha said sharply.

"I'm sorry?" the man in the red tie said.

"Steve," the asset said, and he had the man in the red tie by the throat. He broke his neck and let him fall. "I'm coming—" and it was easy to dispatch the two doctors, but there weren't any weapons, he needed weapons—

Natasha's voice seemed to be coming from far away; his legs were buckling. He struggled to keep himself upright; to go and to stay at the same time. "Bucky, where are you, do you know where you—"

The asset was grateful for the first set of guards; now he had four guns and three knives. The walls
around him were smooth, metallic. He didn't know where he was. He was going to get out. Steve was in a courtyard—and they were coming for him, *four, four, on your four*—

— and Steve kicked out hard, blindly, making contact, then flipped over and broke the second guard's neck with a snap. He wobbled and went down to his knees. "Oh my God," he heard Natasha gasp, and then, "Code Two, Code Two, mission abort, I need backup, I need some goddamned help here—"

"— Code Blue, Code Blue, the asset is on the loose, armed and dangerous— All available men, all available—"

"No, it's all right," Steve tried to tell her; he was dizzy with joy. "It's Bucky, I see Bucky, I—"

"Steve?" Bucky was flickering in and out of the mask. "Where are you? They took you, they—"

"They found me! Hulk found me in the ice! I'm in D.C., I—"

The asset turned and grabbed the little rat of a man by the throat.

"Sputnik," the little man gasped, and—

The asset seized and fell to the ground, twitching.

— arms and legs thrashing, foam around his lips, throat closing up. Steve couldn't breathe, he—and somewhere far away, the sound of gunfire. Red hair fell into his face and somehow Natasha was muscling him up and—

— dragging him up, and impossibly, the asset was still fighting, though he was moving more slowly now, the kill switch having tripped at least three neural transmitters, including the one to his arm, and—

— dragging him out, gun braced against her hip. Someone grabbed his other side and then they were moving faster. A car pulled up with a squeal of tires, and Steve was being thrown onto the back seat. "Bucky," he gasped; he couldn't move; he had to send Bucky his strength; all of it. "Buck—"
—and the asset smashed one of his captors in the face with his metal arm, breaking his jaw, and then pulled a knife and gutted one of the others, but they had him, now, and they were forcing him down, wrestling him back into the chair. A restraint caught and locked his flesh arm in place, but the other—
#
He was panting like an animal. He was trapped, he was dying; they were going to kill him.

"Steve, it's all right," Natasha breathed. "You're going to be all—"
#
"Wipe him!"

"I can't get the—fitted properly!—"

The asset was growling savagely, the metal arm swinging wildly.

"Hold him down!"

"You hold him—Jesus!" the man screamed, and he had a huge bloody chunk taken out of his arm; the asset had bitten him. He reeled back, sobbing. "Jesus fucking Christ!"

"You said he was erratic. This isn't erratic, this is—"

"Hit the switch!"

"What? The protocols—"

"Fuck the protocols! Fuck the goddamned protocols! Shock the shit out of the bastard!"

"But—"

"On my authority! You want this monster loose in a fucking submarine?"

They flipped the switch and the asset screamed—
#
Steve pressed his hands to his head, to hold his brains in—hurt, God, it hurt. His eyes filled with tears—
#
wrap him, cushion him somehow, in the immensity of his love; to smother him in it. A better
death, certainly, than…

#

It was so quiet. In his head, only a faint buzzing. Something beeped. Steve opened his eyes; hospital.

He closed his eyes and let himself drift away.

#

"Captain Rogers, can you hear me? Can you hear me, sir? He can't hear us."

"That kind of dosage, are you surprised? He should be dead thirty times over."

"What's your thinking on this?" The white light clicked on, clicked off again.

"Haloperidol IV."

"Infusion? Yeah, okay."

#

"How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three," Steve said.

#

"Can you say the months backwards?"

"December, November, October, September…"

#

He woke up, gasping, dreaming that he heard Bucky saying his name. "Steve. Steve—"

But it was quiet; his head was quiet.

#

"How do you feel, sir?"

"Great. I—great."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Walter Reed, I think."

"Do you remember what happened?"

"I—got sick," Steve said. "Woozy. I—" and he didn't like to lie, but: "I think I was gassed."

"Gassed?" The doctors exchanged worried glances.

Steve, who knew he was a terrible liar, forced himself onward. "I—don't know what it was. One of
the guards, he had some kind of capsule. It smelled—sweet. I—it confused me, I saw things."

"What kinds of things?"

I saw my dead best friend. Then they caught him and they tortured him and—

"I thought I was back in the war," Steve managed. "With my unit. Austria, I think?" and then he had a thought: "There was a lot of gunfire," he said. "It felt real. Was the gunfire real?"

The doctors exchanged glances and didn't answer. "But you know where you are now."


"And you're not seeing or hearing anything unusual?"

There was a faint buzzing in his head which he hoped, prayed, wasn't Bucky: God, what they'd done to Bucky. He made himself smile as he shook his head. "Nope," he said. "Don't think so—though there was a show on the TV this morning where people switched houses and re-decorated them," and the doctors smiled then. "That was pretty wild," and then he was pulling the IV out of his hand, his elbow. The smiles fell off their faces. "Will you call me a cab?"

"Captain, we'd like to keep you a little longer. " More nervous glances. "Run a few more tests. This gas, maybe it—"

"I feel fine. Really. Please call me a cab."

#

It wasn't until the cab turned onto the Beltway that Steve began to get suspicious, and he was debating whether to confront the driver or just dive out onto the road when the screen on the back of the driver's seat blipped and Tony Stark said, "Cap, it's not them, it's me—I figured you needed a safe place to recover. Plus we should talk," and Steve sighed in relief and sank back. "He's taking you to my helicopter," Stark said. "See you in New York in about an hour."

Stark was waiting on the helipad when the copter touched down, the blades whipping his hair. He was wearing a threadbare t-shirt and jeans and no shoes. He gave Steve a searching look and then frowned. "Romanov thinks you're bugfuck crazy. Peggy thinks someone's trying to kill you. The doctors at Walter Reed told SHIELD your story about being gassed by the North Koreans—nicely played, by the way, though you've missed out on a truly sensational universe of psychotropic drugs. They would have given you anything—Thorazine, heroin, crystal meth—to keep you fighting for Truth, Justice, and—oh, wait: that's the other guy. So who's got it right?"

Steve forced a smile, shrugged. "What do you think?"

"I think you see dead people," Stark replied, and Bucky's face swam in Steve's vision. He was overwhelmed, pressure like a storm cloud bearing down on him. He felt he could fall down under the sadness.

"Go ahead, say it," Stark said with surprising earnestness. "It's okay to say it. It'll make you feel better. I know."

"I wish I were dead," Steve blurted, and Tony nodded with grim understanding and tugged Steve to the edge of the helipad. They stood there together and looked down: Stark Tower was 93 stories high. The cars looked like ants.
"Do you?" Tony asked; he sounded interested in the answer. "Do you really?"

All the tension whooshed out of him, leaving him breathless and giddy. "No," Steve said, and then he was blinking and laughing and gulping for air. "No, I guess I don't. I want to find my friend. I want to know who did this to him."

Tony grinned at him, then poked him in the chest. "See? Empirical evidence will set you free. Come inside and have a drink," he said, and then, foreclosing Steve's objection: "You can get drunk on this stuff; Thor brought it."

"I'm not crazy," Steve said defensively, and Tony replied, "Oh, I don't think you're crazy. I mean, your fashion sense is crazy. Or maybe I just mean terrible. But I don't think you're nuts or anything. You saw him?"

"I saw him," Steve said, and it was such a relief to say it. "I felt him. It's all true. They took him out of cryo and—" and then Steve frowned, the word popping into his head: submarine. "He was back in my head. Just click and—like when you pick up a telephone receiver and you can hear someone breathing even if they don't say anything—"

"Telephones don't work that way anymore," Stark said. "But I know what you mean."

The glass of Asgardian liqueur nearly fell from his hand. "He tried to escape. He killed some guards. And then they said something, a word like a code word, and he fell down—"


"—and they put him into the machine and they—" His stomach turned at the memory of the pain.

"Drink your drink," Tony said, almost absently, and then: "Peggy thought this might happen. We tried to be subtle—which I hope you appreciate, subtlety not being my forte—but we've obviously gotten someone worried. Or a lot of someones." Tony smiled hard and took a drink himself.

Steve's blood froze. "It's Hydra, isn't it. You've found Hydra."

Tony drained the rest of his glass. "Not exactly," he said.

Steve took an involuntary step back as the 3-D blueprint blazed into life; he was getting used to automatic doors and his eyephone, but he still wasn't used to this. It took a moment to piece together what he was seeing: some kind of rotating satellite that held bays for a number of unmanned aircraft, each of them armed with—

Steve looked sharply at Tony. "Those are atomic weapons?"

"Nuclear. But, yeah." Tony was nodding slowly. "Tell me, Cap: what does that look like to you?"

Steve tightened his jaw. "It looks like an updated version of The Valkyrie."

"Yeah," Tony agreed, tilting his head, "that's what it looks like to me, too."

"Did Hydra make this?"

"SHIELD," Tony said, "and not yet. It's in development," and then he waved his hands and pulled
up another blueprint. Three helicarriers: an enormous computer at the core of each. "Helicarriers," Tony confirmed, "that never come down, synced to targeting satellites. They can kill thousands per minute. Or just one person," Stark finished, crossing his arms and hopping up and down: nervous energy. "The scanners can be programmed to find and target a particular individual's DNA. Punching up an assassination is as easy as ordering from Amazon."

"Hydra?" Steve repeated; his throat was dry.

"SHIELD," Tony replied. "This one, they built; there's a launch scheduled. Fury signed off on it."

"Do these look like defensive weapons to you?" Steve asked.

"No," Tony said. "No, they don't. But have to tell you, Cap: I designed the repulsors that'll keep those helicarriers flying. And I'm pretty sure I recognize the targeting systems for those drones. Five years ago Stark Industries would probably have made both gizmos."

Steve smiled grimly. "Peggy's people built the mind-wipe machine: therapeutic treatment for battle-weary soldiers. But that's how they work, Hydra. Everyone doing their bit, till all the pieces are in place. And nobody's responsible for what follows." He stared at the rotating drones, the helicarriers. "We have to stop this."

"You're talking about official U.S. government defense projects," Tony said. "You're talking about SHIELD."

"This isn't defense," Steve exploded. "And if it's not defense, it's not SHIELD. It's called SHIELD, for God's sake."

#

"As far as I know there's no supersoldier program currently active—" Nick Fury said.

"Currently," Steve repeated, bracing both hands on the desk.

"Currently. Yes," Fury said, but he'd lost some of his customary cool. "Obviously there have been programs. We have run programs. But I never heard anything about Sergeant James Barnes being kept alive to do special ops—"

"But could he have been?" Steve said.

For a moment Fury didn't say anything. "He could have been," he admitted. "After the war, SHIELD recruited some of Hydra's top scientists to...." He trailed off, mouth tightening. "You should ask Agent Carter about—"

"Operation Paperclip, she told me," Steve interrupted. "Look, don't you see? All these programs: Project Thunderclap. Project Clearwater. Project Insight—"

Fury glared at him with one angry eye. "We seem to have one hell of a security leak."

"Yeah," Steve agreed. "You do. And you're about to launch a weapon capable of killing thousands, millions of people. Whose idea was it? These projects are Hydra seeds grown in our soil, sir. And once Project Insight goes up, it's not coming down easy. Please, Nick, I'm asking: delay the launch, investigate—"

Fury was already shaking his head. "Do you have any idea how hard it was to get the World Security Council to sign off on—"
"You're saying the paperwork's the problem?" Steve interrupted. Nick Fury closed his mouth.

"There have been one or two...irregularities," Fury said finally. "I'll look into it. And I'll see what I can find out about Barnes." They shook hands on it, but the next time Steve saw Nicholas Fury, he was bleeding out in a corner of Steve's apartment.

"EARS EVERYWHERE," his phone said. "SHIELD COMPROMISED. TRUST NO ONE."

Bullets blasted through the wall, and Fury cried out and fell back, fell down dead. Steve smashed forward through the glass and chased the flickering shadow of the gunman until he could see him, get a shot at him, hurl his shield—and the gunman stopped and turned to catch it and Steve saw the mask, the tactical vest, and it was Bucky, that high-pitched scream in his head, and Bucky hurled the shield back at him—and was gone.

#

"They call him Zimnij Soldát—the Winter Soldier," Natasha said quietly, "and of course you couldn't find him; he's a ghost. Most people don't believe he exists. But I do." She raised her shirt and Steve saw a red-puckered scar. "In Russia, we take our ghost stories seriously."

"So do I," Steve said.

#

And he appeared like a ghost, out of nowhere. The buzzing in Steve's head, the emptiness, somehow got louder, and then all at once the Winter Soldier was upon them, smashing down upon the roof of their car and dragging Sitwell out before firing down into it. Bucky, Steve thought, desperately trying to reach him, Bucky, please, but it was like shouting into an empty room, and if Natasha hadn't yanked him and Sam out of the way, they'd've have been dead.

The Winter Soldier hunted them relentlessly, without a shred of hesitation and with no thought for damage: cars flipped over, buses overturned, explosions ripping up the street. His single-mindedness was terrifying, his physicality amazing: the Winter Soldier was a lot more powerful than he'd been in the dreamworld, in his own self-conception. He was solid muscle in a way that Bucky had never been, and his blows landed harder than when he and Steve had fought in Brooklyn: some part of Bucky, Steve realized, had been pulling the Winter Soldier's punches.

But not anymore: the Winter Soldier fought with a terrifying blankness that gave no quarter, allowed no mistakes. Steve opened his mind to him, begged him to come in—trying to remember that this was Bucky who was hitting him; Bucky underneath, even though the Winter Soldier showed no signs of exhaustion, of effort or of hurt. He just tried to kill you, then tried another way to kill you, then patiently tried another way: as if murder, like genius, was the infinite capacity for taking pains. You felt he would never stop. Natasha fought him better than Steve did, or could—Steve was too busy trying to reach him, searching for traces of Bucky in him.

He let his body fight on instinct while his mind tried to touch Bucky's with pictures, places: Brooklyn, Austria, London—drinking, stealing away to the most obscure hotel they could think of to spend the night, to make love. They were in Italy, they were in the Arctic, they—

The Winter Soldier had him by the throat. The metal hand squeezed. He couldn't breathe, he—

The sun flashed off the ice as Bucky hauled him up and out of the Valkyrie; he was shivering, he was dead; this was impossible. But Bucky was warm, Christ, so warm. He pressed his freezing face against Bucky's warm neck—
"Steve," Bucky panted, "what the fuck is happening?"

"I don't know," Steve managed to reply. "I don't know, I don't know."

The Winter Soldier shoved him back, hard, flinging him over the roof of a car, and Steve came up clutching at his bruised throat and gasping for air. "Bucky," he gasped, and the Winter Soldier wheeled on him angrily, and Steve felt almost blown back by the force of his confusion and rage: who are you, how are you in my head, get out—

"Who the hell—" the Winter Soldier began, and then he stopped, and Steve sensed the first, faint glimmer of recognition in him even as he aimed his gun. Steve stepped forward, into it, unreasonably sure that Bucky wouldn't, couldn't, kill him, but Natasha didn't let him test that hypothesis: she fired a grenade launcher, and the Winter Soldier disappeared in the cloud of smoke; vanished, impossibly, between one breath and the next.

#

"Your name," Steve said, stumbling a little; he was dizzy but he remembered this, would always remember, it was engraved on his insides, "is James Buchanan Barnes." He was bleeding profusely now, but he didn't care; didn't.

The Winter Soldier hit him again, and Steve's eyesight blurred. "You're my friend," he said through his swollen mouth. He'd stopped the helicarriers; he'd dismantled SHIELD, but it was worth nothing, it wasn't worth anything if— He fell back against the beam of the helicarrier, let his shield fall from his arm. "I've loved you my whole life," and then the Winter Soldier was above him, metal fist pulled back and staring down at him, and somewhere, distantly, between the explosions and the roar of the fire, Steve heard the slow-whizzing thunk of a fastball.

Steve smiled helplessly. "Yeah, Buck," and he could see it: the sun eclipsed by the spinning ball. "That's—" and then there was a crack and he was falling, surrounded by fire and debris, and plunging into the cold water, feeling the numbing rush, the slow sinking. Steve felt tears leaking out of his eyes and tried to squeeze them back; he was dying again. His fingers were freezing, the cold water filling his nose, his mouth. He couldn't breathe. He sank.

There was a shadow moving above him, a hand—and then a face, peering down—and it was Bucky, impossibly. Bucky's hand closed on Steve's harness, and then he was hauling Steve up and out of the icy water, grunting and struggling to drag him up, onto the shore. He was shivering, he was dead. Steve closed his eyes against the light and choked up water.

When he opened his eyes again, Bucky was gone.

---

Part Four.

"Bucky?"

"Buck?"

"Buck, are you there?"

"Please answer me if you can hear me."

"Please answer me. Please."
They found the tank. They found the machine. Alexander Pierce had been the last in a long line of handlers. Hydra had been running its projects under the rubric of SHIELD since at least the 1950s. There were other projects, too.

"Bucky?"

"Just one word. Please. Just tell me you're—"

"Please stop," Bucky whispered back, and Steve sat up so fast he nearly fell out of bed.

"Bucky, where are you?" Steve stared into the darkness. "God, I'm glad to hear your voice."

"I'm not ready," Bucky said.

"Okay, I. Okay." Sam Wilson had told him this could happen. "I'll be here when you're ready. I'm right here."

"What you have to understand," Peggy said, her mouth quivering just the faintest bit, "was that we were grieving when we built SHIELD, Howard and I. We were grieving for you so terribly, each in our own way. And so there is an enormous you-shaped hole in the middle of it: there always was. It was a fundamental weakness of the organization."

"What I think she means," Tony said later, "is that—you saw The Wizard of Oz, right?" Steve nodded. "Dad and Peg, they had brains, courage—but the heart was missing. Call it SHIELD all you want, the whole thing was fucked from the start." Tony tossed a handful of peanuts into his mouth and said, chewing, "But we have the chance to do it over. To do it better—to do it right. You lead, this time; I'll make all the cool stuff. Natasha has balls enough for the rest of us, but just in case we have Thor, Barton, and the Big Guy. Avengers," he went on, maybe seeing Steve's reluctance, "is that ethically belated enough for you? That's defensive, right? If we're avenging, then we didn't start it, stands to reason. No aggressive warmongering here, nosireebob."

Steve sighed. "No, but vengeance isn't—it's retaliatory, it's—"

"Jesus fucking Christ, it's just a name, it's just a cool name," Tony groaned. "The Defenders isn't a cool name, we sound like lawyers, Stark and Rogers, LLP. The Protectors, too mob-like. The Supervisors? The Custodians—look, calling it SHIELD didn't stop us from being total fucking fascists, so what's in a name: didn't someone famous say that?"

Steve rubbed his eyes. "You do that on purpose to shock me."

"What?" Tony said, and ate another handful of peanuts.

"Pretend not to know Shakespeare."

"Who?" Tony said, and then: "Okay—yes: too far. Look—are you going to get a job at Taco Bell, or what's the plan exactly?"

"…let me think about it," Steve said.
"I don't know, Natasha," Steve said, stirring his coffee, which had already been plenty stirred. They were sitting together at the café across the street from Stark Tower, soon to be Avengers Tower if Tony Stark got his way. "I mean, he's right: what am I going to do, go back to art school? Am I going to stand by when Hydra resurfaces, or when aliens attack the Earth?" He shook his head. "No, and there are certainly worthwhile fights to be had. But…”

Natasha nodded sympathetically, but pointed out: "It's a small team; just us. And you'd be in charge —"

"You say that like it solves everything. We worked for Hydra, you and me, both; we—" and Steve became aware that there was someone else talking in his head; not Bucky.

"—inseparable on both schoolyard and battlefield," he said.

Natasha stared at him; her face betrayed nothing. "What?"

"Barnes is the only Howling Commando to give his life in service of his country," Steve repeated, and then, softly: 'He's at the Smithsonian. He's in D.C., he's at the exhibit, he's—"

Natasha shifted slightly, ready to spring into action. "Should I call someone? Do you want to go down there or—?"

Steve shook his head; he could feel the pushback like something physical. Bucky hadn't pushed him away like this since the war, back when his biggest fear was that Steve would discover that he was sexually attracted to men. Steve smiled sadly and shook his head; God, the things you thought were important. They'd been so young. "He doesn't want me," Steve told her. "Not yet, anyway. He's trying to remember," and then the loop began again in his head.

Best friends since childhood... Is this you? and Steve was about to say yes, but then he saw what Bucky was looking at: posters from the USO tour, a highly heroic mural and an empty uniform, and no, that wasn't him, that was Captain America. Yes. No. Kind of. There were actual pictures somewhere—maybe in that third room, where they were running the film of Peggy?—but he had better memories himself, so many he could hardly contain them: him and Bucky jawing on random streetcorners, in the Automat, at the movies, on the streetcar, in the ballpark, the el, the schoolroom, hotel room, barracks trucks battlefield trains and— Let me come to you, Buck.

No. Not yet.

#

He and Barton and Natasha were taking down one of the last Hydra strongholds—in Kansas, Steve thought bitterly; the heartland; there's no place like home—when he next saw the Hulk, who had leapt out of nowhere when a gigantic armored all-terrain vehicle full of Hydra scientists emerged going full barrel and tried to make a break for it; the Hulk pounced on it like a cat with a chew toy and flung it around happily before smashing it to pieces.

Natasha smirked and began dragging people out of the wreckage and handcuffing them. Steve left her and Barton to it and ran after the Hulk, who was burning off his excess energy by smashing barns and chasing cattle. Steve skidded to a stop, then raised his hands placatingly as Hulk rounded on him, all bulging eyes and teeth.

"Hulk," Steve said breathlessly, "hi. I just wanted—" and then he was blown back by the force of Hulk's roar, the raw emotion in it.

Hulk had been upset to find Steve taken—he hadn't known that could happen!—and Bucky had
gone half-crazy with the grief of losing Steve from his, from their mind. Steve remembered the
terrible silences whenever they took Bucky, the way time stretched and became meaningless; he
remembered fantasizing about killing himself, knowing he couldn't. Hulk roared again, and this
time Steve felt the sense of goneness—saw the hole opening up, a drop into black, the terrible
helplessness Hulk had felt when they'd taken Bucky away again, too. Hulk hadn't known that he
could be all alone over there. Hulk was unprepared for it. Hulk was wild with the betrayal.

"I'm sorry," Steve managed. "I know just how you feel. Bucky's here, though, somewhere—Can
you…?" He stopped because Hulk wasn't paying attention anymore: he was listening. Steve bit his
lip and tried not to listen; he could feel the repelling force of Bucky's will: *stay away; leave me
alone; I don't know you; I'm not sure who you—*

Steve started at the Hulk's sudden growl—and wherever he was, Bucky started too—and then he
saw them, him and Bucky both, looking tiny and terrified in the dirt-packed street. Cowboys and
horses fled past them, churning up dust, and they were arguing, shoving at each other. "*What the
hell is that?* "*I didn't do it!*" "*Make it stop!*"

Then he and Bucky were kneeling in the sand next to their beach fire, cooking a large white fish on
a stick. They were still tiny, but they seemed less frightened now. They looked up at Hulk with
friendly, tanned faces.

"Hey, you big lug," Bucky said, carefully turning the fish over, and Steve could feel how the Hulk
liked him. "You hungry?" and then the Hulk picked Steve up off the beach with one huge hand like
King Kong and kind of waved him at Bucky, who went wide-eyed and nearly dropped the fish into
the fire.

"Steve," Hulk said, waving him in Bucky's face like he was a Captain America doll. "Steve," and
standing in a field in Kansas, Steve burst out laughing because, wherever he was, Bucky was
startled and laughing and—

He choked on his laugh when the Hulk loomed threateningly over him and said, "Door. Bucky
door."

#

Steve had no idea what that meant. There'd been no doors in that Kansas field—or, if there had,
Hulk had already smashed them to pieces. It wasn't until he was back in New York that he started
to notice doors, that some doors were—strange: the wrong shape or the wrong size. Doors where
there shouldn't be, and suddenly Steve was sure that Bucky was putting them there for him to walk
through. They hadn't known that they could create worlds together back when they'd last been
alive, but they'd had a lot of practice since then, and it was second nature to them now.

Steve slowed his pace on East 44th street and let the foot traffic move around him on the sidewalk.
STORE FOR RENT the sign said, but what store had three doors? There was a glass door leading
into the empty storefront, and a brown door with buzzers on the side leading to the rental units
upstairs, but what was the blue door? Steve tilted his head to look up at the narrow building,
wedged between a deli and something called a copy shop. He'd lived in New York his whole life,
and he'd also drawn a fair number of buildings in his time. That door went nowhere.

He pulled it open and stepped into a dark vestibule, then pushed through a set of double doors into
an impossibly large space; about ten times the size of the building's footprint. Steve's first thought
was that it was an army hospital, cots crammed in everywhere like after a battle, but these beds
were mostly empty, their occupants elsewhere, though some of the cots had duffle bags on them, or
wadded up blankets, or personal items shoved beneath the pillows. A shelter, Steve realized;
maybe a veterans' shelter, because those were army blankets and bags, and the men who were blankly sitting on their beds had the right look about them: shell-shocked.

A tall black man with a military bearing came over and said, "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for someone," Steve began, but the man surprised him by nodding his head toward the back of the vast room: "Back left corner," he said. "He likes to have a defensible space," and Steve nodded and began threading his way between the cots. The men he passed looked tired, defeated; many looked dirty and were wearing worn clothes.

Bucky was sitting on the side of his cot, hunched over, hands dangling between his knees, obviously waiting for him. He looked up warily as Steve approached: he was pale, drawn, unshaven, wearing a threadbare denim jacket. He was wearing a cap but Steve could see that his dark hair was brushing his shoulders. Steve slowed his pace; he could still feel Bucky's resistance, pushing at him; Bucky had let him in, but Steve didn't want to overwhelm him.

He could feel Bucky's eyes moving over him, studying him, and he stopped and moved his arms away from his sides a little, offering. Behind the forcefield keeping him away, Steve sensed fear and the metallic tang of panic. He said nothing, just waited to see what Bucky needed from him.

"I know you," Bucky finally said, though his eyes were dark and worried. "But I don't remember you," and all at once Steve understood why Bucky was troubled: he had feelings but he had no evidence for those feelings, and—Bucky was reading his mind and nodding, finishing the thought: he'd been fooled so many times. "Why don't I...?"

"Because they tried to burn me out of your mind," Steve said softly. "They've tried so many times, Buck, but they've never managed to do it. I'm in there somewhere," Steve told him, and then he raised fingertips to his own temples and added, tapping them, "and you're in here. Go on in: take what you need," and a moment later Steve felt the first tentative invasion of his memory—Bucky peering into the untidy rooms inside him: closets, tables, mantlepieces, everything cluttered with books and papers and art supplies, weird things from the Barnes house and Steve's ma's favorite blue china, the smell of the hallway at school and Bucky's dress uniform and the checkerboard—and Steve could feel Bucky's juddering shock at how many memories there were.

Bucky lurched to his feet, staring. "It's eighty-five years," Steve apologized, showing his hands.

"What... who are we to each other?" Bucky asked, boggling, and there were still no words for it. Everything: they'd always been everything to each other. It stretched out endless and all-encompassing, and then snapped back to a single point that tightened Steve's throat: the blind feeling of being shoulder to shoulder, and then the hard nudge knocking him sideways: Hey, look at that. You'll get 'em next time. You want coffee? Cheer up, you moron. All right, let's hit the road. Wake up, sleepyhead. Know what I mean? Come on, you wanna? I'm here. I'm right here—

Bucky frowned at this, then came close. Steve held his breath; Bucky was inches away, but very still: maybe feeling the energy building between him, cataloging Steve's reactions and his own. Steve's cock stirred in his pants, hair rising on the back of his neck: he tried not to think about—he couldn't not think about Bucky's head dropping into his lap, his mouth shaping itself around his cock, Bucky flipping him onto hands and knees and pushing inside him. His vision spotted and he made himself breathe. Bucky's eyes were moving over his face; he could tell that Bucky was feeling the electricity between them, too, though he was more mistrustful of it.

"We." Bucky's fingers closed around the fabric at the elbow of Steve's jacket: not yet ready to touch him, but ready to touch his clothes, maybe. "What about..." His beard was soft against Steve's mouth, and the kiss was soft, too—at least until Bucky's tongue teased along his bottom lip
and set him on fire, left him gasping and hungry for more.

"This: we've been this?" Bucky scraped out, and Steve could only nod wordlessly: yes.

Steve was lost in his own needs—he wanted to cup Bucky's head and kiss him deep; like kissing him would make him remember, as it had in a million folk tales—and so he was taken aback when Bucky's forehead creased and they were both suddenly awash in pain. "My head hurts," Bucky whispered as the wall fell, and Christ, Bucky'd been keeping him out to protect him. The blood vessels in Steve's head felt swollen to bursting, and he staggered a little, because that was a headache. He understood Bucky's hollowed cheeks now, the dark circles under his eyes: felt what they'd done to him. Steve cupped Bucky's head but instead of kissing him, he pulled their foreheads together, feeling Bucky's warm skin against his, the smooth bone underneath.

"Bucky where are you?" Steve said, trying to draw the pain out and into himself. He shuddered under it. "New York? DC?" There'd been no signs to indicate where they were, or if this shelter was even a real place. "Let me come to you--"

He stopped; Bucky'd let down more barriers, and Steve saw that at least part of his pain was the pain of missing information: he was, literally, hurting to remember. Steve tightened his hands on Bucky's shoulders and imagined a pipeline flowing between them: Her name was Kathleen. March 10. The Shadow knows. 1420 Washington. Brickmason, a navy blue wool suit with his name in the hatband, black dings in the gold of his wedding ring; he never took it off. They lost, 24-6. Roller skates, which the skate key never tightened enough. A black eye; the left. She kept her mad money in the flour jar. 1938, the heat of the factory. Alice stole your—

Steve blinked and found himself on the sidewalk on East 44th street, a rough blanket covering him and two medics bent over him, doing chest compressions. A red and white ambulance had pulled up half on the sidewalk, its revolving light still spinning. Steve said, "I'm all right. I'm fine," and the medics frowned and sat back; Steve pushed up on his elbows and saw that a crowd had formed on either side; they were being held back by policemen. "Really, I'm—"

They weren't buying it. "Sir, can you tell me your name?"

"Yeah, it's—Steve. Steve Rogers," and one of the medics started in surprise. Steve pointed at Stark Tower, looming and visible overhead where 44th terminated at Grand Central, and said, "I, uh—I live right over there," and one said "Sir, I think you should come in for—" just as the one who recognized him blurted, "Captain Rogers, can we see you to your—" and when the first medic stared at the other, he whispered, "He's Captain America, Ed; he's—"

Natasha appeared out of nowhere and took charge of the situation. "AP Kim, AP Varick, thank you for responding: I can take it from here." Steve scrambled awkwardly to his feet and saw her black Corvette in front of the ambulance. "We need him," Natasha said, "but I'll make sure he gets checked out first, don't you worry."

AP Varick looked from him to her and then said, reluctantly, "Tell his doctor that we didn't have time to determine if it was an obstructive, arrhythmic, or vasovagal syncope."

"I will, thank you," Natasha said, and shoved Steve into the passenger seat of her car.

"What's a syncope?" Steve asked Natasha, as she pulled away.

Natasha shot him a sharp look. "You passed out," she said, and then she was pressing a button and
a screen blipped on. Natasha said, "Doctor Chen, we're coming in: can you certify Captain Rogers fit for duty?" She took a hard left on Vanderbilt and gunned the engine, zooming around the traffic toward the underground entrance to Stark Tower. "We need to be mission-ready in ten minutes," and Steve realized that she'd really meant it about him being needed somewhere.

"What's going on?" It was a bad time for a mission. Bucky was coming to, maybe even coming back.

"I don't know," Natasha replied, frowning. "Stark knows—but it's bad. He's waiting for us."

Steve suited up and checked his weapons while Dr. Chen hurried after him and asked him questions he couldn't possibly answer, even if he had time to: "Can you remember what you were doing when you passed out?" "Did you have any unusual sensations prior to the event?" "Did you experience pain?"

Yes, yes, and yes, Steve thought, but nobody here could read his mind: he could keep his thoughts and his feelings to himself. "I was just walking," he said, and pulled on his gauntlets.

"Are we good?" Natasha asked, appearing out nowhere. "Any danger in clearing him for duty?"

Dr. Chen paused from taking notes to look wryly over at her. "Compared to who? Banner?" and Natasha made a face and jerked her head toward the briefing room.

Stark was there, already in his Iron Man armor with the visor tipped up. Banner was there too, looking grave. Stark looked up from a tabletop monitor. "Cap," he said. "We don't have a lot of time on this, so I'm gonna bottomline it for you and then follow your lead. Two months ago, Stark Industries lost a prototype drone,"—Steve opened his mouth and closed it again— "but we didn't worry about it much, because—" Tony opened his hand and something fluttered out. It was about the size of a dragonfly and was made of fine steel mesh. It flew up above their heads.

"Vaccine delivery system," Tony said, leaning back to look. "We made about a hundred, sent them up as a test. 99 came back. No big deal, we thought—a bird, whatever—except whoever took it didn't know we'd built in a tracker—to track swarms," he added, "to see how vaccines are delivered across populations. And when they replicated the drone, they replicated the tracker," Tony concluded. "And so—"

He flung his screen into the air and Steve's heart sank: it was full of what looked like millions of tiny drones, swarming like locusts. "It gets worse," Tony said grimly, "so let's do this quick, rip off the bandage. Tl;dr, two things,"—and Steve didn't know what that meant, but he listened hard —"first: this swarm's not carrying vaccine, it's carrying toxin; and second, the data suggests they're headed right for Barton's farmhouse," and Natasha jerked, more shocked than he'd ever seen her, and Steve took her arm and said, quietly, "We're gonna stop this, Nat. We will."

No time to waste, so Steve laid out a plan; the farm's defenses hadn't been built to stop something this small, but the swarm could be disrupted by electricity, their parts fried. Targeting would be difficult, though: the swarm could learn and redirect itself. "We need Thor," Steve said grimly.

"On his way," Tony said. "World's largest bug zapper," but when the door next opened it was Barton who came through, innocent-faced and oblivious. "Sorry Cap," Barton said, a little breathlessly. "Got here as soon as I—— and Steve went momentarily blank—it had been years since
he'd had to deliver this sort of bad news to a soldier—but it turned out he didn't have to: Natasha immediately went to Barton and muscled him outside, to tell him in private.

"What's the attractor?" Steve asked Tony. "What's the swarm homing in on?"

"The microbiome. Human flora and fauna. Scent," Tony clarified. "The ones we built just separated human microbiota from that of animals, but I'm guessing whoever's done this has redefined 'human' to mean 'Barton.'"

"So if we have Clint, we can draw the swarm away," Steve put forward. "Toward Thor."

"Yeah," Tony said, and then, snapping his fingers, "and we ought to go his locker, his laundry—grab up anything he's worn or—"

The world snapped out of focus. Steve, Bucky said, low and urgent, but he was all right, he was safe, he was on a motorcycle, Steve could sense the movement, the wind, he—but he couldn't be distracted, not now; not now, Buck; I'm sorry, I—he saw Barton's face and the metallic locusts swarming around the farmhouse, and Tony, Tony was saying—Wait for me: I'll be back as soon as I can. I can't wait to see you, can't— He made himself tune Bucky out.

"—Banner might be able to synthesize some Eau de Barton for us on the way, though we'll wear his goddamned stinky shirts if not," and Steve nodded and got his head back into the game.

#

Barton was grim and silent on the flight, made old before his time in a way that was all too familiar to Steve, but he nodded and pulled on his helmet when they explained that he couldn't be the one to rescue his family—that he'd only be concentrating the Barton scent around them. Instead, he would stick to Thor, drawing the swarms toward him like moths to flame, while Steve and Tony, wearing the bacterial spray that Banner had distilled, triangulated the lightning, Steve deflecting it on his shield and Tony throwing it back to Thor with his palms. It would be Natasha, wearing a suit of armored mesh, who drove to the farmhouse and got the Bartons out. Banner set up an emergency medivac in the quinjet, and was waiting there with antitoxin: nobody thought it was a good idea for him to risk being stung: there was nothing for the Hulk to destroy but the farm itself.

Clint's house had been enveloped in a buzzing black cloud which darkened the sky like a tornado. Steve hesitated at diving out of the plane into the swarm, even protected as he was: it was unnerving, biblical—this fight seemed unfightable, unwinnable. He dropped down through the teeming drones, steeling himself as they flew in his face, flew all around him—and was grateful for the first crack of Thor's lightning from the south-west. He lifted his shield and sent the electricity crackling back towards Tony. Fried and twitching drones clattered down between and around them, but there were more—so many more and so loud that Steve couldn't hear the engine of the armored all-terrain vehicle that Natasha was driving toward the farm, though he could see it: a black rectangle moving through the gray static of the drone-filled air.

The lightning struck again and again, and heaps of the tiny drones began to pile up around Steve's ankles. The swarm was shifting, too—drawn by Barton's scent toward Thor, and so he and Tony changed position to redirect the electricity through the heart of the swarm. For the first time, a corner of the Barton house became visible: white clapboard with green shutters. Natasha, Steve saw, had driven the armored car right up onto the Barton porch and half into the mudroom, though he didn't think Clint would mind: not if Laura and the kids were—

They were okay. They were all right. The certainty of it settled over Steve with an inevitability that had him raising a hand to his earpiece to tell the others—and then Tony was in his ear. He feels it
too, Steve thought, but that wasn't what Tony was saying. "—into Phase Two, Cap, do you copy? Cap?" and Steve blinked and said "Yeah, I copy."

Now that there were fewer drones, Stark was going to have Barton draw them into a containment device. Steve moved into position to take up Tony's slack, fighting from the heart of the storm, holding his ground and aiming Thor's lightning at the drones with his shield. And then sunlight was flickering on the grass as the remaining drones rose up, swerving and flowing as they climbed into the high blue sky and sailed away in an undulating stream.

Steve lowered his shield, gasping; the house was pockmarked but seemed intact, and he began to lope toward it, picking up speed: Natasha still hadn't come out, and the armored car was still wedged in the wall. But they were all right, Steve thought, assailed with confusion. They were all right, they—but his conviction dropped away as he clambered over the hood into the house.

It was in disarray, and empty—kitchen, dining room, sitting room—and then Natasha came down the stairs, white-faced. Steve's stomach lurched as he imagined Laura and the children upstairs, collapsed on the floor and covered with welts and—

"They're not here," and he'd never heard that tone in Natasha's voice. "I've looked everywhere, I —"

"They're all right," Steve heard himself say, and Natasha's face twisted with anger: she was going to hit him, and he raised his hands defensively. "They are," he insisted. "I know they—"

"You can't know that," Natasha gritted out, and then Thor was there, asking, "Is everyone all right?" and Tony was dropping Barton and landing with a thump himself. "They're not here," Natasha told them, and Tony said, "What? How—" Barton flung off his helmet, looking distressed, and Thor said firmly, "We will search for them. Stark, you take the east—" and Steve found himself shouting, "They're all right! They're fine!" and when everyone turned to him, he blurted, "Bucky's got them," and he knew it was true.

"I don't find that comforting," Natasha said dangerously, but Barton turned to Steve with pleading eyes. "I do," he said, "if it's true they're all right. I don't care about anything so long as—" and Steve said, "They are," and then: "I know they are," because it was all he could—

No; it wasn't. "Come on," Steve said, and went out of the house, and he didn't know where he was going except that he did know. He walked onto the covered porch and down the steps, followed by the others, and then they were moving down the Barton's long dirt-packed drive to Route 6. Steve turned east without knowing why—there wasn't anything this way but corn and silos and more corn—but the rightness of it was washing over him like a wave, and he felt a kind of creeping joy when a group of dots appeared on the horizon. Barton took off at a run, sprinting past them. The largest dot resolved into the shape of Laura Barton, and then Clint reached her and pulled her into his arms, hugging tight and nearly swinging her off the ground, before reaching for the kids and gathering them all in. They were soaked, their hair damply plastered to their heads, and dirty, as if they'd been rolling around on the ground—and they had been: the Bartons had been sheep-dipped and covered with dirt to hide their scent from the drones, and then taken downwind. Tracking's something I know about, and Steve moved around the reunited Bartons toward the last black dot on the horizon: Bucky, masked and gloved, far up the road.

Steve was stopped by Laura Barton's hand on his arm. "He said you sent him," she said.

"I did," Steve replied automatically. "I guess I did," and then he was walking, half-dazed, toward Bucky, who'd read the situation off his mind and acted decisively. He wasn't decisive now, though—he was hanging back, on the verge of fleeing despite Steve's thrum of come, please come back.
Terrible thoughts began to flash through Steve's mind as he got closer: murders, assassinations, all the ugly things that Bucky had done, that they'd made him do. Shots to the head, cars crashing, women strangled and men with their throats cut—I know all that, Steve interrupted, and then he was stopped by a sadness so awful that was all he could do bear up under the grief.

Bucky was shaking his head, and the mask was meant to conceal, but it concealed nothing: he was overcome with the intensity of Bucky's feelings, shaken by them—helpless, hopeless, it can't be like it was—

I don't want it to be like it was. Steve pulled Bucky's goggles and mask off his face, like he'd done so many times before, but this time he felt overwhelmed by Bucky's physicality: the smell of him, the texture of the skin of his neck, the thin coat of grime under his ear, the way his chest heaved beneath his tac vest. Bucky looked bigger, younger—he hadn't aged as badly on the outside as he had in his mind—and Steve found himself leaning in to brush his nose and mouth against his long strands of hair, breathing in the scent of him.

Bucky's hands closed on his arms and he nudged his forehead against Steve's—and then he was falling and Steve was falling too and dimly trying to twist beneath him, get under him, break his fall. But they never hit the rough paving of Route 6—instead they crashed onto the sunbleached sand where Steve had disappeared, and Bucky was clawing at him and clutching him skin to skin, their shirts unbuttoned to the waist: clutching him so hard it hurt. "Don't go," Bucky said, sounding incoherent and miserable. "Steve," and Steve mumbled, "Not my fault. I didn't—"

"Ruined," Bucky gasped, and blood was seeping up through the sand all around them. On the lake, dead fish floated in the water. Rotting birds dotted the shore. "It's all ruined," Bucky choked out. "That whole time, we were—but I was—I—" and Steve pulled their foreheads together again and rubbed his thumbs in circles on Bucky's temples.

"Shhh. No. You were with me. We were together and it was—" and they were at Bucky's canyon, with its amazing bands of color and its huge blue sky overhead: so different and so much more wonderful than the real thing, because it was the culmination of all Bucky's dreams and desires. "Everything we made together was beautiful," Steve managed; he was barely able to speak, but then they'd never needed speech to communicate, even before the ESP. The truth was all around them and between them, in the rocks and in the air: it's beautiful here because you are—and then Bucky mouth was crushing his, his hand sliding beneath Steve's waistband, thumb following the curve of his hipbone. Steve shivered and opened his mouth for the tease of Bucky's tongue—

—and then they both gasped, jolted, and found themselves lying in the dirt of Route 6 with the Hulk and the other Avengers bent over them, and then the Hulk roared again, loud enough to blow back the corn. "Holy cow," Bucky breathed, eyes widening. "Hulk," and then the Hulk dragged him up with a happy, terrifying smile, and nearly crushed him.

Epilogue.

"It's pretty goddamned impressive," Bucky said, leaning against the railing; he was wearing a baseball cap, mirrored sunglasses, and a purple longsleeved t-shirt that had "Grand Canyon" written across it in cursive. "I mean..." He gestured toward it with his metal hand; the canyon stretched as far out and far down as the eye could see.

"Yeah, it's..." Steve irritably tugged his own hat down over his eyes. "I guess I wasn't in the mood
to appreciate it,” though his irritation faded when Bucky gracefully swung into his space and kissed him full on the mouth, right there in public among the strolling couples, the groups of hikers, and the families with kids. Nobody even looked twice, and it was still the most wonderful and most shocking thing in the world to him: that he and Bucky could kiss like this.

"Our world," Bucky reminded him, arching an eyebrow. "We can do anything here," and Steve grinned back at him, because maybe the best part of having made it to the 21st century was that the times had finally caught up with Bucky's crazy imagination.

#

To Steve's chagrin, Bucky was adapting to the changing times faster and better than he had, head start notwithstanding. Bucky had a better eye for the fashions ("What," Bucky asked, frowning at Steve's wardrobe, "no tailors survived the war?") and a better ear for the music (though he always irritated Stark by insisting that this or that act was just "some copycat" of some musician Bucky'd seen at one dance hall or another), and Bucky had taken one look at the dismal state of train travel in America today and had promptly plunked down a chunk of back pay on a bright red car with a low, long nose, a huge engine, and a music system that made you feel like you were sitting in Gene Krupa's lap. And it was Bucky who refused to be ashamed of kissing in public, "because everything's allowed now: girls with girls, boys with boys, both if you want 'em—which I know you do but I don't," and Steve had pushed him back and blown him to the point of torture until Bucky had finally gasped, "Okay, okay, okay, I believe you, Jesus."

And sometimes it was hard to believe that this was the real world, it felt so like the world they'd invented for themselves: Bucky taking his hand as they walked along the boardwalk at Coney Island, or lying in the sun with his head in Bucky's lap. It became a running joke between them: "Hey, don't look at me," one of them would mutter when they were confronted with something particularly hideous out of modernity: a haircut, a billboard, a building: the unbelievable eyesore that was Stark Tower. "I didn't make that," as if the whole world was still their creation.

At the same time they both felt viscerally swept back into the timestream. Steve had forgotten how weird and surprising it was to be actually alive, and it wasn't the alien attacks that reminded him (Bucky's spaceships were, for Steve's dollar, much cooler and more futuristic looking than the real thing): it was the little things, like the way sex sometimes got awkward when one or the other of them wanted it too much. It was the elbow to the face Steve had taken when he'd lurched up the wrong way (that had never happened in la la land). It was the way Bucky got desperate and uncontrolled in his movements and slipped out of him by accident and then came messily on his back just as Steve pushed back blindly and accidentally knocked them both off the bed. That particular sex-related accident had ended with him crawling into Bucky's lap on the floor and helplessly jerking off over Bucky's softening cock while laughing—there was a lot more laughing during sex in the real world, they discovered. Also that living bodies sometimes did unexpected things: burped or farted or came too soon or wouldn't come at all.

"Goddammit!" Steve had yelled at the ceiling one day when his body had ramped up and then inexplicably stopped, leaving him hanging and desperate and hard and numb all at the same time. "Help me," he'd gasped, bumping his cock against Bucky's belly, and Bucky—dear, darling Bucky, his pal, his buddy, the love of his—had grinned wolfishly and mocked him only a little before sending him over with a skillful press of fingers in the right places. They'd never expected these weird little moments, so they'd never happened, but he and Bucky decided that they were actually the best part of sex: the moments, it turned out, that you were actually living for.
"I still want to see it," Bucky said, even after Steve told him that the Grand Canyon wasn't anything to write home about, so Steve relented: he wanted them to live in the world: this world. The 20th Century Limited had long ago stopped running, so they packed tents into Bucky's car and set off to tour the roads between New York and Arizona, stopping whenever they pleased, which was often. They wanted to see all the local attractions: go to the state fairs in Pennsylvania and sit on the porch swing of the bed and breakfast in Indiana and eat barbeque in Oklahoma and see the sunset in Texas. They wanted to do things they hadn't done before: make new memories.

Bucky's car had all sorts of flickering lights and gizmos on the dashboard, and so it took Steve a moment to figure out that he couldn't turn off the radio because it wasn't on, that the music he'd been hearing was, it was—

Bucky registered the feeling immediately, glancing sharply away from the road at him and saying, "Steve? Are you all—?" and then he was swerving onto the shoulder and jerking the car to a stop, because Steve was covering his face with his forearms and sobbing and Bucky couldn't understand why—something about music? Steve, what?—and Bucky was reaching across the car for him, confused and worried. There used to be music in your head all the time, but Bucky could never understand his shock and joy at hearing it again when Steve had long ago given it up for lost.

"Okay, yeah, it's impressive," Steve admitted, grinning a little: Bucky's enthusiasm for it was contagious. He was suddenly excited to explore the canyon: 200 miles of hard hiking and rock climbing and camping and rafting and bird-spotting and star-gazing—birds, nothing: there are lions down there — and Bucky nudged his shoulder hard, bumping him off-balance, and said, "Come on, old man: let's go for it," and they headed together down into the enormous and beautiful gorge, cut from the eternal rock by a little water and the slow, slow passage of time.

End Notes

Immense beta thanks to lim and astolat. If you liked, please consider reblogging on tumblr.

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