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by kristophine

Summary

The complete story of Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes--not quite cradle to grave; more like Brooklyn cradle to icy grave to Russia and DC to Eastern Europe and South Korea, and back to New York again.

Notes

This is long, and the chapter divisions are almost arbitrary, because it's too long to post in one chunk.

I read about two dozen books, spent a lot more time than can possibly be healthy on Google, and rewatched the movies about six times for this. I took some liberties with the timeline of WWII--notably where the fronts were and when--although I took my lead on that from the MCU. So if you feel the urge to correct a historical (or MCU) detail, by all means please do, but please include a reference.

Comments are dearly loved and cherished. If you have a question about what something means, or whether there's a reason for it, PLEASE ASK, because I DESPERATELY want to talk about all the stuff that DIDN'T make it into the text.

As usual, this would be way worse without the intervention of ecce-meliora, my editor and bff.

If you would like to enjoy some era-appropriate music (including the songs referenced!) from before our boys go in the ice, you can check out my playlist We'll Never Be Fred and Ginger.

NOW WITH GLORIOUS FANART by Orithe!!!!!!!
Chapter 1

Over the carnage rose prophetic a voice,

Be not dishearten’d, affection shall solve the problems of freedom yet,

Those who love each other shall become invincible,

They shall yet make Columbia victorious.

--Whitman

“All fire and smoke and nothing inside you. You only pretend to be an American. We are brothers and we love each other.”

--Hemingway

“Stevie!” Sarah was ready to go, fussing with her hair, a pin here and a pin there and another bobby pin in her mouth; it was nearly time, if they were going to catch the train.

Steve stuck his head into the bedroom. “Yeah, I’m ready,” he said, before looking down at the ground and kicking at it, pouting.

“Honey, you’ll have a good time,” she said, finishing the last pin before bending down to take his hand in hers. He tugged it back out, scowling, on the verge of tears. She sighed heavily, and that set him off. Tears started to leak out of his eyes.

“Uncle John and Aunt Bessie were good friends of Daddy’s,” she said, quietly. “I know you don’t remember them, but they’re nice.”

“I don’t see why we have to go to their house!”

“Because they asked us, honey, and it’s very nice of them, and if you want, we can ask them to tell us stories about Daddy.”

That stopped him for a minute; he clearly hadn’t considered that John and Bessie might know something he didn’t.

“Do you think they will?” he asked, scuffing his foot on the floor again, but less vigorously.

“I do. Especially if you ask nice.”

“Okay.” He sniffled dramatically, but reached up and took her hand. “Let’s go.”

“We have to put your shoes on first, honey,” she said, and smiled at him, even though her eyes felt tight and wet.

When they walked out of the theater, Steve wouldn’t stop talking. “Ma! Did you see that? How did
they make the flames colors? How did they get cameras up in the planes?”

“I did see it, honey,” she said, laughing. “They paint the color right on the film. They can’t do it very much but they can do it for some parts.”

Steve was so worked up he was twisting and jumping as he walked. “And then the girl got to drive! Ma, I want to drive. No, I want to fly.”

“You can do anything you want when you grow up,” she said, threading her hand into his to try and rein him in.

Fat chance. He twisted out of her grip almost immediately, and said, “I want a friend like that! I want a friend I can fly with! Won’t fight over girls. That’s just gross!”

“You might change your mind about that.”

“Vroooooom!” He was making airplane noises with his mouth, crashing one hand into the other. “Ratatatat!”

But that night, she woke up to find him standing forlornly by the side of her bed, and she sat up. “Honey? What’s wrong?”

“It’s just sad,” he whispered. “That his friend died.”

“It is sad, honey, but it was just a movie. Nobody really died.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know.”

“Okay,” he said, and then, “can I sleep in your bed? I had bad dreams.”

She sighed. “Okay, honey.”

He was out like a light in two minutes. Of course he always windmilled around in his sleep, so she ended up trying not to fall off the edge of the bed for the rest of the night—but that wasn’t so bad.

That was the winter he got rheumatic fever, and after it, the doctor said his heart was never going to be the same. The mitral valve had gone funny from the inflammation, hadn’t really recovered, and Steve was always going to have some troubles—he shouldn’t run, shouldn’t be on any sports teams, should try to stick to quieter activities. The doctor looked at Sarah with eyes full of a certain fear that told her everything he wasn’t saying out loud. He was doing her a favor, for free, because he was sweet on her, because some nights if she didn’t have to go home right away after shift they might meet up in the spare storage room in the back of the building. So she knew the look in his eyes. She’d seen it directed at patients who didn’t realize yet how sick they were, patients he didn’t want to have to tell.

She shoved it down. Steve was her boy. Maybe he would never be a pilot, fine, that was just as well. Pilots’ families had to worry about them. Her boy could be something else, anything else. Anything but a soldier.

Sometimes Steve’s dad’s friends would tell stories about him. That was how Steve got to know his
dad, a little—Uncle John’s laugh as he said, “And then Joe, that crazy b—son of a gun, he just looks the sergeant right in the eye and says, ‘All due respect, sir, that’s a pretty bad idea.’ Right in the eye!”

Joseph Rogers was a funny man, Steve learned, and would split his last ration with his buddies, no matter how many of them there were, so each man might only get half a bite, but at least every man got half a bite.

“Fair to the bone,” said Uncle Pat, not a real uncle either. “He was gonna be fair to everyone if it killed him.” Then Uncle Pat cleared his throat and said, “Did I ever tell you the one about the time he found where we stashed the still?”

Steve dragged the back of his hand across his nose. It was bleeding; the blood stood out bright red against his skin when he glanced down at his hand, which had gone waxy and pale. He shook his head, and gritted his teeth as he drew in a choking snort of blood and air. The metallic drip down the back of his throat was getting familiar.

He didn’t bother wiping his hand on his pants. Sometimes the blood scared them a little. The next bully—Jimmy, from three blocks over—stepped up for his turn, fists tightly balled, eyes wary but not frightened.

When Jimmy threw the punch Steve ducked, and it was lucky, but not lucky enough. He straightened up only to find Jimmy’s other fist connecting with his shoulder. It wasn’t much of a punch, didn’t knock the wind out of him, or sting like Bill’s had, but it still hurt.

Steve lashed out frantically and dug his bitten nail-stubs into Jimmy’s face. Jimmy howled and called him a little nancy boy, and then Steve kicked him in the shins, hard. Jimmy’s next punch connected and Steve went down, and by the time he was dragging himself up again, they’d taken off.

The pain in his shoulder and his face ached and throbbed, a continuous, steady burn. He dug out his handkerchief and wiped his face clean as best he could. Ma would give him a talking-to, but at least she didn’t hold with whippings.

At least Esther should have had time to get blocks away by then.

One summer, when Steve was well, he was sitting out on the stoop reading. He’d gotten a book at the library—it was about a knight in the Middle Ages, although the middle of what he could not have said—and he was getting to the part where the knight was going to rescue the princess.

Out on the street, some of the neighborhood girls were skipping rope, a pack of them making a game of it, with one ducking in under the rope with each verse of a chant and one at each end twirling the ropes together.

*Mother, Mother, I am sick,*

*Send for the doctor,*

*Quick, quick, quick!*

*Doctor, Doctor, shall I die?*

*Yes, my dear,*
And so shall I.

How many coaches shall I have?

Enough for you and

Your family, too.

Steve frowned down at the page, flipped it, then realized he hadn’t really read that last part, and had to turn back to it.

The girls moved on to another chant, this one about monkeys.

As if his heart wasn’t enough, Steve got sick in his lungs every winter. It was like clockwork—school would start up, it would get cold, and within a couple of weeks he’d be down with a fever.

Ever since he was three or four he’d had asthma attacks. He’d scared Sarah so bad that first time. She’d only been a nurse for a couple of years and it had been awful before she figured out what was happening. Even then, there wasn’t much she could do. Just hold her baby and wait for him to ride it out.

Getting sick meant his lungs were always about one step away from seizing up. She hated it, hated listening to him. Maybe this time would be the time he’d pass out. Maybe he wouldn’t make it through this time. Or maybe this would be the last time and he’d get over it, grow out of it, and never make these awful, wracking noises again. That hope was probably the worst part.

Steve was sitting on the stoop with a scrap of paper and a pencil when a kid, maybe a year or two older than him, came whooping down the street with a couple of other boys. Not enough for a good game. Steve dropped his pencil, and it bounced on the next step and came to a stop before rolling over the edge.

The kid looked up, maybe seeing it out of the corner of his eye, and then his face changed, warm and welcoming. “Hey, bud!” He held out the ball. “You want to play?”

“Sure,” said Steve, who was a little worried, but if his dad had been fair to everybody he could be, too, and if this kid wanted to play ball—well, nobody’d pushed him down yet.

“I’m Bucky,” said the kid, and Steve hopped down off the stoop. It turned out he wasn’t very good at hitting the ball, but nobody pushed him down then, either.

The horrible pulsing noise of the warning bell before school was intolerably loud; Steve squared his shoulders, stepping into the mad crush of students.

It was one thing at his old school, but this new school—he looked at the waves of students pouring in to the building, and all of them looked like they knew something he didn’t. They were older, mostly, so he felt much too young next to them. As if it wasn’t bad enough being one of the youngest in the class, he was still small. Sickly.

Somebody taking the stairs two at a time crashed into him, and when he turned his head to say something, they’d already passed him.
But on his way back from lunch, when he was trying to get from the second floor down to the first, he heard somebody bellow, “Hey, Steve! STEVE ROGERS!”

He turned to look, and it was Bucky, waving like a maniac. He grinned over the heads of the other kids, and in the seconds before Steve got sucked back into the crowd, Steve smiled and waved back.

The rest of the day felt a little better.

He ran into Bucky again on the way out of the building. Well, ran into made it sound like it was by accident, which it wasn’t, really. Steve had been hanging around a little, waiting. He was pretending to read a library book while he sat up on the edge of a low brick wall, and hordes of kids came streaming out of the building. Bucky might not come out this way. He might be staying late. But.

It took a couple minutes, but then he heard it again: “Steve Rogers!” and his head shot up.

Bucky was shouldering and elbowing his way through all the other kids, and when he got to Steve he was grinning big. “You want to see something?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Bucky glanced both ways, dramatically, before pulling a matchbox out of his pocket and sliding it open. There, inside, was a tooth, with some gory dried blood still on it.

“What? Ew!” said Steve.

“I know! It’s mine! It fell out in math! The teacher said if I stopped showing it to people she’d give me the matchbox for it.”

“You going to keep it?”

“Yeah!”

“That’s neat!”

Bucky walked partway home with him. He talked a lot—about his tooth, about the other kids in the class, about the Dodgers even though they weren’t very good. When Steve tripped and his foot came out of his shoe, he knew Bucky saw the layers of newspaper laid in it to cover the holes, but Bucky didn’t say anything about it, just kept on about Miss Drummond and her face when she saw the tooth when it still had a nerve dangling off it. (That was the moment he fiercely endeared himself to Steve.)

He had to peel off a couple blocks before Steve’s place, but he said, “Hey, I bet my mom would say it was okay if you came over this Saturday, you want to?”

“Sure!”

Sarah was a little startled and a little bemused when Steve started talking nonstop about Bucky. He hadn’t mentioned it but apparently he’d met Bucky before, and now run into him again and there was a tooth and something about going to his house on Saturday? “Can I, Ma?” he asked, his eyes such a sweet, piercing blue, peering up at her for all the world like Joe about to cajole her out of a bad mood.

“Of course you can, honey,” she said. “It’s nice that you made a friend.”

The only other person he ever talked about was Miss Chambers, his favorite teacher (“ever, Ma,
ever, she’s the best!”). And while Miss Chambers was, in fact, a lovely young woman, who had given Stevie a part in the Nativity (shepherd boy; he had not been terribly convincing but Bobby Fogarty looked like a ringer for the painting of Joseph they had up on the wall in front of the bathroom so he’d had that part sewn up), she wasn’t much of a friend for a little boy.

The two of them hung off the back of the truck, Steve trying to hold back laughter, eyes bright with it, and Bucky grinning lopsidedly. “We’re too damn big for this,” Bucky said under the noise of the traffic, visibly impressed at his own bravery in saying a swear word.

“Not as long as the whole back doesn’t fall off,” said Steve.

“You—okay, go for it,” said Bucky. Steve wriggled up over the edge of the truck and grabbed, real quick, and came back with a huge ice shard in his hand. He juggled it, making a face at the cold, and when the truck stopped next they dropped off the back and ran like hell.

They ducked up onto the stoop in front of Steve’s building, and Steve gasped for a while to catch his breath. Bucky broke the ice in two; they each licked their piece, content for a little while in the broiling heat that radiated up off the streets.

Steve liked the Enrights’ dog. Really, Teddy was more like the building’s dog. He roamed as he pleased. It wasn’t Steve’s fault if Teddy showed up to their door sometimes, snuffling around the crack until Steve opened up and let him in. When Bucky wasn’t there, Teddy was good company. Teddy was a patchy mutt, getting old and creaky, and liked to rest his weary bones in front of the fireplace in the winter.

Sarah didn’t come home until late most days, so Steve had plenty of time before she’d show up and wrinkle her nose and ask if that was wet dog. He’d let Teddy flop down in front of the couch, and he’d prop his feet up on Teddy’s back while he held his schoolbooks up to read. Something about the dog’s warmth and droning snores would send him to sleep half the time.

Days when Sarah came home and found him like that, fast asleep, she’d shoo Teddy out, but her voice was never as hard as she meant it to be.

Bucky wanted a dog, but his dad said no and meant it. Too much work. “You need a hobby, you start putting some real effort into your grades,” he said curtly. Buck’s dad could be a piece of work.

One weekend, Bucky was staying over at Steve’s, and they were pretending to be polar explorers. Sarah had the night off, so she’d made them thumbprint cookies with a drop of jam in the middle.

“Bucky,” asked Steve, “if you could explore anywhere, where would you go?”

Bucky rolled over, staring up at the ceiling in contemplation. “I don’t know. Somewhere warm, I think. Maybe a tropical island.”

“That sounds nice,” said Steve. He was starting to get drowsy. Pretty soon he was going to have to turn out the lamp, even if they didn’t go to sleep right away. Ma hated to waste the oil.

“Yeah, think about it.” Bucky was getting more interested in this hypothetical adventure. “Somewhere with breadfruit trees, right? So we don’t even have to work hard for food. We’ll have to find water. But if there’s trees there’s got to be fresh water, so we can find a spring, or, or dig a well.”

“Don’t wells have to be deep?”
“I don’t know. Maybe not as deep on an island. Anyway, we’d be the first people there. And we’d hear the birds in the morning, and monkeys at night. And there would be pearl oysters.”

“I never found a pearl in an oyster,” said Steve dubiously.

“They’re special oysters, I guess. Anyway, we’d learn to dive for them. We’d hold our breath, for minutes and minutes, I don’t know, hours, maybe, and we’d find the oysters, big as our heads, and inside there’d be a giant pearl.” Bucky held up his thumb and forefinger to show the staggering size. “When we got tired of the island we’d make a raft and come back and sell the pearls, and we’d be rich forever.”

Steve set his jaw. “I’d buy Ma a house.”

“Yeah, but even richer than that. Rich enough to buy out McGillivray’s candies.”

They were both struck silent with awe at that thought for a moment; the candy store was a brightly-lit heaven, glass bins waiting for Mr. McGillivray’s careful, slow hands to come with the scoop and measure out exactly as much as had been paid for, counting the pennies scrupulously.

“And I’ll get a dog,” added Bucky wistfully. “A big dog. I’ll name it—I don’t know.”

“Fido?”

“Yeah, that’s a good name,” said Bucky, who secretly thought he could probably come up with a better name but would loyally have refused to admit it.

“Teddy’s a good dog,” said Steve. “It’s nice. He’s good to have around when it’s quiet.”


“I wouldn’t mind a sister.” Steve was twisting a thread from a pillowcase around his finger, around and around. “It gets lonely when it’s quiet.”

“Oh,” said Bucky. He couldn’t think of anything good to say in response to that.

Steve shook his head a little, shaking it off. “But it’s good when you’re here, because then we don’t have to share with anybody.”

“Yeah! My sisters can be such a hassle.” That was objectively true; there was no way, for instance, the thumbprint jam cookies would have lasted so long in the Barnes household, with so many sets of small grubby hands competing for them.

“I’m your best friend, right?” asked Steve abruptly. It sounded like it pained him to ask.

Bucky propped himself up on his elbows and said, “Yeah,” like it should have been transparently obvious. (It was to any outside observers.)

“Okay. Good,” said Steve. “So if we go exploring, we’ll go together.”

“Yeah.”

“Swear?”

“Swear.”

Steve yawned deeply. “I should get the lamp.”
“Yeah, okay.” Bucky started to hunt for the blanket. “You going to be warm enough?”

“I think so.” Steve got the lamp turned down, watching as the wick sputtered out. He climbed back down off the sofa. “You got the blanket?”

“Yeah, here.”

They each grabbed a side and tucked it around themselves, and they slept like that, back to back, dreaming of jewel-blue water and islands under the brilliant tropical sun.

Bucky’s dad didn’t like Steve, which was stupid, because Steve was great. Steve was funny. He’d make cracks about the other kids that would have gotten his butt whipped if the teachers heard him, but he was good at talking soft enough that nobody else did. Steve was easy to talk to. He never said remember to be grateful or your sister would never do that, and he wasn’t like the kids at school who always wanted to talk about marbles or other boring stuff.

But when Steve came over for dinner, Bucky’s dad would look at him over the top of his glasses with a little frown, and it would make Bucky’s shoulders tighten up, like he’d done something wrong.

Bucky’s mom loved Steve. She wanted to feed him, even when he wasn’t there. She’d send Bucky over with an extra cookie for him, wrapped up in a stray rag that Bucky knew better than to forget, and Steve would protest until Bucky said “Mom loves you, she wants to feed you up. Eat it.” Or sometimes, “Fine, we can split it,” and he’d take the smaller piece, which Steve would see, but he’d eat his, because he wasn’t an idiot. Just stubborn as heck.

So mostly Bucky went to Steve’s place, or if Bucky’s dad was gone for a while or working late Steve could come over for dinner, and if Steve picked up that Bucky’s dad didn’t like him, he didn’t say anything about it.

It was winter. Steve’s coughs were huge, wracking, turning him inside out. Every cough seemed to take every bit of breath he had and then some. Bucky watched him, eyebrows drawn together, but preternaturally still.

When that round of coughing stopped, Bucky got up in his sock feet and padded over to the stove. He put a kettle on, and Steve tried to say, “Don’t,” but Bucky just looked back at him.

“Steve,” he said, “you need some tea. Just sit down.” He sounded grown-up.

Steve subsided, wrapping the blanket tighter around himself, the hot water bottle sloshing on his lap. Bucky pulled a couple of mugs off the cupboard—he’d drink as much tea as he made for Steve, though he always steeped his second.

Bucky turned on the radio as the water came to a boil, and the soft, vibrant voice of the Shadow poured out. Steve took a deeper breath without noticing or meaning to, and for a second he thought he’d start coughing again, but it only caught and then came back out.

“Hey, Buck, wanna go to the candy store?”
Bucky’s head jerked up. “Do I? Ask a stupid question, buddy.”

Steve grinned, jingling change in his hand. “Did Mrs. Callahan’s chores. She said it was cheap at the price.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet!”

They got Tootsie rolls and the red wax lips, and they put the lips on at the same time and then laughed at each other. It was a funny look, on Bucky’s face, the red, red lips against his skin.

“Jeez, Steve,” said Bucky, a little muffled through the clumsy wax, “those things look ridiculous on you.”

“Oh, and they’re supposed to be making you look good, Mr. Dracula?”

“Shut your trap!” But the words were ruined by the way he had to lean against Steve to hold himself up through the fresh wave of laughter.

The jackhammers outside were screaming. It was a good day for them, bright and clear and warm but not too hot, and school hadn’t even been out for two weeks.

“I don’t know,” said Steve, slowly. “I could just wear my undershirt but I don’t have a good pair of trunks.”

Bucky punched his arm lightly. “Come on, you can borrow my old pair. Mom had to get new ones for me last month. They’re still fine and you’re so skinny they’ll fit.”

Steve chewed on his lip, visibly debating.

“There’ll be girls,” said Bucky, “and sand, and sunlight. Come on.”

The tension went out of Steve’s shoulders as he decided. “Okay. Fine. I got enough for fare and a hot dog if you got the bath house.”

“All right!” crowed Bucky, grinning. “Let’s go get the trunks and get the heck out of here. I need some summer!”

The water really was nice, even if the suit was itchy and baggy and the undershirt was definitely going to give Steve a sunburn the shape of the neckline. The boardwalk was creaky and they ducked under it to watch some of the older kids kissing, which was great until one of the guys looked up from his girl and said, “Hey! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

They scrambled back out, and Bucky threw his arm over Steve’s shoulders as they dashed off, laughing. “That guy’s face! I thought he was going to chase us!”

“Nah,” said Steve, “he had too much to do!”

They laughed again, harder, and Steve had to catch his breath on a cough, and of course Bucky immediately dragged them to a stop behind the lifeguard tower. “You okay?”

“I’m fine, don’t worry about it,” he said, and ruined the effect a little with another small cough. Bucky wouldn’t settle down until he got them each a juice and Steve drank his without coughing again.
The first time Steve saw Danny McAllistair with a boy, they were hiding, a vacant lot not too far from their houses. Steve was hiding, too. He’d picked a fight with some kids beating up on a little kid a couple streets down, and he wasn’t sure they weren’t going to come back for a second round.

Danny was three years older, and he and the other boy Steve didn’t recognize were standing close together. Danny was doing something with his hand, his arm moving, and the other boy was looking down between them with a pained look on his face.

Steve just stepped a few feet to the side and slipped behind a torn-up fence board.

Danny’s face scrunched up, and he let out a huge gasp, shuddering, and then the other boy did the same thing, with a little yelp tacked on at the end.

“Shut up,” hissed Danny, “you want somebody to hear?”

The boy shook his head, hard, and Danny relaxed backward, dug a handkerchief out of his pocket, and—oh. Steve could see—they were cleaning themselves up.

“See you,” said the boy, and Danny nodded, jerkily, and then the boy vanished like a jackrabbit through the debris littering the lot.

Danny sat down, and sighed, and then scrubbed hard at his reddened face with his other hand. “Christ,” he said, out loud.

Steve waited until Danny stood up and left, before he climbed out from the rubble.

By the time they were getting on fourteen and thirteen, Bucky figured he knew why his dad didn’t like Steve. It was that Steve was short, and skinny, and looked like he was usually about one coughing fit away from dropping dead.

Bucky’s dad—for some reason, it was like he was worried Bucky was going to catch it, lose a couple inches, whatever, and turn into an asthmatic.

He didn’t try to talk to his dad about how that didn’t even make sense. He figured it was better not to push a sore point. And it wasn’t like his dad tried to keep them apart, so that was fine.

Bucky was confirmed the year before Steve, since he was older. His parents had his picture taken in a suit, which Steve thought just about beat all. Steve dropped by to see him in the morning, while they were still getting him ready, his mom fussing over him like he was a roast for company.

“Look at you!” he crowed. Bucky glowered at him furiously, trying desperately to get his hair to lie flat by getting it wet again, splashing water into his hands at the sink and then palming his hair.

“Ah, hush up,” said Bucky. “It’s just one day.”

“You going to make wishes?”

“Already made them.”

“Any of them about your hair?”
“None of your business!”

“You going to tell Jesus about your mom’s flowerpot?”

“I figure He’s got to already know, and if He doesn’t, then what He doesn’t know won’t hurt Him,” said Bucky, with an unexpectedly philosophical outlook.

“You’ll have to confess it.”

“I s’pose.”

“You’ll have to confess everything.”

“Nah, or the priest would be there all day. I’ll confess as needs be.” It was an attitude Bucky was to keep, over the years.

Steve was, if anything, a little jealous that Bucky wasn’t going to have to spend so much time on instruction anymore, but then again, Steve didn’t mind. There was something comforting about the image of angels, even if he’d gotten used to the idea that they weren’t going to be doing much directly for him. He figured if they were, he would have gotten more of a response the times he’d felt like his lungs were closing up on him and he’d begged for air, prayed for it as hard as he could. It had never done any good. If that had been the heavenly response when he was a child and, he had been assured, as innocent as he was ever going to be, he couldn’t imagine the angels were going to get much more involved once he’d had a chance to build up an adult record of sin.

Bucky’s mom was saying something about Steve—Bucky wasn’t even really paying attention—when his dad snorted.

His mom cut her eyes over to him, looking already displeased. “What is it, Harold?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Really.”

“Winnie, it’s—look, that boy is lucky to have a friend like Bucky, and we all know it. Always hanging around. At least Bucky gets to prove he’s got a good left.”

That was the first time his dad had ever praised his left hook, which was interesting, and also raised the question of how he knew about Bucky’s left hook. Even if it was a thing of beauty.

His mom looked—stricken, sort of. “Harold!”

“It’s true, Winnie, and you know it. Steve Rogers is headed for an early grave and the way he goes around, it’s like he thinks he’s Hercules.”

“I think he’s very brave.”

“I think he’s a numbskull.”

Early grave, thought Bucky, and felt suddenly oddly like he wasn’t connected to the chair he was sitting in, or the plate in the front of him, or the fork in his hand, or even his hand.
Steve was such a little shit. Bucky rounded the corner to the boy’s room right as he heard the sound of a face meeting a fist, and he hit the doors so hard they flew open.

Steve looked up at him, crooked smile, from where he was hanging on to a sink for balance, no blood (thank God) but that lip was going to turn fat.

“Woody here was just calling me a bastard,” he said, cheerily.

“Oh, yeah?” Bucky took a step forward. He was in the middle of a growth spurt, had put on a couple inches over the summer. No weight to go with it yet, but height. “You talking bad about Sarah Rogers? Really? Because she’s a real nice lady, I like her.”

Woody was a smart aleck, and when he opened his mouth he was going to say something rotten, Bucky could tell, so he just went straight for a kick to the balls as Woody took a breath. Woody dropped like a rock. Sisters: they taught you so much about life. Alice might be a pain sometimes, but she’d sat Bucky down and made him learn how to knee a guy until he could have done it blindfolded in the dark.

Steve was laughing. “Jesus, Buck, I had it. You didn’t have to go for the crotch!”

“You’d think he wasn’t talking about your mama, Steven Grant Rogers.” Bucky put his nose up in the air primly, and marched them back to the hallway.

“Jesus, Stevie, what are you reading?”

Steve looked up, and held out the magazine wordlessly for Bucky’s inspection. On the cover was a man rippling with muscles, well-oiled, and grinning at the camera.

“Strength & Health?” Bucky read, and shook his head. “Don’t hurt yourself trying to look like that. That guy looks deranged.”

“They have some exercises. I’ll give them a try.”

“When you’re done, do you mind if I borrow it?”

“Sure, no problem. You want to look deranged, too?”

“Nah,” said Bucky, “just maybe they have some good ideas, you know?”

He sat down next to Steve on the bed, reading over his shoulder.

Steve started doing some of the exercises from the magazine. He couldn’t handle all of them; his arms were so thin, and his wrists would start to ache. But he could do push-ups, whenever he was well, although jumping-jacks got him in trouble with the neighbors, so he had to stop those.

Sometimes he’d look in the mirror and flex his arm, looking to see if it was getting stronger, and after a couple of months he could tell it was. The muscles weren’t big, but they stood out, sharper, and getting harder.

Buck caught him at it once and busted up laughing. “You doing the poses, Stevie?”

Steve’s faced got hot and he grabbed at his shirt. “Like you never steal my magazines!” he accused.
“I bet you do this too.”

Bucky choked on that, going pink, waving a hand ineffectually in front of his face until he’d calmed down, and then what he said was, “Look, you want to come out and play ball?”

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” said Bucky. “It’s been one week since my last confession.”

Father Dalton never seemed to care that much about confession. He just sort of grunted his way through it and at the end you’d get some Hail Marys and you had to promise to think real hard about whatever it was you’d done.

Bucky had gotten out of the habit of telling Father Dalton everything a while back, but he still figured confessing most of his sins had to count for something.

“I’ve had impure thoughts,” he said. “And touched myself. And I got in a fight at school.” He resisted the urge to add that they had it coming; that only got you an extra couple of Our Fathers.

Father Dalton sounded like he was swallowing a yawn. “Five Hail Marys and two Our Fathers. And try to think of what our Lord Jesus would want you to do.”

Bucky knelt in the pew after he got out and ran through the penance as fast as he figured he could while still respecting the idea of it, and tossed in a prayer to Jesus that if he wasn’t supposed to touch himself, could Jesus maybe see His way clear to helping fewer impure thoughts cross his mind.

Bucky liked to dance and was pretty good at it, but he got shy real easy, so when Steve came into Bucky’s bedroom to find him dancing to the radio, he just waited for a minute.

Bucky was humming softly, until he made it to a turn and saw Steve. “—Holy Christ, don’t scare me like that!”

Steve held up his hands. “Didn’t mean to!”

Bucky looked a little embarrassed. “Jeez. Fine.”

Steve sprawled out on Bucky’s bed, looking down to where Bucky had dropped to sit cross-legged in a welter of schoolbooks and paper. “Did you hear about the guy who got shot instead of Roosevelt?”

“Yeah, he died, right?” said Bucky, thoughtfully. “Glad it wasn’t the President. I mean, we just got through electing that one. I don’t want to listen to people go on about electing a new guy until I have to.”

“Ma made me listen to the whole speech on the radio.”

“Yeah, so did my dad. He said we’d be glad later.”

“Your dad’s always saying that about the stuff he makes you do.”

“You’re telling me,” said Bucky, making a face at his homework. “I’m supposed to be learning math why, exactly?”

“So you can do his books?”
“Ugh, I’d rather throw fish around at the market.”

Steve put on his best impression of Harold and said, “That can be arranged!”

Bucky made a face and threw a pencil at Steve. “It’s bad enough when he does it, don’t you start.”

Steve rolled over, laughing, and dropped the pencil back in front of Bucky. He looked up, and Bucky couldn’t help smiling back at his upside-down face.

“You want to go see King Kong this weekend?” Steve said.

“Yeah, sure.”

Steve was always drawing in the margins of books, his papers—whatever he could get his hands on. His ma eventually gave up trying to keep him from doing it, and just tried to grab the neighbor’s newspapers if they were going to toss them. The BDE always looked like Steve was trying to give it tattoos.

“You’re pretty good,” said Bucky, staring over his shoulder at a sketch that was taking shape in the upper right corner. It was recognizably Mary Linehan from class, who was stuck-up but pretty, and Bucky had tried drawing people before and knew it was hard.

Steve just made a “hnn” noise and stuck his tongue in the corner of his mouth, like he always did when he was drawing, and Bucky settled back with the funnies to wait until Steve was done defacing the Business section. Not like anybody really wanted to read that, anyway, even on a Sunday.

Later, Steve told Bucky that when his ma found the drawing of Mary Linehan, she got a real serious look on her face and sat him down for a Talk, with a capital T, the Facts-Of-Life TALK, and Bucky said, “Jeez, my dad talked to me about that when I was twelve.”

“Yeah, but I think Ma was hoping I’d be a priest or something.”

Bucky started to laugh, huge, wheezing laughs, at the idea of Steven Grant Rogers as a priest, and said, “Has she met you? Does she know that thing you did last Lent?”

“No! She can never know.”

“Well, she ain’t going to hear it from me, but can you imagine?”

“I thought about it,” said Steve. “For a while. Figured maybe—don’t know if I’m going to grow much, don’t know if I’m ever going to find a girl. Might be easier to just be a priest.”

“Easier. Yeah. That’s why guys go for the priesthood. That’s what they all say, it’s a cakewalk.”

Steve frowned. “Well, it’s not like I never thought about it. That’s all I’m saying.”

Bucky had to try to picture it, then, Steve’s face (what would he look like grown-up? Taller?) above the white collar, and just couldn’t.

“Does she know about the fish?”
“Buck!”

“Okay, fine, I won’t say it. But you were never going to make much of a priest, buddy.”

Bucky had started losing the baby fat that had made his face round when he was fourteen, but it didn’t really set until he was fifteen, sixteen. It was strange sometimes, seeing the face he was going to have as a man in the face that was still a kid’s.

His face was sweet and a little soulful, and the girls liked it, even if he did usually have zits going. He talked to them really nicely, not quite like he talked to his sisters because he flirted with the girls at school, but he got a reputation for not pushing, just saying things like “You look nice in that dress” and “Hey, it’s the prettiest girl in English.”

Sometimes he’d see Steve’s face out of the corner of his eye when he was talking, if Steve was around, and the expression on it gave Bucky an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his stomach, the way Steve’s eyebrows would draw together and a little line would come up between them. Like he was mad, but not really.

Bucky had always liked people, but the older he got the easier it was to make them like him back.

Brooklyn teachers always liked to make students read Brooklyn writers, which was how Steve figured he was going to end up memorizing Whitman whether he wanted to or not. He did a book report on Leaves of Grass, because it was one of the options, even though there was the little star by it on the sheet that meant it might not be suitable. He sifted through it, dog-earring pages, taking notes, but half-heartedly at best. Steve wasn’t a poet and had limited interest in it. Words weren’t like pictures, especially in poetry. They were clunky. It was hard to tell exactly what somebody meant by them.

Know’st thou not there is but one theme for ever-enduring bards,

And that is the theme of War, the fortune of battles,

The making of perfect soldiers.

He wrote, rather laboriously, “Whitman describes the interest of war and soldiers as a natural question for poets,” and then set his pencil down and sighed.

The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love gave him pause for a minute, but he kept going.

It is a painful thing to love a man or woman to excess, and yet it satisfies, it is great

Loving to excess. What an idea. How could you love too much? It was one thing that didn’t cost a penny, and it didn’t have to hurt; you could hold on to love in your heart and create more of it, an infinite amount more, as you needed to.

Prodigal, you have given me love—there I to you give love!

O unspeakable passionate love.

“Whitman also talks at length about love, in a general way, as a way to liberate the human spirit,”
wrote Steve, and was proud of himself for working the word *liberate* in.

*Wherever he goes men and woman accept and desire him,*

*They desire he should like them, touch them, speak to them, stay with them.*

(That part, though, reminded him of Bucky.)

Sarah always liked to sing along to the radio. Ever since Stevie was little, he’d perked up when she did, which suited her just fine. It was nice to be appreciated.

Even at fifteen, when most boys his age had started trying to act like they were found in a jungle instead of raised by their parents, when he came home after school to her singing in the kitchen on her days off, his face would soften and he’d smile, and if it had been a very good day for him, he might even join her. She loved his voice, which was sweet and steady, and had cracked into a deep voice like a man’s, now smoothed over most of the rough spots.

She knew from what she’d come home to him listening to that he liked some songs better than others, some singers better than others. He’d never sing along to Ruth Etting, but he’d belt his heart out to Bing Crosby. Until or unless she made a sound, and then he’d turn around so fast he’d give himself whiplash, and he’d stop singing and say, “So how was it today, Ma?”

Sometimes she made things up. Sometimes she’d tell him the truth. It was one of those evenings when she came home after a long, long day, found him sitting sprawled out on the couch with his sketchbook, singing along almost under his breath, *you’re getting to be a habit with me.* The light was casting a funny shadow, and for a minute he looked so much older.

He glanced up and smiled. “Hey, Ma, run late?”

“Hey, honey.” She pulled out a chair and sat down, heavily.

She hadn’t taken off her coat, and Steve’s face sharpened as he searched hers. “What happened?”

She sighed, and then, to her surprise and disgust, she started to cry. She put up a hand in front of her face, but her shoulders kept heaving, heaving. Steve was up off the couch in a shot, scrambling over to her, pencil rolling away; he threw his arms around her from the side, awkwardly crouched even though he wasn’t tall, and he said, “Shhh, shhh, what is it, Ma? It’s okay, I’m here.”

She shook her head a few times, and got the sobs under control. “It was a girl at the hospital today,” she said. “She got in trouble and she went to somebody to try to take care of it. Oh, honey, she died. She was so sick by the time somebody brought her in, and so scared, and she just looked up at me and she died.”

This wasn’t the first girl who’d died like this on her. She’d gotten used to it, as much as you can. But this girl was the youngest, far and away the youngest, couldn’t have been more than thirteen. And so scared. Just a little baby. The horrible stench of putrid flesh wafting up from her vagina when they got her stripped on the table, the stench of sepsis. There’s nothing like it, and she knew it as soon as she smelled it, knew that girl was a lost cause. She’d bottomed out not two hours later, for all they tried.

“Stevie,” she said, “I’m going to tell you a couple of things. Okay? They might tell you about it in school, but I need to know you know it.”
He’d pulled up a chair, and now, sitting next to her, hand still resting on her back, he nodded, fiercely.

He already knew about the birds and the bees, the basics. So she told him about rubbers, which maybe the Pope didn’t approve of but nurses did, and how a girl in trouble needs a friend, and if he’s going to be a good friend to girls, he’ll never get them in trouble, and he’ll take them to the hospital sooner, a lot sooner, if anything does happen. You can buy rubbers in stores now, Stevie, sweetie, nobody needs to show up at the hospital like that poor girl, like all the poor girls.

She started to cry again, more tired this time, no sobs, just tears tracking down her face in the hazy light from the lamp. “Promise me, honey,” she said. “You won’t send me any girls.”

“I promise, Ma,” he said, looking stricken.

“It happens to good girls, too, you know. Just be careful. Be careful with girls.”

“I promise. I will. I always will.”

He started her a cup of tea, and took her coat to hang up to dry, and then came back and sat with her. He held her free hand as she drank her tea, until she had herself back under control.

“You’re a good boy, Stevie,” she said. “Somebody’s going to love you so much, you need to be good to them. I know you will.”

When they were kids they’d slept in a lot of places. Couch-cushion forts in the living room, draping a sheet over the furniture to make a palace or a tent. “Okay, so, we’re soldiers,” Steve would say, and Bucky would roll his eyes but go along with it. Or they’d both wriggle onto Steve’s bed, which was narrow but so were they, back then.

They didn’t do it so much around the time they started high school. Bucky’d just kind of stopped staying the night so much, and Sarah hadn’t noticed anything and neither had his parents. If Steve had, he didn’t say anything about it, just chewed on his lip and looked at Bucky with pondering eyes, which was godawful annoying.

The first girl Bucky kissed was Marybeth Miller, in the fifth grade; she screamed like a stomped cat and hauled off and slugged him for it, so maybe he was a little gunshy.

The second girl Bucky kissed was Viola Lukins, in the ninth grade, and it was just a little kiss at the end of a dance, and she blushed like crazy and giggled and he had to hear about it for weeks from guys asking sing-song if she was his girlfriend. Finally they stopped, but not until he’d decided that kissing girls was an awful lot of trouble.

The third girl Bucky kissed was Eleanor Hawley, in the tenth grade, and it was amazing, and he couldn’t imagine why he hadn’t been doing more kissing. Why was it so amazing? Maybe because it was when they snuck out the back of the dance and sat on the stoop, talking a little, before they started kissing; maybe because she smelled like roses, maybe because she slid onto his lap while they kissed and she was so warm and he didn’t know where to put his hands but he settled on holding her waist and they just pressed their lips together and when they started breathing heavy, mouths a little open, he could feel how wet and soft and hot her mouth was, and he made a little noise in the back of his throat, and she giggled, but this time it didn’t bother him at all. It wasn’t until a door somewhere in the building slammed that she gasped and jumped up from his lap and said, “Come on,
somebody’s going to see us!” and dragged him back in by his hand.

Bucky started trying to get Steve dates when Steve was sixteen. Steve protested, vigorously.

“I can’t dance,” he yelled from the bathroom.

“You’re not kidding,” yelled back Mr. McInnes from next door, through the bathroom wall.

“Thanks, Mr. McInnes,” he shouted directly at the wall. Mr. McInnes’ booming laugh came back through.

“Look,” said Bucky when Steve came back in, hair slicked and wet, “I’m not saying you have to be good at it. You just have to try.”

“I don’t want to try!”

“Come on. Angie’s your year, you could have fun.”

“She’s my year and she knows who I am. We’re not going to have fun. I don’t know how you got her to go.”

“I’m going with her big sister, this was better than staying home. Maybe she’ll like you.”

“Buck, I don’t like her. She never says anything in class.”

“Neither do you!”

“Yeah, but she seems scared. I just don’t want to.”

“So she’s mousy, you can work with that.”

“Work how?” Steve made a face. “I don’t—I don’t want to get anything out of it!”

“Not like that! Just, you know, have a good time. Small talk. Chit-chat. Say dumb stuff about people you know until you feel comfortable.”

“Is that what you do?” Steve looked genuinely curious and a little appalled.

“Well, yeah.”

“Huh. It sounds nuts.”

“It’s fun!”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“You’ll try it out, because you’re coming tonight if I have to drag you there by your belt loops. Steve Rogers, I got you a date and you’re giving it a shot.”

After that, Bucky said, “Maybe it would help if you learned to dance.”

“That’s what I said, genius.”

“No, I mean—I could teach you.”
Steve laughed out loud. “Oh, what, you’re gonna lead? Nice.”

Bucky’s face went off-balance, mouth curling ruefully. “Okay, that would be weird.”

“ Weird, nothing!”

“I... okay, I guess I could just... show you? We wouldn’t have to dance together.”

“That’s the hard part!” Steve threw his hands up in the air. “Look, let’s make a deal, you don’t sign me up for any more dancing and we call it good.”

“Yeah,” said Bucky. “Sure.”

One time, when they were kids, twelve, thirteen, Bucky had said, “You want to practice kissing?”

Steve’s head had jerked up from the book he was reading and he just said, frowning, “No.”

Bucky had meant—nobody needed to—he just let it go.

The first girl Steve kissed was Evelyn Holligan, and she thought at the time how cool he was, not breaking into a sweat like the other boys she’d kissed, or shaking, or trying to get her to go any farther. But for all that, it was still nice; maybe more than nice. He was short and skinny, but so was she, and if he was mostly knobby elbows and bony knees, he held her like she’d seen movie stars do, one big hand spread out against the small of her back and the other resting at the nape of her neck, her arms laced around his neck. And he did heave a shuddering breath, rubbing her back a little, which felt like he was admitting something.

After, he’d asked to borrow her handkerchief to make sure there wasn’t any lipstick on him, and she was indignant until he held up the white cloth, smiling, and sure enough, there was a little mauve ghost of Lilac Heaven.

“You’ve got a reputation to keep, Evie,” he said, and she laughed.

“Evie and Stevie,” she said, a little delighted by it. But the next day at school, after she’d talked to Cathleen and Dot, they’d convinced her that however nice he was, he wasn’t the kind of boy she should go on more dates with. He seemed all right with that, which was a little insulting, wasn’t it? But convenient, at least.

At eighteen, Bucky felt restless all the time, a cold crawling in his skin. He would drag Steve to the movies, as often as he could. The October he was eighteen and Steve was seventeen, he made Steve go to a showing of Wings. Steve had told him it was his favorite movie as a kid, he’d gone to see it a bunch of times in a row, and Bucky had seen it once and kind of remembered it but not very well.

Jeez. He could see why Steve loved it. Heroism all over the place, the steady drumbeat of war. Nobody was happy to think about war just then—too much going on in Europe, too much to worry about—but Steve was, Steve always was. He stared at that screen like he wanted to eat it.

When the pilot realized he’d killed his best friend, Steve’s breath hitched, and Bucky glanced over at him, which was how he almost missed when the pilot leaned down and gave his friend a quick kiss
that landed partly on his mouth. He blinked at the screen, so he wasn’t looking at Steve’s face, which was fine, probably fine.

Once, when Bucky had been drinking with his dad but his dad had gone to bed complaining about a headache, he tried to explain to his mom why Steve fought so much.

“See,” he said, “if you think, who’s going to win, then it doesn’t make any sense at all. Right? Steve’s not gonna win.”

She nodded, looking at him curiously.

“So it’s not about winning. Steve’s always doing it for something else. Make a point. Get somebody out of the way, if they’re in trouble, or making trouble, or just prove he won’t just take it.”

His mom’s mouth had half a smile on it, but still looked sad. He thought if she understood, maybe she would know there was no reason to look sad. Steve got beat a lot, but he didn’t mind it, not the way another guy would, a guy who thought he might win. Steve started fights to lose them. He knew he was going to lose them. If it wasn’t about winning the fight, then you always had to look at whatever Steve was winning by losing the fight.

And sure, it was pretty bad to see his face, sometimes. When he came staggering in with a shiner or a bloody nose or a fat lip. But he was doing all right.


Those happened to be the only two phrases he knew in French, but he was doing just fine with German, thanks, and when Steve said, “At least French sounds romantic, German sounds like you’re choking on something,” Bucky had wiggled his eyebrows and said, “Maybe that’s part of the charm! Who knows what—” and Steve had waved it away, busting up laughing, yelling “Stop, stop! My tender ears!”

Sitting up on the roof was popular when it was warm, so that was out of the question. The stoop wasn’t private, not with kids playing stickball (and yeah, so sometimes he’d help them, coach a little or something, but not today). In the end he dragged Steve down to the empty lot two blocks over, and then pulled the two bottles of beer out of his jacket with a flourish. Steve took one look at his face and laughed, a stupid loud honk, then clapped a hand over his mouth, eyes dancing.

“Oh, come on,” said Bucky, “I got these special! It’s an occasion!”

“Well, what are they?” asked Steve, settling down against a pile of boards (quick glance back for nails, none, good).

“I got a job! I’m starting tomorrow.” He’d had little pick-up jobs before, but this one paid actual money. And wasn’t with his dad.

Steve looked—well, jealous, actually, but he shut it down fast. “That’s great, Buck!”

“I know. I can finally start taking care of some things myself. Tell my dad to stick it.”
“You’re going to finish the school year, though, right? Graduate?”

“Hell, yeah. I told Mr. McPherson I wouldn’t do it otherwise. He says it’s not a problem, he can always use more guys over the summer so I can work part-time before and then go full-time and if it works out I can stay on.”

“That’s—that’s really good.”

“Yeah, I’m having fantasies about getting my own place. Get some privacy for once.”

Steve actually went a little pale, and Bucky couldn’t tell—was he rubbing it in, should he shut up? He opened his mouth but Steve beat him to it.

“So you’ll, uh, you thinking about—settling down?”


“Oh, okay. I just figured—” Steve shrugged. “Your own place, steady job. You could, if you wanted to.”

“Well, I don’t want to,” said Bucky. “Christ, I’m eighteen. I’m not—no.”

“Okay,” said Steve, and something eased in his shoulders, and Bucky pretend he hadn’t been looking for that, and he lifted his beer and took a long pull from it, and it was okay, really, then.

Steve handed his bottle to Bucky. Bucky flexed his wrists as he opened it, showing off. Steve took a drink and pulled a face at it, but drank again anyway.

The year the coldest winter hit, Steve was still seventeen and Bucky turned nineteen. The frost on the outside of the panes kept threatening to climb inside. Bucky would come over after work and surreptitiously smuggle some coal into their bin; if he timed it right Steve didn’t spot it, but if he slipped up Steve would frown at him deeply, visibly wounded.

Sarah was having a tough year at work. She was working extra shifts almost all the time, splitting time between two hospitals because one hospital wouldn’t let her work that much. The second place was a TB ward, and the first place wouldn’t have let her keep working there if they’d known, but she wasn’t stupid, she washed her hands real well and changed uniforms between, and so far so good.

Steve was sick, but not as sick as Bucky had been afraid. He coughed like he meant it, but he could still breathe pretty easily in between, and he wasn’t sick enough to let Bucky hover over him like a mother hen.

“Buck,” he said, sighing, waving away the towel. “I’m not breathing that.”

“You’re breathing steam if I have to knock you out to make you do it.”

They glared at each other over the pot of boiling water for a minute before Steve gave in, and got up from the couch to come over to the stove and prop his head under the towel.

“Alice says it’s good for your skin, anyway,” said Bucky.

Steve laughed reluctantly under the towel, and it only turned into a half-cough, quickly over.

“Yeah,” he said, “that’s my problem with the girls, my skin.”
It wasn’t, of course. His skin was clear, clearer than any seventeen-year-old had a right to. Bucky, on the other hand, was always halfway through a horrible break-out. Alice probably hadn’t even told him about the steam, he’d probably read it in one of her magazines while he was trying to figure out what to do about his skin.

“Nah,” said Bucky, “your problem is you got no confidence.”

“I got plenty of confidence.”

“I’m not talking about getting in dumb fights.”

“Well, then I guess maybe it could be.”

Steve caught a flash of Bucky’s smile from under where his head was draped with the towel, which was rapidly wilting under the pressure of the steam.

The heat wave summer hit just before Steve’s eighteenth birthday. Bucky said, “Come on, let’s go to the beach.”

Steve groaned from the couch. “It’s not a bad idea. I’m just not convinced getting up is a good idea.”

Bucky was shuffling in the living room, tapping out little dance moves with his feet along to the radio. *Summertime*, crooned the radio—not Billie Holiday yet—and the livin’s easy.

“We don’t have to wear swimsuits with straps,” said Bucky. “Come on, it’s so hot!”

“Yeah, and the ride is gonna be hot, and the beach is gonna be hot, and the sand is gonna be hot, and I don’t know if it’s worth it to get up just to go be hot a bunch of other places.”

“Cool water,” wheedled Bucky. “Cool, clean water, the sound of the waves, fresh air, a breeze, come on, a breeze, don’t that sound good?”

Steve finally had to laugh, eyes still shut, and he said, “Fine. Fine, we’ll go. But I gotta see about borrowing a suit from Tim.”

“Oh, let’s do it!”

That day they ended up at Steeplechase Park (“STEEPLECHASE: THE FUNNY PLACE”), on the namesake ride. Everybody knew the horse with the most weight would go fastest on the track, so they’d pile onto the horses two at a time. Bucky climbed on first and glanced back over his shoulder, smiling. “Come on, Steve!” he yelled.

Steve turned the ticket around in his palm, climbed on behind Bucky. He wrapped his arms around Bucky’s waist and held on, tightening them as the horses started to move on their mechanical tracks. The wood under him was hot to the touch from the sunlight, which seemed like it just got hotter as it fell through the glass above them.

The drop in the pit of his stomach was just the ride starting up. He could smell the lime of Bucky’s hair cream from here.

Steve was so light they were never the fastest anyway, even though they doubled up.

“You want to do the Ferris wheel next?” Bucky called back over his shoulder.
Steve thought about sitting next to Bucky, maybe pressed against him if the car was full. “Sure,” he said.

The year Jessie Owens won the Olympics, Steve grinned broadly and punched Bucky lightly in the shoulder.

“They said he couldn’t do it!” he crowed. “Well, they can eat it.”

Bucky smiled back at him, fondly. “You can’t help yourself, can you? Always got to root for the underdog.”

“He was only the underdog because he’s black. White man could run like that, everybody would have called him the favorite.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

It was reassuring; you could set your watch by Steve Rogers’ desire to see somebody who wasn’t getting a fair shake win, against any and all odds.

(Except, perhaps, if they were up against the Dodgers.)

The punch took him by surprise. It was closed-fist and came from the shadows by the bar door, and it was a clumsy swipe but it still grazed his head.

“Christ! What the h—” Steve turned, but even as he was turning another punch came, and that one got him on the ground.

“Fucking fairy!” the guy shouted, and now he was looming over Steve. “What, did I mess up your hair?”

“What is your problem?” Steve yelled, starting to push himself up from the ground. “What the hell?”

The guy kicked him, hard, in the ribs, and that took him down, gasping. Steve could smell the reek of alcohol on him—stale and gross, the odor that comes from having been drunk long enough to start sweating it out.

“My problem is little cocksucking fairies like you,” the guy said, heavily, leaning over like he was going to kick again.

There were advantages to already being on the ground. Steve grabbed his ankle and yanked it out from under him.

When the asshole went down, Steve clambered to his feet. The ground was slick with rain, and the guy was drunk enough that he wasn’t going to get up again for at least a couple of minutes. Steve shouted at him, half-crouched above him, “Shut your mouth, asshole, or you want to tell your buddies you got your ass handed to you by some pansy kid?”

The drunk was breathing in ragged gasps. Steve didn’t like to hit a man while he was down, but he delivered a stinging backhand slap, and the drunk’s head lolled to the side, and then he turned and walked away. Briskly.

Nobody followed him. Guess the asshole hadn’t had any friends with him after all.
When he got home, Bucky was sprawled on the floor on his stomach, pillow tucked up under his chest, reading one of Steve’s bodybuilding magazines. He usually had one floating around.

“Jesus,” said Bucky when he got a look back over his shoulder, dropping the magazine. “What the hell happened to you?”

Steve touched his face—he hadn’t thought he was bleeding, but—oh. A bruise was already starting to puff up his right cheek.

“Some drunk on his way out of a bar thought I looked like a fairy and needed a lesson,” he said. “I won, though.”

Bucky shot to his feet. “What the hell!”

“Yeah, that’s what I said.” Steve laughed, going for a washcloth. “Got lucky, though, he didn’t have any friends with him. And he was so drunk he practically just fell down.”

Bucky reached out for Steve’s face, fingers carefully braced along jawline and cheekbone, tipping it back and forth in the light. He was squinting intensely at Steve. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. He got in a couple punches but like I said, I won.”

“You don’t get to say that very often.”

“Every once in a while.”

Bucky let go of his face, then hesitated. “Did he—do you know why he went after you?”

“No! It was the nuttiest thing! I was just walking by the bar and he must have just come out, and I think he wanted to pick a fight.” Steve sighed. “Okay, what is it?”

Bucky was staring at him, mouth twisted in thought. “I—maybe it’s the hair? It kind of looks—I don’t know, like you bleached it.”

“I’m blond! I’m Irish!”

“I know, I know, but maybe that asshole didn’t. Maybe he figured it was on purpose.”

“So what, you want me to dye my hair so I don’t get punched?” Steve laughed harshly. “This ain’t the first time I been called a fairy, it won’t be the last. I’m not a big guy. They figure they can win.”

Bucky was shaking his head. “No. Nah, you shouldn’t dye your hair. Just—you weren’t—you know, doing anyt—”

“What the hell? No, of course I wasn’t!”

“Okay, okay!” Bucky held up his hands, palms out. “Just, you know, it’s really something. Really something.”

“You’re telling me,” said Steve, pressing the damp washcloth to his cheek.

“You want me to get some ice?”

“Yeah, how much good is that going to do? I’m already going to swell up, I might as well not waste the ice.”
They went to see *A Star is Born* because people kept saying nice things about it, even though it meant a ride into the city on a train packed for the weekend, the subway smelling of mildew and sweat.

Before it started, there was a newsreel that had the Hindenburg, in all its huge blaze, almost but not quite glory; Steve couldn’t take his eyes off it, just stared and stared, marveling at how it looked up there in black and white, the film rolling by. Like it could be unwound, undone. But disasters only progress in one direction. The fire ate the shell off the frame like fire eating into a photograph, until the frame was naked, geometric, and then collapsing in on itself. Black smoke billowed up from it. “—the white-hot skeleton,” the announcer said breathlessly, “the incandescent tangle,” and he wasn’t wrong, it was incandescent, like the frame had been the filament of a lightbulb.

The movie was good, but on the way home, Bucky kept staring off into space as the train rattled along. Steve nudged his shoulder with his own.

Bucky looked over, still frowning. “Just—there was a thunderstorm, you heard that?” he asked. “That they rode out.”

“Yeah,” said Steve.

“Imagine that. You get through a thunderstorm in that thing, thinking maybe you’ll go up like a match, and then you’re ten minutes from landing on a flat damn field. And boom.”

“There’s always room for something worse to happen,” said Steve.

Bucky looked back out the window. “Yeah.”

When Bucky was twenty and Steve was nineteen, Steve came down with something awful, worse than the usual. It wasn’t just the coughing. He was burning up, he was a million degrees, and Sarah had to work, hovering at the foot of his bed anxiously until he pulled a smile out of somewhere and said, “Get on, Ma, you’re gonna be late,” and she was reassured enough by that to go. Jobs were thin on the ground, and she’d been selfish, keeping two.

So it wasn’t a surprise when Bucky came over. Ma had probably called him from the hospital.

“Hey, buddy,” said Buck, leaning over the bed. “You look like garbage.” It was a joke, but not really; Steve thought he should maybe laugh, but not really.

“Feel that way,” said Steve, and had to turn his head so he could cough and cough and cough. There was a whoop at the end of it.

“You need some water?”

“Yeah.”

Bucky grabbed a glass and went to get water, and when he came back he brought a couple of aspirin with it.

Steve sighed, looking at them, but palmed them and took them with the water without a fuss. He really was burning up. He could feel the fever, light and bright behind his eyes, making them ache, making his skin alternate between too hot and too cold.
Bucky disappeared and came back again with the Vap-O-Rub, and Steve couldn’t help making a face, even though his heart wasn’t in it.

“Don’t give me that,” said Bucky, but his voice had no heat in it. Just quiet and sad. So Steve pushed the blanket off his chest, and coughed a little more, and Bucky dipped his fingers into the jar and rubbed the salve on his chest, slow and thorough, like he always had.

“You gonna get married, Buck?” slurled Steve, eyes drifting shut again.

Bucky’s hand didn’t pause. “Dunno.”

“You should. You’d be a hell of a husband. Hell of a wife.”

“Already got Mom on my back about it, don’t need you, too.”

The slow, rhythmic circles were so soothing. Steve found himself starting to drop off to sleep. The fever dreams weren’t good, but they weren’t bad, either. Just uncomfortable, hot and too bright. Huge, spooling walls of color.

That was the time when the fever got so high it messed up Steve’s hearing, a little, even though he pretended nothing was the matter. Bucky figured it out—of course he did—but didn’t say. Just turned the radio up louder when they listened to it.

When he got close to graduating from high school, Steve was getting antsy. They needed more money than Ma was bringing in, even working as much as she did.

Getting the job as a clerk at the drugstore was a godsend, even if the hours were sparse. Mostly, it was because the pharmacist was somebody Ma knew from the old days, and when he moved back into the neighborhood and started working at the shop, she reached out and asked him if he knew anybody that might hire her skinny little smart-mouthed son.

Steve ended up missing work sometimes when he was sick. He didn’t get sick the way he had as a kid—not as often, anyway. He told the pharmacist, Mr. Brennan, as much. And if Mr. Brennan didn’t completely believe him, well, he never fired Steve, either. He let Steve out in time for the art tutoring he did for a little extra money (and the practice). And he always asked after Ma, even when she started to go downhill, later.

Sometimes he thought it was funny, that out of all his friends he was the one who could buy rubbers if he wanted to without anyone having to know. Not like he was going to, not like he had any use for them. He thought sometimes he should have gone into the priesthood, after all.

Mr. Brennan kept a bottle of Scotch in the back, in his little room, where he slept. One night at closing he said, “Steve, my boy, have a glass with me.”

He leaned back on the bed, back against the wall, while Steve tried to get comfortable in the straight-backed chair. They toasted, and then Mr. Brennan said, “My boy, I’m worried about this war.”

Steve didn’t have to ask what he meant. The papers were full of it, getting louder and louder, Hitler starting to creep into everyone’s territory. He just nodded, trying to sip at the scotch without making a face. It tasted like something he’d strip paint with.

Mr. Brennan leaned forward, a look on his face so serious it could have been comical. “I really hoped,” he said, “that after the last one we’d be done with it. But the damn Germans can’t be done,
can’t they? So promise me something.”

“I—sir?” said Steve.

“They’ll start drafting us all again. It’s just a matter of time. So when they draft me, promise me you’ll find a good boy, somebody responsible, like you, to help run the store. Hell, or a skirt. Doesn’t matter so much, in wartime. I just want a shop to come back to.”

There were so many shades of unfair in that it was hard to parse them all out, but instead of saying *Don’t you think I’ll go, too?* or *You’re too old for them to want to draft you,* he looked at Mr. Brennan’s face, a little sweaty in the chill room, and said, “I promise.”

“Good boy, Stevie,” he said, settling back. “Just like your dear ma said.”

*Snow White* came out, and after Steve spent days talking about what an *achievement* it was and how *interesting* it would be to see the animation, which was all supposed to be hand-painted, on glass plates, but in full color, Bucky said, “Enough, already! Let’s go. Tomorrow night.”

Steve beamed liked Bucky had made a great concession—like they didn’t go to the movies all the damn time anyway.

The theater was pretty packed, and the seats right in front of theirs were taken by a couple, probably seventeen or eighteen. They started out just smiling and leaning together over popcorn, the boy offering the girl in her neat pinned-up brown hair and tight-busted dress the box, and she smiled back at him with red-painted lips.

After the lights had gone down, the girl put her hand on the armrest between them, and the boy’s hand covered hers.

When *Snow White* was running in fear through the forest, the boy’s arm slipped up over the girl’s shoulders, and she leaned in to it. By the end of the movie, when the lights came up, they were curled together like they’d always been right there.

When Hitler took over Austria, Mr. Brennan spent the whole day staring at the paper, folding it, unfolding it again.

“This is no good, Steve, my boy,” he said. “No good at all.”

“Yes, sir,” said Steve, unpacking the new shipment of cigars. They smelled rich and dark, a hell of a lot better than they smelled when someone was actually smoking one.

“He was born there, you know. I think he always wanted it back. Always.”

“Wouldn’t be surprised,” said Steve. He dragged the stepstool over to get up to the shelves behind the counter.

“But it’s just a taste, to him. Just a taste. I know wolves like that. He’ll want more blood.”

“I didn’t think there was any blood,” said Steve, balancing on one foot while he just barely stepped up onto a lower shelf to reach the higher one. “Wasn’t it supposed to be peaceful?”

“Just a matter of time.”
Steve would have liked to disagree, but sliding a box into place, paper catching on the box next to it, he thought of the grim face in the papers, stories of crimes against Jews, and he didn’t.

As it turned out, Mr. Brennan was right sooner rather than later. The SS Blackshirts killed a man, a monarchist, two days later, and it was on the front page of the paper. Maybe he was threatening them, maybe he wasn’t; maybe he shot himself (but he probably didn’t).

Mr. Brennan left early. “Close up for me, Steve,” he said, on his way out. “Regular time.”

Steve nodded.

*I speak in the name of millions of inhabitants of this wonderful German land*, the newspaper read, and Steve set it down. Mr. Brennan had laid it aside in the morning.

“What do you think?” he asked Bucky that night, over a sandwich at the automat. “Think Mr. Brennan’s right?”

Bucky said, “I hope to God not.” But his eyes were grim and sad.

The front page had led with *Deny Jews Vote in Austrian Shakeup. Crowds cheer at intimation Hitler aims to be Emperor.*

Nobody needed an emperor anymore. This wasn’t Rome, and besides, look how that had ended.

Sarah died when Steve was twenty-one.

She’d gotten sick when he was twenty. It was ugly, and painful. Steve kept sending her letters in the sanatorium, but the sanatorium wasn’t one of the nice places, because they could never have afforded that. Her life insurance was just enough to cover the funeral, and Steve had a feeling that the insurance man had talked to the undertaker, but what the hell. He just wanted it over with.

Bucky started out offering him rides, but pretty quick Buck stopped offering and started just showing up, because he’d figured that out—that Steve had a hard time saying yes. And normally he would have just ragged on Steve until Steve said yes, but not now. This was different.

Lots of things were different.

After the funeral (Ma in her coffin had looked nothing like herself—just wasted, thin and frail, with the halo of sad straggly blonde hair, and it was exhausting to see her like that, he felt more tired than he’d felt in years), Bucky walked back up the steps with him to the place Steve had moved into when Ma went into the sanatorium. It had felt like letting her down, but there was just no way he was going to be able to keep to old place without the nursing money coming in. Bucky had argued with him then, too. “Why don’t you come live with me? Just until you—until things are settled?” but Steve had said no, and Bucky had looked tragic, like Steve had hit him.

So it started up again, and Steve shook his head, again, and said, “I can make it on my own.”

Bucky leaned in toward him and said—low and fierce, almost angry—“but you don’t have to,” and Steve couldn’t answer that.

“I’m with you to the end of the line,” said Bucky.
That night he thought about making a fort of pillows on Bucky’s floor, like when we were kids, but he didn’t feel like a kid anymore. Maybe he should, maybe he should feel small and scared and alone, but instead he just felt tired.

They went to the Fair in the fall of ’39, a couple of months after, long enough that Steve was maybe okay with being distracted. They surfaced from the subway at the Amusement Zone.

“Wow,” drawled Bucky, dryly, “a whole zone for amusement. That’s got to be good.”

Steve was flipping through a guide. “Okay, what do we want to start with? We aren’t going to get to see the whole thing. Got to pick.”

“I heard Dali’s is wild,” said Bucky, squinting down over Steve’s shoulder, twisting his neck to see the map. When he had their location pegged, he started tugging Steve that direction with one hand on his wrist. The building was pretty—tall and creamy, covered in plaster coral, some of it painted red. Dream of Venus, in big red letters. A girl out front was waving people in, wearing a bikini with a bathrobe over it. It was extra money, but Bucky got them in.

Steve felt himself starting to turn red almost immediately. Dali’s mermaids were topless, by and large. Some larger than others. There was a girl sitting in what was supposed to be an undersea diorama or something, combing her hair, fiddling with it, looking bored. Her breasts were small and round, with little pink nipples, pert as anything. Bucky smiled in at her, but it was like she didn’t see him.

Where they could see another mermaid swimming, Steve looked away, face still hot. The windows into the tank went high up the walls, and her suit covered pretty much everything except her breasts, fabric cut out around them. This one came up to the glass, smiled and flirted, did barrel-rolls under the water. Bucky grinned and wiggled his fingers at her in a little wave. Steve held down the urge to kick him in the ankle.

When they left, Steve quiet and still feeling the heat in his face, Bucky said, “You hate it that much, buddy?”

Steve just shrugged. “I guess.”

“Okay. Well, let’s see what’s next.” Bucky didn’t even suggest the Crystal Lassies, thank God, or the Sun Worshipers, which—Steve could kind of see one of the girls near the entrance, probably on purpose for advertising, and she wasn’t wearing much of anything on her top half, just what looked like a little cover-up made out of the same material as pantyhose. Which didn’t really cover anything.

Past that was the Parachute Jump. “You want to do that one?” asked Bucky.

“Either way.”

“Let’s do it.”

Steve wasn’t sure where Bucky had the extra money for the Fair from, but—Bucky hadn’t looked happy a lot lately. And today seemed like it was a good day, his face smoothing out, smiling up into the sun. So he said, “Sure,” and followed.

The line was annoyingly long, and they bickered a little over whether Steve was too punk to even go on these things, and whether Bucky was a jerk for suggesting it, and what they should go see after, and whether they should get food next. They got up to the ride, eventually, and Steve had to take a deep breath as they got strapped in to it.
Nobody was saying war too loud yet but he couldn’t help but think about it, whether Bucky was going to end up in one of these things for real, whether he was.

The lift to the top was excruciating, and when it finally went out from under him and the whole thing plunged down, he couldn’t help the sharp gasp. He didn’t look at Bucky, strapped in next to him, just at the buildings all around, the splashes of color and the rows of trees and—they stopped with a jerk, and he felt wrung-out, limp.

They got free and on the way out, Bucky said, “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Nah,” said Steve, “guess not.”

“Probably a good thing we did it before lunch.”

“You throw up once,” said Steve.

“But what a once!” Bucky was grinning. “Come on. Penguins or dancers?”

So they went to see the dancers jitterbugging, and Bucky’s toe tapped along, humming a little, smiling. And they went to see the penguins (Steve liked the penguins better than the exhibit, although Bucky insisted on reading everything before he’d let them leave the island).

They turned in to see an exhibit labeled “FROZEN ALIVE” in huge block letters, white on dark blue, with “DEATH-DEFYING FEAT” under it in smaller letters.

“Well, hell,” said Bucky, “I want to see a death-defying feat.”

“Fine,” said Steve, “but I bet there aren’t any penguins.”

There weren’t. There was a girl, who was going to be encased in a block of ice. It took Steve a minute to catch on to what was happening, but she was standing next to what looked like a coffin made of ice, thick but still clear enough he figured you could mostly see through it. She wasn’t wearing much, just some heels and a shining white swimsuit, and a big smile. Her hair was brass-blonde and piled up on her head in big curls. The announcer was talking a mile a minute, explaining that she’d be in the ice for as long as they could possibly leave her in, risking death with every passing moment.

“Doesn’t sound like a good time,” he mumbled to Bucky, who nudged his shoulder and shushed him. Somebody next to him in the crowd jostled him a little.

When it was time for her to go in, they pulled back one of the slabs on top, and she shimmied out of her swimsuit (which left Bucky’s eyebrows raised and a little grin on his mouth) and stepped out of her heels into the coffin.

She laid down, full-length, and they slid the slab back into place over top of her. Steve could make out the curls of her hair through the ice. Over the back of the stage there was more writing, Frozen Alive Girl! Coast to Coast! Exotic!

She stayed in there for a long time, long enough that Steve was starting to worry, imagining her pale skin turning red and then blue with it—trying to picture what it would be like to be that cold, for so long, just staring at the ice just a couple of inches in front of her eyes.

When they finally let her out, she swung her legs out, and threw her arms wide to cheers from the crowd. Her skin was red everywhere it had been touching or close to the ice, but she looked fine.
“I’ll be damned,” said Bucky, as they started to walk away. “I thought for sure it would be some kind of trick, but I don’t think it could be.”

“I know,” said Steve. “They couldn’t have put anybody else in there or anything, I could see her the whole time.”

Bucky shook his head. “Hell of a way to get paid.”

They wandered out into the other zones. When they made it to the Community Interests zone, Steve loved the art teaching exhibit. “Of course you do,” sighed Bucky, rolling his eyes, as Steve stared at the students all drawing. “And of course a girl topless here is different than a girl topless somewhere else.”

Steve pulled out their guide to the Fair and a pencil from his pocket and in a few quick lines dashed off a figure drawing of her. “Wow,” said Bucky, peering over his shoulder at it. “You’re barely even looking at her.”

“You get used to working fast if you want to draw people,” said Steve, trying not to preen. “They’re always moving even if you ask them to hold still.” He shot Bucky an accusatory glance, and Bucky laughed.

They both loved Futurama. Bucky liked the seats speeding sideways, and Steve liked how crisp and well-organized everything looked. The city spreading away underneath them, lines stretching out, making the city look clean and happy.

“What do you think you’re going to be doing by the time they make cities like that?” he asked after they walked out.

Bucky frowned over at him. “Retired, maybe.”

Steve shrugged, dodging a pair of giggling girls. “You know what I mean. You going to work there forever?”

“I’ll work there as long as it makes sense to work there. How long you going to work at the drugstore?”

“Long as it takes for the Louvre to recognize my talents.”

“You’re going to be waiting a long time.”

“Speaking of the Louvre, you want to go see the art exhibit?”

“The paintings? Sure.”

Steve loved wandering around looking at the Old Masters. The museums in the city were great, but this was something else again, piece after piece he’d only seen in books from the library.

They did make it to see the Perisphere and the Trilon, tilting their heads back to stare up at the huge slender needle and the giant white sphere from the moving walkway. Democracity was neat. It felt like everywhere they looked, there were echoes of the coming war. Just a matter of time.

At the very end of the night there was an Aquatic Cavalcade that Bucky insisted they had to see, and the performers were all done up in red, white, and blue. It was a hell of a spectacle, huge and bright and beautiful, and Steve thought, Wonder what next year is going to look like.
They went to see *Wizard of Oz* as soon as it came out, braving the crowds. The moment when everything went Technicolor was amazing, just amazing. Bucky stared at it, heart in his throat.

When the Tin Man started talking, though, his blood went cold.

Afterwards, it was like Steve hadn’t noticed anything. Steve kept going on about how great the colors were. Bucky smiled and nodded, throat tight, and he looked down at the plate of French fries they were splitting.

“You okay?” asked Steve, finally, not quite looking at him.


“Like what?” Steve nudged Bucky’s elbow with his own. “You getting serious with Annie?”

“No. Nah, I’m, I’m actually thinking we might be winding down.”

Winding down.

He’d been finding reasons not to see her for three weeks. He figured she’d take the hint, sooner or later.

“Oh. That’s a shame.”

“Yeah.”

“She’s a nice girl.”

“There are lots of nice girls out there, Stevie.” He stared at the fry in his hand. “ Doesn’t mean every one of them has to be right for me.”

“Yeah,” said Steve, but he looked a little confused.

“Anyway. The movie was great.”

Steve’s face lit up with a smile. He leaned forward, jabbing a fry at Bucky. “Damn right! They had fun with it, too. Flying monkeys, melting witches, and did you see how bright the ruby slippers were?”

“I remember them silver in the book,” said Bucky.

“They were. But you think they were going to go silver for Technicolor? Not a chance.”

Bucky let him keep talking. Let him keep waving the fries around. Just watched him talk, smiled at the right times, tried not to think about the lisp and lilt of the Tin Man’s voice or the way the Cowardly Lion had said *I’m just a... dandy lion*, the knowing smile on the face of the woman on his right when she’d elbowed her friend partway through.

Hitler invaded Poland.

Annie broke up with Bucky.

Steve said, “Ah, jeez. I’m sorry.”

They went out to a bar, and Bucky bought them each a beer. “I ought to be buying for you,” said Steve, “considering the circumstances.”
“Just don’t get in a fight and we’ll call it even.”

Steve managed not to, for once. It was a good night.

They went to see Gone With the Wind when it came out, and Steve kept jittering, excited to see the book up on the screen.

“I hear it’s good,” he said.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Yeah, you’ve only said that about ten times. You know saying it more won’t make it more true, right?”

Steve rocked up onto his toes in the line, hands jammed in his pockets. “It was a pretty good book.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“You should read it sometime! It’s not bad.”

Bucky was watching the little clouds of steam from Steve’s mouth. It was a cold night, too cold, and getting Steve home later was going to mean watching that stubborn son of a bitch shiver through all the streets between the theater and home. His jacket wouldn’t keep a dog warm, and a dog had a built-in fur coat.

When they finally got into the theater, Steve had to blow his runny nose, and Bucky sprang for a bucket of popcorn to share while Steve saved his seat.

By the time he made it back in, the newsreel was just starting. Steve waved him down, and he watched as the announcer gravely told them about troop movements as the Germans angled for Scandinavia. The papers were up to date more, but the newsreels made it seem more real.

The movie was long, damn long, but good. The Civil War seemed remote enough that Bucky could watch it without thinking too much—

“You're afraid of what may happen if the war comes, aren't you? But we don't have to be afraid for us. No war can come into our world, Ashley. Whatever comes, I’ll love you, just as I do now, until I die.”

Steve was watching intently, the whole time, like he was trying to memorize the movie. Bucky held out the popcorn for him and he reached in without looking, fingers swiping through the puffy little kernels.

On screen, Ashley was failing to be romanced by Scarlett’s best advances. Bucky and Steve sat together, watching the blond Southern gentleman try and fail to make himself clear, push her away for real, Rhett smiling like a demon. Bucky ate the rest of the popcorn without remembering to share.

On the way out Steve said, “See, Buck, wasn’t that worth seeing?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Bucky. But he cut Steve a half-smile, and out of the corner of his eye he could see how pleased Steve looked with it.

When he was turning twenty-three, Bucky’s skin had cleared up completely, and he was a better dancer than ever—strong enough that he could dance for hours, almost non-stop. Girls liked that; he
tried not to get their hopes up, so he didn’t dance with the same girl too much. He loved the heat of
the dance floor, the way his heart would pound, their hands in his and the quick bright noise of their
feet in the floor, tapping in time.

Steve said, “Bucky, when you going to settle down? You keep taking out pretty girls, they’re going
to start thinking you’re only after one thing.”

“Hey, maybe I am,” said Bucky, and Steve laughed.

“Yeah, right,” he said, sizing up Bucky fondly. “You think you’re fooling anybody with that big
talk? I know high schoolers these days who’ve gotten further than you have.”

“So long as none of them got anywhere with you,” said Bucky, “I won’t have to perish from the
shame.”

Later, after they’d decided Steve would stay for dinner, Bucky said, from the stove, “Besides, I don’t
know—I don’t want to get hitched if I’m just—if I’m going to have to leave.”

Steve didn’t have to ask. That made sense, didn’t it? It had been six, seven months since Hitler tore
into Poland like he owned the place. Everyone could feel the air shifting. And for everyone who said
we should mind our own damn business, somebody else was pointing out that guys like Hitler didn’t
know the meaning of the word enough.

“He’s somebody you can’t trust to back down,” said Bucky. “No matter what. I got a feeling he’s
not going to stop until somebody stops him.”

“Yeah,” said Steve. “I think you’re right.” He glanced down, setting the second plate on the table.
“Wish it could be me.”

“You’re nuts,” said Bucky flatly. “Nobody wants to go over there. It’s going to be a mess. And
you’d get beaten to a fucking pulp.”

Steve dropped the spoon with a clatter. “At least I’d try. If somebody’d give me a chance.”

Bucky’s shoulders tensed up harder, and when he turned around with the saucepan, his mouth was a
hard, thin line.

“Right, Rogers,” he said. “The problem is all the assholes who won’t let you kill yourself. I get it.”

They ate in frosty silence until Bucky visibly relented and said, “You want to see the Friday game?”

“Yeah.” Steve dunked the bread into the soup. “That sounds good.”

They didn’t talk about it again for a while.

Steve shook out the paper about a week after Bucky’s birthday. The front-page headline was a boxer
who’d been caught and confessed to a murder, a brutal beating of a German consulate attaché.

As he browsed the story with about half-interest, he caught the words improper advances and
stopped suddenly. His eyes skimmed back up to catch the context.

It was after improper advances were made that he struck him ‘in a fury,’ said Haas

“keep my wife out of this” the confessed murderer had said
They’d gone back to the attaché’s house—why? It wasn’t clear—and they had retired to the bedroom and then [Police reported Dr. Engelberg then made improper advances]

He struck the doctor in the face with his fist. After that, he became angry and picked up something (doesn’t know what it was) and struck the doctor again.

His heart was pounding. He could feel the slight thrill of it in his chest, vibrating with the sudden demand.

found lying in a relaxed position, with hands unclenched, as if he had been struck down in his sleep

A number of points in the prisoner’s story, police said, called for at least further clarification

Struck down in his sleep. Improper advances. Retired to the bedroom.

Steve’s hands were shaking as he set the paper down. Would—it was in the paper, it started on the front page. Of course everyone was going to read it. No point in trying to shield anybody from it.

Of course if they could prove there’d been improper advances—Haas would have an easier time of it, wouldn’t he? Because everybody would figure, the jury would figure, the guy had deserved it somehow.

Haas—Kehler, his real name was—the boxer, went on trial near the end of February. They covered it in the papers again. Men, and men alone, fit into the crime which was uncovered on Dec. 6. And then, in that tone, that unbearable tone, At first it was thought there might be international espionage entanglements but soon there were revealed only the sordid details of a 42-year-old bachelor’s private life.

bloody fingerprints, a large bathrobe and size 11 bedroom slippers bedroom slippers, Christ, hit in the head while he slept

And the next day there was a story about selecting jury talesmen. Possibles being excluded for admitting they didn’t like Hitler—that was something, wasn’t it—and We must know, too, if the jurors have any prejudice because Engelberg was afflicted with a sexual perversion.

Turkus again asked: “Would you be influenced if he were a Nazi and a homo-sexual?” Sheridan said he would not.

Bucky went out with some guys from work. He didn’t invite Steve. They wouldn’t have liked him, he wouldn’t have liked them. (Bucky didn’t like them, much, but they were all right.)

They went to a bar, a grimy nasty little place, and Bucky paced himself so he was never quite as drunk as they were.
They told jokes, practically screaming them. “See, a fag gets home,” said Claude, “and he finds a man in bed with his wife. He’s telling his friend about it later and his friend says, ‘So what did you do? Did you let her have it?’ and he says, ‘You bet I did! I really slammed that door on my way out!’”

Bucky smiled over the rim of his bottle while the other guys hooted with laughter.

In mid-March, after two weeks of running into reminders in the papers when he least expected it, hearing murmurs about it at the shop, Haas was convicted. Steve’s hands shook, just barely, as he read Judge Brancato told the jurors... “This was a clever, shrewd murder.”

Twenty years for manslaughter. Well, it was something.

That was the spring Bucky started acting like a freak, if Steve had to nail it down later. He was over at Steve’s almost every day after work. Jumpy at everything, worrying about Steve all the time—worse than usual. He was always looking like he was waiting to find a firecracker under his pillow. It went on all spring, and into the summer.

“Jesus, Buck,” said Steve one evening when a car backfiring had him jerking bolt upright in the chair by the window, where he’d been just sitting and listening to the radio with a sock he was darning (one of Steve’s, though Steve hadn’t been about to point it out to him).

Bucky shook his head and ran his hand over his face. “Christ, I don’t know. I’m just—things got me on edge.”

The radio murmured at them softly about Hitler’s terrifying progress. The Battle of Britain.

“You think about what it must be like, to be over there?” asked Bucky, softly. The darning egg and the sock sat forgotten in his lap. He was staring out into nothing. “Getting bombed. All the damn time.”

Steve said, “Hm.”

“I can’t imagine,” said Bucky. He shut his eyes and leaned back. “I’ve tried. Can’t. It’s hard enough to get a life started over here with none of that.”

“What life are you starting?” asked Steve, absently, working on a sketch he was supposed to have done for the woman who was buying it two days ago. “Haven’t seen you settling down.”

Bucky looked down at the darning egg in his lap and snorted out a laugh. “Looks like you’re the lucky prizewinner,” he said.

Steve laughed, obligingly, and dropped his eyes to his sketchbook. And after a minute, Bucky picked the sock back up and started working on it again.

They didn’t make it back to the World’s Fair that year, which was probably for the best. Money was tighter than usual for Steve while he tried to put more time in on his art. The museum where he’d been taking some classes had been dangling out the hope of maybe getting to teach a class of his own, and he was ramping up for it. Bucky came over the weekend after Steve’s birthday and found
that he’d actually set up a real little oil painting station in his living room—he’d clearly built the easel himself from scrap, Steve always was bad with a hammer, but there were smears of paint on the canvas.

“Hey,” he said, “what’s that?”

Steve glanced over. “More like what it’s going to be. Right now I’m just doing the underpainting.”

“Oh.” Bucky watched Steve pulling the pot of oatmeal off the stove, rooting around in the cupboard for the condensed milk. “You see the news about the bombing?”

“At the Fair? Yeah. Hell of a day to do it.” It had been the Fourth, Steve’s birthday. Steve had seen Bucky, just for a couple minutes when Bucky was on his way home from work. He’d come by and dropped off Steve’s presents—a new shirt from him and a pair of knit socks from his mom—and then he’d had to leave again.

“They know who did it yet?”

“Don’t think so.”

Later, Steve’s memories of that fall would be gilded with brilliant sunlight, a little harsh, a little chill, but still pouring over the world like molten gold. It was special because it was the last fall, even though he didn’t know it then. He thought Bucky might have known. Suspected, at least.

The induction center was cold. It got to Bucky, gave him goosebumps on top of goosebumps. The waiting room was full of men, lacking chairs for everybody, and the line rolled along so slowly he wasn’t sure there was one.

When it was finally his turn, of course he had to take his clothes off for the physical. The doctor wasn’t bothering with smiles; he just waved at the drawers and said “Off with ‘em, kid.”

So Bucky stripped out and stood naked, and the doctor left him like that while he listened to his chest, his back, his gut.

The doctor straightened up, pulling the stethoscope out of his ears and draping it around his neck. “So, you like girls?” he asked, like he didn’t care what the answer was.

“Like ‘em just fine,” said Bucky, and the words left his mouth naturally.

“Put your clothes on and go through that door, to the left. Fingerprinting.”

Fingerprinting was messy, and still cold. The black ink was thick and sticky and felt like he’d dipped his fingers into tar. The card with his prints, set aside to dry, caught his eye for a minute. But then it was on to scrubbing his hands off as best he could, and armed with a serial number, 32557038, and then he had to swear an oath, for God’s sake.

"That I will bear true faith and allegiance to the United States of America; that I will serve them honestly and faithfully against all enemies whomsoever; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to the rules and articles of war."
He mumbled his way through it, and then got the hell out of that room. In the men’s room he splashed cold water on his face, took a deep breath. The other guys trying not to freak out, either, didn’t say anything.

When Bucky said “I’m going into the service,” it took Steve a long time to figure out what he meant. Bucky was fiddling with his hat, turning it over and over, and Steve said, “Wha—what? The service?”

“Army. I’m leaving next week.”

Steve stood there, hands still full of laundry.

“Oh,” he said.

Bucky’s mouth was wobbling—he was chewing on his lip. He said, “I’m sorry. I know—I know you wanted to go.”

“I did,” said Steve. “I do.”

“It just—it was time.”

“Do you know where you’re going?”

“Heading to Georgia soon. With the 107th.”

“107th?” Steve slowly lowered his handful of shirts into the wash water. “Oh.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” said Bucky, in a rush, “it just—it worked out that way.”

“Okay. No. It’s okay, Buck. I’m—I’m proud of you.”

“I didn’t want to go without you.”

“I know. But it’s better this way. If I—don’t get over there, you should get started. You’ll get promoted.”

Bucky leaned against the edge of the tub. “I need to know—tell me you’ll write.”

“I’ll write. All the time. You’ll get sick of it.”

“And send me cookies.”

“You want my cookies? They’re crap.”

“I want your cookies.”

“How am I going to know, uh, where to write? What about when they move you?”

“They forward it. It doesn’t always work I guess, but I’ll keep sending you my address. Don’t—don’t move, okay? If you move send me the new address first.”

“Yeah, no, I’m not going to move. Not unless they let me in.”
Getting the letter was bad. *Greetings.* But Steve thinking he’d volunteered—letting Steve think that—it was worse, but it was better.

Steve didn’t tell anyone when he tried the first induction center. There was no one left to tell. The doctor frowned at him, and before they even got started on the interview, he said, “Son, let me listen to your lungs.”

Steve took deep breaths as directed, tried not to let them rattle. Useless. The doctor moved the cold disc from one side of his back to the other, then again, and again, and around to his chest, up under his collarbone.

The doctor pulled back, shaking his head. “I’m going to go ahead and end this. Your lungs are in a sorry state, son. I’m sorry, but you’re not going anywhere but right back home.”

The train down to Camp Stewart was so boring Bucky had to consider the possibility that he might actually die of it. He had a scrap of letter to Steve half-started, and another to Mom and Becca and Angelica and Bets, but the motion made it hard to write, made a little bit of nausea creep around behind his eyes. He didn’t get carsick, hadn’t since they bought the car when he was fifteen, but the train was cramped, close and sweaty, and it was different.

“Where you from?” asked the guy next to him, short and young, too young. Bucky was only twenty-three but this kid couldn’t be more than eighteen, and four years felt like it might as well be a million.

“Brooklyn,” he said.

“Wow, really?”

“Yeah. Born and raised.”

“That’s pretty neat. I’m from Jersey. Not any big city. Little place, Masonville.”

“Yeah?” said Bucky, not sure they really needed to be having a conversation. The short kid had been napping earlier and had woken up, eyes blinking into the twilight of the train. It was getting too dark to be writing anyway.

“Yeah, it’s not bad. My name’s Roy.”

“Bucky.”

“How’d your family take it?”

“Not bad,” he said. There’d been wailing and gnashing of teeth, but in the end they’d been all right. He hadn’t been able to lie to them about being drafted, not looking into his mother’s eyes.

Roy leaned back and sighed. “My mom had a cow. I’m her only boy, she kept saying ‘Well, when are you going to get married? I’m not getting any younger, I want grandchildren before I die, carry on the family name,’ all that jazz.”

“Jeez,” said Bucky, trying to sound sympathetic.
“My dad’s dead, though. So she worries more.”

“My dad keeps a shop,” said Bucky, and then wished he could take it back immediately. Roy perked up at this piece of information.

“Yeah? That must be pretty neat. I always thought it would be fun to go into a shop after close and just play around.”

Bucky half-snorted, half-laughed. “I don’t think Dad would have been very happy if I’d done that.”

“Yeah, well, just an idea. You got any idea what you want to do in the service?”

Bucky shook his head slowly. “I don’t know. I don’t even know what I’d be good at.”

“I’m hoping for something where I get to stay far away from any action. I think I’d be a good supply clerk, something like that.”

“Aiming high?”

“Not a chance!” Roy laughed. “I want to do my time and come home safe, you know?”

“Yeah,” said Bucky. “Me, too.”

“At least it’s not the Navy. I know, I know, people say that Navy is easier, but you know how long they go without even seeing any girls on those ships?” Roy shook his head.

“Look, I think I’m going to try to get some shut-eye,” said Bucky. Roy nodded and, for once in his goddamned life, shut the hell up.

Setting up in the barracks was easy enough. He just chucked his stuff onto a bed halfway down the room in the middle and called it good.

The shouting from the drill sergeant started right off the bat, which was fine. What use was having a dad if you didn’t get used to shouting?

Steve went to the movies a couple of weeks after Bucky left. It was weird, going by himself. The last couple of years it seemed like they always worked it out so they’d get one night every week or two where they had the time and the money to go and watch something, maybe something new and fancy, or a solid old double-feature.

He wasn’t even sure what he ended up picking, sitting there in the quiet theater with his empty hands sitting loosely in his lap. Nothing about war. The newsreel came on.

“In Washington State,” the announcer droned, urgently, “the massive Tacoma Narrows Bridge has suffered from catastrophic failure. Like a nightmare, high above the river, the bridge twists and turns in a way you would not believe unless you could see it for yourself, as you do now.”

Steve stared. The bridge was pulling like taffy, twisting almost completely around. It writhed like a living thing, like a snake, yanking at the cables pinning it until those tore, and then it started to fall apart from the center out, huge chunks of the bridge dropping into the river beneath it.

When it finally stopped, there were hunks of metal jutting out from the remnants of the bridge on
either side. They looked sharp, broken like that, torqued to breaking.

He pressed the flat of his palm into his leg, slowly, increasing the pressure until it distracted him from how it felt to watch the bridge collapse. He knew something about falling apart. Leaving a few pillars standing, cables dangling in the wind.

*Hey, you pill. Are you still in basic training? Thanks for the postcards, looks like it’s not too bad down there. This winter’s a hell of a thing, snow everywhere, but not as bad as that big one a couple years back. Drew you a Christmas tree in case those losers forget you need one, you big sap.*

Bucky set down the letter, stared off into space for a minute. It had come a couple weeks to Christmas, with a book—that was great, even if Steve’s idea of good reading was a *history book* about Abe Lincoln. What, did he need to be *inspired*?

The Christmas tree he’d drawn in had the angel topper Bucky’s family always used, and some ornaments he could recognize, too. There was a present drawn in under it with a little arrow and a note that read “will send it soon.”

“You heading down to the store?” asked Clarence, sticking his head around the corner of the door.

“Maybe,” said Bucky. “Why, you guys going down?”

“Okay, I’ll come with. Hang on.” He jammed his feet into his shoes, dropping the book he’d been working on, and joined Clarence and Frank and Eugene, who was trying very hard not to acquire the nickname “Yoooo-Gene” for how he said it.

The store was small, chilly like *everything* was chilly but with a stifling quality to it from being closed up overnight. Bucky leaned against a counter and browsed the postcards, thumbing through them—he’d already sent Steve two, but hell, maybe another one. Maybe another one for his mom, too.

“Jesus,” said Frank under his breath, next to him.

Bucky glanced up. What—oh. There was a fairy with what looked like a working girl, next to him, just looking at the candy like he didn’t have a care in the world. He wasn’t bad-looking, really skinny, bad skin, maybe a couple inches shorter than Bucky, and he didn’t look like he was trying to get some trade, either. He was talking to the girl, who wasn’t wearing any makeup—who would, middle of the afternoon, with the weather like this—and they weren’t even paying attention to the soldiers.

“Huh,” agreed Bucky.

He figured they’d leave it alone, but Frank was tense, and Eugene was catching it, glancing up at both of them and then to the fairy and the girl and then back. Clarence was over looking longingly at soap and hair cream and paying no goddamn attention. Jesus, like he was going to need hair cream in the Army.

“Think I’m going to get a postcard,” said Bucky, with some unnecessary emphasis, making Frank look back at over him. “Maybe a couple. What do you think my mom would like?”
That kept Frank from starting any shit for a couple of minutes, Bucky criticizing the postcards (“why’s it so purple? there isn’t any purple around here”) and playing dumb (“how often do you think I should write her? how often are you writing your mom?”), and by the time Frank remembered, the kid had paid for some candy and left with the girl, and the tension that had been worse than the weather was gone.

Some of the guys—okay, most of the guys—would get into trouble in town if anybody gave them half a chance. So mostly the COs didn’t give them a chance, but sometimes they took one anyway. And Bucky was nothing if not bold, so he went along one night.

The guys he was with were headed to pick up working girls. Bucky said, “You know, I really just want a drink,” and they let him ditch the party to head into a bar. He figured one beer and then back to base, but he ended up getting sidetracked.

The kid from the store was there. He was leaning across the bar, talking quietly to the bartender. Local queer, local bar, figures they’d worked something out so he could come in and spend whatever money he had. Maybe he was hustling.

Bucky’s hand went to the letter in his jacket pocket, and he fiddled with the edges for a second before pulling it out again. It was getting close to his birthday and Steve hadn’t said anything about a birthday present before Christmas. A Christmas present would still be better than nothing. Maybe some cookies. He’d sent a batch of them right away so they almost beat Bucky down to the base, long gone, shared with guys who razzed him about his mom sending her grown kid cookies. So what if they were dry and kind of chalky, they were good. And he’d gotten a letter from her, too, right about the same time, so what the hell, he let them think his mom sent them. Didn’t want them thinking anything weird about Steve. Or about Steve at all.

He drank slowly, not wanting to waste the beer, staring at the sketch of the tree. If he looked close enough he could see each of the little lines that made the whole thing. Better look while it was still fresh. The sides would get rubbed together and eventually the details, in soft pencil, would wear away.

Somebody sitting down across from him got his attention. Working girl. He twigged to her instantly—not hard, wearing that makeup. It was the girl from the store, too. She was a little stocky, short, but not bad with the full face on.

“Hey, mister,” she said, “that letter’s got you looking sad. You want to buy a girl a drink?”

He managed a little smile for her and shook his head. “Sorry.”

She shrugged. “Well, thanks anyway. Have a good night.” She got up to go, but then she paused, turned back, said in a much lower voice, “If you’re in the mood for something a little different, you can see Georgie.” She jerked her head at the queer, who was sitting at the darker end of the bar, nursing a beer.

He blinked at her, and she shrugged. “Just if you’re looking for it.”

“Yeah,” he said, “nah, but thanks.”

After that, he drank the rest of his beer faster; no one else tried to talk to him, and he got up at the end and left, and collected the guys from the shacks where they’d gone with the girls.
Training was dumb as hell. They didn’t even have real equipment half the time, so they had to practice like they were shooting guns without actually shooting, hauling flour sacks around for targets, and they spent as much time building the damn camp as they did drilling. Drills weren’t too bad. Bucky could let his mind fade out, just focus on getting his mind blank and his body loose, ready to snap into the next command. Some of the guys were always overthinking it, getting into patterns, but the drill sergeant was never going to let a pattern go for very long, unless it was specifically to screw with them. Left FACE, left FACE, right FACE, right FACE, about FACE, about FACE, right FACE, left FACE, I SAID LEFT FACE SOLDIER, CAN YOU HEAR ME, ARE YOU A DUMB FUCK, SOLDIER? I CAN’T HEAR YOU got pretty fucking old, but as long as nobody was fucking it up too bad, it wasn’t the worst way to pass time. And the hikes, Jesus, who wanted to spend that much of their life walking? And walking that fast? Still better than the calisthenics, but nowhere near as much fun as the hand-to-hand combat practice, amateur as it was. Classes in the afternoon, learning the guns and the vehicles and a little bit about a lot of things there was no way he was going to remember.

Nights were better. Some nights he was tired enough to just drop right into his bunk and pass out. Sometimes he could read a little before lights-out. He was done with Abraham Lincoln and had traded him for a shitty crime novel. He’d joked to Clarence that anything titled The Red Box should have more sex in it. Clarence had guffawed like the weird huge giraffe he was.

He got a package from Steve right before his birthday, and when he opened it he had to grin, and Ed said, “Hey, what’s that? What have you got there?”

It was cookies, layered on top of a sheet of wax paper, which Steve never did, which meant under it—holy shit, three nudie pics. These were going to be gold.

“That is not from your mother,” said Ed.

“Nah, friend of mine sent ‘em,” he mumbled around a mouthful of cookie.

“Damn good friend,” Clarence said, leaning over to see.

He picked up the top one. There was a note laid over it that said, Figured you might get bored. You can thank me later.

“His mom wanted him to be a priest,” said Bucky.

Ed raised his eyebrows, looking awed.

“Yeah, I know,” said Bucky, and ate a cookie, and showed the guys the pics, but not the letter.

Hey, hope the pictures I sent make it through. Figured you’d want something new. Or you can at least trade them for something. Don’t know how hard these are to come by. Don’t say it.

Happy birthday. Christmas present is still coming.

Steve was a damn menace.

On his birthday, he said nothing to anyone, because the drill sergeant had been a complete dick to the two guys who’d had birthdays since they showed up. No extra pushups for him, please and thanks.

He did have the chance to get away to Hinesville for a beer, not just down to the store but all the way into town, which was great. None of the guys wanted to come with, because they’d pulled some
dumb shit the last time and the bartender threatened to clock them if they came back. Bucky felt a little uneasy being singled out in any way—even if it was because he wasn’t getting threats from a bear of a man who couldn’t get five steps out from behind the bar before he started gasping for air—but it was okay.

The girl wasn’t there. Neither was Georgie. He nursed his beer again and, even though he was feeling broke as hell, got himself a slice of pie.

His Christmas present showed up. Well, two of them, one from his family and one from Steve.

The present from his family was a whole bunch of candy bars, just a box full of them, with a couple of smallish books jammed in there. Goldmine.

The present from Steve came two days later (but still before Christmas), a smaller box and a little beat up. Bucky almost pretended he was going to wait until Christmas to open it, but he gave in immediately and opened it to find that Steve, that clever punk, somehow managed to send him several pairs of socks and underwear, and a book on engineering that looked like a real snoozer, and in a hollowed-out Bible, there was a flask full of whisky. Good whisky. Bucky would have asked how, but he would have been afraid of what the answer would be. Christ, if they started searching the packages better it was going to be a crying shame.

The letter was a little—more personal, this time. And longer. Steve wrote It’s cold as hell, I hope Georgia is less godawful. It’s so cold I’ve got every blanket in the place piled up and I’m still cold. You’d be so mad at me if you were here, but I haven’t gotten sick yet.

Seems like everybody and their uncle from the neighborhood is getting drafted now. No luck for me yet. (That dumb punk must have tried to sign up.) Of all things, there’s a shortage of Christmas trees, so hang on to that one I sent you. Stark keeps showing up in the news with new inventions that are supposed to make it easier to economize, but what do rich people need with economy, anyway? And they’re the only ones who are going to be able to afford his stuff.

Don’t think I’m getting sentimental here, but you know this is the first time we won’t see each other on Christmas since 1928? Your family invited me over, though. Don’t worry, I’m going. I can just see you thinking I’m going to sit in my place alone and starve to death while freezing like I’m Tiny Tim. It’s not that bad, not by a long shot. I’m still teaching art lessons, and the Museum says they’re going to hire me for the new program, which would be great, and in the meantime I still help out whenever they need a hand for a couple of days. The more guys sign up, the more jobs there are left for the little guys like me.

Are you doing stupid stuff yet? Seen any good movies?

Steve always signed things Sincerely, Steve Rogers, which was kind of hilarious, as if Steve couldn’t be insincere as hell when he wanted to be.

So Bucky skipped the postcard and wrote a real letter, over three nights before lights-out, and mailed it.

Christmas dinner at the Barnes’ meant ham with a mustard and brown sugar crust, cloves pushed in, and also Harold’s eyes on Steve whenever he thought Steve wasn’t looking, a narrow, calculating stare. The big story in the paper the day before had been a feared German attack on the British on
Christmas Day, but they’d had the radio on almost all day and there hadn’t been a word about it, so that was one bullet dodged. If the Germans attacked Britain with ground troops—that didn’t bear thinking about, but kids like Bucky would end up getting into the mix, he was sure.

But Harold wasn’t going to want to hear that. Steve kept his mouth shut as much as he could. He tried to just ask the girls about how things were going, but then he noticed Harold’s sharp eyes darting back and forth between Steve and Alice and he had the sudden, horrifying thought that he was old enough that Harold might think he and Alice—good Lord, like he’d be able to support a fam—no. After that he just gave up on talking altogether.

After dinner, Harold asked if he wanted to stay and have a cigar. Steve pled out by saying he needed to get some work done on a new commission and escaped into the chill. He could hear the girls singing in the kitchen as the door shut behind him.

Steve had the postcards tucked in a neat pile on the kitchen counter, but the letter was nicer. Better. Definitely longer, at any rate. It came after Christmas, before New Year’s, when the city had that Twelve Days feel still hovering over it.

_Boot camp is for suckers. You should not be trying to come here, you would die of boredom before the work killed you._

_Thanks for the packages, they are just what the doctor ordered. Nobody around here can cook for shit. We eat like dogs. Actually, dog food might be better._

_And thanks for the tree. It gets pretty bare around here. We have been put to work building things but I think this might actually be a real swamp. There are forests around but they are not good for much._

_Send some drawings of the neighborhood. Or pretty girls. Or both. And if you can find any gum, that would be good. There is a store we can walk to but they only have one kind and it is like chewing on a blown-up tire. What kind of store has one kind of gum? It cannot be good for business. They must know we got nowhere else._

_Regards,_

_Private Barnes_

_P.S. Shut up, I can hear the jokes from here. Yes, I am a Private. For now. Hoping to get bumped to Private First Class soon just so I can hear some new jokes._

Steve propped his chin up on his hand, reading it over dinner that night, which was potatoes (again). He drank some milk from the bottle—cream skimmed that morning, put in the potatoes—and looked out the window.

Might as well do the view from here. He grabbed some paper and a pencil, and started doing the buildings on the other side of the street. Pretty girls would be easy enough.

“Ladies,” sang out the drill sergeant, “get your lily-white powdered asses _out here in three._”

“Laaaaaadies,” mimicked Moose—his real name was Walter, but he was built like one—in a falsetto. “Christ, I wish he’d give it a rest.”
“Why, darlin’?” asked Homer in his thick drawl. “You don’t like his tender gentle manner with us?”

Moose snorted as he jammed his feet into his boots. “I don’t like anything about that cocksucking asshole.”

Bucky said, looping the bootlaces around his hand, “Let’s get a move on. He said three, you know he’s going to be an asshole about it if we’re not out in two.”

There was a time it all lined up. He went to the bar. None of the guys were there, but Georgie was, and he made a point of catching his eye when the bartender’s back was turned and tipping his head toward the door a little.

Georgie nodded, barely, and finished his drink and headed out. A minute later Bucky finished his and headed out, too.

Georgie waited at the end of the street, outside of the light. They didn’t walk all the way back to the shacks. This was a town but it was a hick town, and they didn’t have to go far to find woods.

Georgie charged for his time, and he made sure Bucky knew it. When Bucky nodded, tightly, Georgie smiled and instead of kissing him, he just palmed Bucky through his pants. When Bucky throttled off the gasp, Georgie grinned like Bucky’d done something good. He got down on his knees easily, and he blew Bucky like that, back up against a tree, getting bark in his hair, which would be easy enough to explain away. Everybody was looking pretty filthy by then.

Bucky had to breathe through his mouth to stay quiet. His fingers ended up fumbling in Georgie’s hair, and Georgie didn’t seem to mind. It was quick and hard. When he came, he did gasp, knees going weak but catching himself.

Georgie stood back up, wiping his mouth—he didn’t even flinch, just swallowed—Bucky handed over the cash, and George smiled at him fondly, walked him back to the road.

“He have a good night,” Georgie said, and Bucky managed to nod and say, “You, too.”

He was smart enough to know that he could get away with it once in a while but not often, so he didn’t do it often. Just enough. A couple of times. Georgie never kissed him, and always swallowed, and Bucky wondered if any of the other guys—honestly, which of the other guys, visited Georgie like he did, and if Georgie swallowed for them. He was such a kid, couldn’t be more than seventeen, eighteen. Probably not old enough for the draft yet. They’d been talking about bumping it down but right then it was still twenty-one.

He tried to picture Georgie in uniform and couldn’t come up with anything. Those narrow shoulders didn’t belong in olive drab.

Teaching was nice. Steve liked a lot of things about it—the paycheck wasn’t big but it was enough that he could tell Mr. Brennan to hire on somebody else, and Steve would work part-time and pick up the odd shifts here and there, which Mr. Brennan reluctantly decided to put up with because Steve had come to know the store well enough that firing him wasn’t sensible—and he liked that for a couple hours a week he was surrounded by people learning, the quiet, friendly atmosphere of the room where the classes were held. It was a little small for the class and tended to get too warm, but
the walls were butter-yellow and there was a big set of windows in one wall. They’d thought about putting him in the basement but he’d argued the class needed the light.

He had one student in an intermediate level class who was pretty good with still life, and one day he was commenting on the way she’d done the planes of her current underpainting when he noticed that she wasn’t looking at the canvas while he talked. She was looking at him. There was something a little too open, a little too yearning, in her face. She couldn’t have been more than sixteen. She was unobjectionable verging on pretty but she still had an unfinished look, like she hadn’t grown out of the face she’d had as a child. She was short enough that she had to look up at him when he talked.

He finished up the critique and stepped back from the painting, and smiled at her with somebody else’s face.

Someone else was in charge of hiring the life models, Miriam, probably, so he never gave it much thought. One evening a young man came in, drops of water clinging to his dun-brown hair. He smiled and stuck out his hand to shake Steve’s.

“Lonnie,” he said. “You must be Steve?”

“That’s me.”

“Where shall I change?”

“There’s a storeroom that adjoins,” said Steve, pointing out the door. “We’ll be starting class in about five minutes so there’s really no hurry.” Lonnie grinned at him and vanished into it.

He came back out with just a length of fabric wrapped around his hips and perched on the platform, and when the students were all ready, he let it fall. He was circumcised, good-looking, slim but with broad shoulders and clearly defined muscles. Not much body hair. Excellent model for beginning students. Very easy to follow his lines.

“So you’re an artist,” said Lonnie, buttoning up his coat after his third session, a few weeks later.

Steve glanced up and smiled from the sink where he was rinsing out his brushes. “Looks that way.”

“I’m an actor, myself,” said Lonnie, and it made sense, with his easy way with the students. He didn’t talk to them during, of course, but before and after if he ran into them he’d chat with them briefly. “Modeling is a nice way to supplement that a bit.”

“You sound like you’re not from around here.” Steve finished up and turned off the water, and started laying the brushes out.

“Oh, not hardly. I’m from California.”

That seemed impossibly far away. “What brought you out here? California has cities. California has Hollywood.”

“Yes, but I don’t want to get into movies. I’m pure stage. Broadway or nothing.” Lonnie laughed. He had cheekbones sharp enough to cut paper. Sparkling brown eyes. “And Brooklyn’s got cheaper places than Manhattan.”

“Can’t argue with that,” said Steve. He had turned around to talk to Lonnie. He was still holding the brushes.
“Are you from around here?”

“Born and raised.”

“You sound like it, too.” Lonnie was grinning at him. Standing close to him.

One corner of Steve’s mouth lifted in a crooked smile. “Is that a compliment or an insult?”

“Take it as a compliment,” said Lonnie with another little laugh. “Brooklyn’s great.”

They looked at each other for a moment, smiling. Steve let the silence drag out too long and Lonnie said, with a rueful little raise of his eyebrows, “Well, I’d better get going. It’s not going to get any drier out there.”

“I’ll see you next time,” said Steve, stepping back, smiling his teacher’s smile, and turned back toward the sink. When he heard the door close behind him, he put his hands on either side of the sink and leaned forward for a minute, heavily.

He straightened up after a minute and went back to clean-up, tucking bottles of solvent back into cupboards and organizing them, turning all the labels to face forward, even though it didn’t matter at all.

Dear Bucky,

Basic must be over by now. How was it? Is it easier now, or do they just keep right on yelling?

Teaching classes is going really well. My students are interesting, some of them are even good, and so far I haven’t gotten hit with a single spitball.

Feel free to make any jokes you like about the life models and nudity. I would say get it out of your system but something tells me that will never happen.

“Are you in love?”

“Yes.”

“With that English girl?”

“Yes.”

“Poor baby.”

Steve was re-reading A Farewell to Arms. He figured he probably hadn’t liked it as a kid because he hadn’t understood it very well—maybe it would make more sense on a second try, and anyway, he had the book. They didn’t have that many books, Ma hadn’t had much time for reading them, and it just made sense to read what they had when he was too tired to go to the library.

This time it still felt heavy, like trying to read it ground him down.

“You can make fun of the priest.”

“That priest. It isn’t me that makes fun of him. It is the captain. I like him. If you must have a priest
have that priest. He’s coming to see you. He makes big preparations.”

“I like him.”

“Oh, I knew it. Sometimes I think you and he are a little that way.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do sometimes. A little that way…”

He put the book down and stared out the window at the pattering rain while the radio softly chattered at him. It was a funny story, he thought, but he hadn’t been listening to the beginning so he had no idea what it was about now.

“Oh I love to tease you, baby. With your priest and your English girl, and really you are just like me underneath.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, we are. You are really an Italian. All fire and smoke and nothing inside you. You only pretend to be an American. We are brothers and we love each other.”

In the end, when everyone who was going to die in the book was dead, he thought maybe he’d been right about it as a kid after all.

“Kiss me once and tell me you’re not serious.”

“I never kiss you. You’re an ape.”

“I know, you are the fine good Anglo-Saxon boy. I know. You are the remorse boy, I know.”

That night in bed he curled his hand around his cock and jerked off. Fast, hard, functional.

“Hell,” I said, “I love you enough now. What do you want to do? Ruin me?”

“Yes. I want to ruin you.”

“Good,” I said, “that’s what I want, too.”

Bucky got leave to go home for a visit early in the spring. Just forty-eight hours but he’d take it. He sent word to his mom and, separately, to Steve.

Steve showed up to meet him at the station. He looked thinner, which, it wasn’t like he had a lot of fat on him to lose in the first place. He was wearing the same damn jacket over the same damn sweater and the same damn shirt. Bucky threw his arms around Steve in a bear hug so massive Steve’s breath came out in a little *hrk* but Steve squeezed him back as hard as he could, a quick hug but a powerful one. They stepped back and Steve said, “Going to try to turn some heads in that uniform?”

Bucky grinned at him, lopsided, feeling like his mouth didn’t work anymore. “Ain’t got time for that,” he said. “Just here to impress my mom.”

He pulled off his hat when they went into the station, headed back for the el. Steve’s eyes slid over to him—well, the hat was instinct by now, hell, it had been months. You learned quick not to keep
getting screamed at for the same old thing. His shoes looked pretty good, he kept one pair of them polished to a high shine and just barely touched up the others that he mostly wore. He’d worn the more scuffed-up ones but for a minute he kind of wished he’d gone for the ones like mirrors.

“How was the train?”

“Not bad. Quiet. Got a nap in.”

“You’ll need it. I think Alice is going to be in hysterics by the time you get back.”

Bucky tried to imagine Alice in hysterics. “I doubt it.” Steve bumped his shoulder companionably as they walked.

The el was on the crowded side, hot, smelling of metal and smoke and perfume. Steve and Bucky were standing so close every time the carriage shuddered it knocked Steve up against Bucky, even though he was holding onto a strap.

They didn’t talk much on the way home. Bucky was thinking about asking, Did you try again, you numbskull? but Steve was still here, wasn’t he, so even if he had they’d still had some sense. You do anything stupid? But who was he to talk.

At the Barnes’ house, Winnie opened the door already in tears. Steve hung back and watched her drag Bucky down for a kiss on the cheek, and Bucky’s face was soft, smiling, warm. “Aw, Mom,” he said. “I missed you, too.”

Bucky was broader across the shoulders, for sure, the jacket straining a little like it had fit him when he started but that was months ago. Seeing—seeing Bucky in the uniform—something awful kept twisting in Steve’s chest. His little, narrow chest, like his little clenched fists, and he had to put his hands behind his back until Winnie turned and smiled at him, and waved him in after her son, the returning hero.

“Angelica’s coming home in a bit, dear, she has a late shift. But she said she wanted to see you, so you have to stay awake.”

“Oh, I slept on the train, Mom. I think I can manage.”

Winnie had put together enough food to feed a couple dozen hungry bears, and it took some time working through it before Harold put down the fork and said, “So, son, you want to tell us about the camp?”

“Half-built when we got there,” said Bucky. “Maybe less than half. We’re working on finishing it up, but it is a pain and a half.”

Betsy said, “Are the other boys your age?”

Bucky nodded. “Mostly. Some are real young, you know, turn 18 and first thing they do is go enlist. And some are older. The officers, mainly. I swear we have some guys who served in the last war.”

His eyes flickered over to Steve like he knew he was maybe pushing it, but he left it at that, and Steve just took another bite of mashed potatoes even though it felt like a burning stone in his belly.

“Bets just wants to know because she’s going boy-crazy,” said Alice with a dismissive little snort. (She did not, in fact, look like she was going to have hysterics, and had at no point looked that way.)
“Am not!” protested Betsy, but the way she wrinkled her nose suggested otherwise.

Harold said, “Are you making any new friends?”

Bucky shrugged. “Not a lot of time for friends when you’re up at ass o’clock every morning and busting your hump all day.”

“Ah, well,” said his dad. “I remember when I was working for the Army, it seemed like the guys made some pretty good friends for life. Maybe that will happen for you.”

Steve found himself choking on the words *He already has one* but let them go. He almost never came over when Harold was going to be home—and who would, who would want to, with what a sour son of a bitch Harold could be sometimes. And it was something, wasn’t it, that Steve kept thinking he’d be happier if it was him and Bucky just listening to the radio over at his place, maybe if Bucky got the hell out of that uniform, stopped sitting like he had a steel beam in place of a spine.

“How are you settling in?” asked Steve, trying to contribute something, anything.

“Not much settling to do. We get our space, you know, and we all kind of have things we do. Lots of reading. We swap books. Thanks for the Lincoln book, that ate some time.”


“Yeah, biography of Abe Lincoln,” said Steve.

“Must have been a good read.”

“I hope so.”

Bucky coughed a little. “Yeah. Say, Dad, how’s the sales?”

“Oh, good. Can’t complain too much. We’re a little down from last month, but it’s probably just people worrying over the war.”

“Well,” said Winnie, “it’s not like that’s unreasonable. There’s so much happening so fast.”

Harold sniffed. “I still think Britain is going to keep it under control.”

“Yeah, I don’t know about that,” said Bucky. “Seems like there might be more there that they can handle.”

“Hitler’s just a bully. He’s all puffed up about nothing.”

“There’s been bigger bullies who did a lot more than Hitler’s tried so far,” said Steve.

Alice stabbed at her pork chop viciously. “Can we just talk about something that isn’t war? For once?”

“Of course, dear,” said Winnie. “Tell your brother about your dance coming up! She’s on the decorating committee.”

“Oh, really?” Bucky raised his eyebrows at her. “I thought it would take an act of God to get you on a committee.”

“More like Billy Sorenson,” muttered Betsy.
Bucky whooped, and Alice smacked his arm. “It’s not like that! Shut up!”

“I’ll believe it when I see it. Alice and Billy? You said he was a wimp!”

“That was last—you know what, you jerk, you just leave it alone!”


Bets just shoved a whole mouthful of corn in and then waved at her full mouth in mock dismay as she chewed. Bucky’s sense of humor didn’t come from nowhere, that was for sure, although between Harold and Winnie it was hard to see it.

“You’re staying in tonight, right, Bucky?” asked Winnie, and Bucky nodded.

“Sure thing, Mom. Wouldn’t want to miss Angie.”

“Or breakfast,” muttered Betsy, whose mouth was clear again.

The circle of dark heads with the light glowing on their hair like haloes, bowed over plates heaped with food, was so warm and alive with chatter. Steve couldn’t help thinking of his ma and how quiet their place had been, always the crackle of the radio, the noises from the street, how often he’d come home when she was still at work and sat down to work on a sketch or read, or just lay down and think while the shadows marched across the wall.

“Steve,” said Alice, smoothing her hands across the napkin in her lap, “how did that thing last week go?”

“Oh, not bad,” said Steve. “The model showed and most of the students did, too, so we had a pretty good session.”

“Steve’s been hired by the museum for their new art classes,” Alice said to Bucky. “He’s finally going to get paid real money for art.”

Bucky smiled over at Steve, like he hadn’t written about it. “Good work, buddy,” he said, and Steve smiled back against the slow roiling feeling in his chest.

“It’s not a sure thing yet,” he said. “They could still change their mind about making it permanent.”

“They’re not going to,” said Betsy with a firm positivity.

“Well, let’s hope.” Steve picked up another forkful of pork chop. He was making slow progress on it.

“What did you think about that Tobruk business?” Harold asked Bucky.

“Honestly!” Alice said hotly. “Can’t stop talking about it for five minutes, can you?”

Harold shot her a look, and suddenly in it Steve read something—concern, for Bucky, for an eldest and only son—and Steve felt, not so much a thaw in his heart, but a sympathetic crack.

Angelica came home toward the end of dinner, and she threw her arms around Bucky, who hugged her back, fiercely. Her dress was yellow gingham, brown hair pinned up neatly with only a few strands escaping, and she didn’t look anything like somebody who sold dances at dance-halls, but she smelled like pipe smoke and gin. There were purple smudges under her eyes, and her mascara was wearing a little, but she was still as pretty as—she was still pretty, with Bucky’s bone structure, a little dimple in her chin and high cheekbones.
After Bucky and Angelica talked a little, the girls got down to cleaning up, handling the dishes, and Bucky and Harold and Steve ducked in to the living room to sit by the fireplace, the radio chattering quietly in the background.

Harold pulled out a bottle of whiskey. “Little something for my boy?”

“Sure, Dad,” said Bucky, taking the offered glass.

“Steve?” Harold was polite enough to hold out the decanter, and Steve, in a fit of pique, took a glass. “So what do you think about Tobruk?”

Bucky leaned back and sighed. “Dad, I don’t know that much about it.”

“Still. I think it’s a good sign. The Brits whipped them soundly.”

“At one port, in Libya,” said Steve, just to be contrary. “I don’t know if that’s going to be any indication of how the war goes.”

Harold glanced at him sharply. The light from the fireplace flickered over his glasses, and Steve lost his pupils for a moment. “Well, look at Benghazi.”

“The Italians aren’t the Germans. The Germans are harder.”

“We don’t know that.”

“They’re putting Rommel in charge in Africa. It’s going get ugly.”

Harold set his glass down harder than he needed to, and it clinked on the coaster. “Damn it, boy, why do you have to be such a—”

“Dad,” said Bucky, warning. “Steve’s reading the papers, same as you.”

Harold looked over at Bucky and sighed, some of the anger draining out of his face, but the lines still clear and hard. “Seems to me somebody’s been reading his strategy books again,” he said, like a joke but too tight and stiff to be one.

Steve said, “Been reading them a long time.”

“For all the good it’s done you.”


Steve was turning his glass around in his hands, and he lifted it and took a sip. It burned—it was decent but not particularly good whiskey, he was still Irish enough to know that—but it settled in his stomach and eased the tight ring around his throat a little.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Barnes,” said Steve. “I don’t mean to upset you.”

Harold’s face was no less grim over that—being upset was something a woman did—but he was big enough to let it go. “Of course. Well, maybe your sister is right, Buck, maybe we should talk about something besides the war.”

When it got late, Steve said, “I should probably get going,” and Harold made a noncommittal noise that sounded a lot like agreement.

“I’ll walk you out,” said Bucky.
At the doorway, they stood, looking at each other for a long minute; Bucky’s shoulders, broader now, stiff in the uniform he still hadn’t taken off, and Steve—Steve figured he looked about the same, and maybe that was a good thing. Maybe it was good to be a familiar touchstone.

Bucky surprised him by grabbing him in another near-strangling hug. They didn’t say anything, just held on, and Steve could feel when the hug went from being a long hug to an unusually long hug—but he still didn’t let go, or even loosen his grip. Bucky first.

When Bucky let go, Steve stepped back, and it seemed like maybe Bucky’s face was—Bucky’s eyes were shining.

“Hey,” said Bucky, “tomorrow after breakfast, before my train, I’ll come say hi, okay?”

“Sounds good,” said Steve.

“Okay.”

“Night.”

“Night.”

Steve had a hard time sleeping that night, tossing and turning, the ugly low rage at the war (and at Harold, and the world, and his own body) burning right behind his breastbone, and something else, which he had never named before and did not intend to start now.

He said a Hail Mary, and then another, the tempo dragging out slower and slower in his mind, until he slipped into sleep without quite realizing it. The next time he woke up, the sky was light.

Bucky slept in his old bed that night. It had gone to Alice when he moved out, but she was returned to her old place with Angelica for the night, and his room seemed smaller and noisier than he remembered. Trucks kept rumbling by all night, and there were lights from the street that kept prickling at his eyes.

He curled up on his side after a while, thinking it was a shame to waste the privacy, first he’d had in months. So he jerked off, silent but slow, with the luxury of time, and his mind drifted from Georgie’s mouth to—to other things, places it had no business being, but nowhere he minded in the middle of the night, when it was just him and a sleepless city.

Afterwards he cleaned up (dirty sock, real classy but no way he wanted Mom finding it in the laundry, he’d take care of it himself back at camp) and fell into a light, shaky sleep.

Bucky came by after breakfast, like he said he would. He knocked on the door while it was still early—Steve had dragged on a pair of pants and a shirt earlier, and was just sitting drinking a cup of mostly-cold tea by the time the knock came.

There were bags under his eyes. He hadn’t slept well, either, great.

“Hey,” Steve said. “Come on in.”

Bucky had brought his bag, and he dropped it next to his chair at the table. Steve got a second mug
of tea and pushed it across the table to him.

“Thanks,” said Bucky. He just held the mug under his nose for a minute, breathing the steam.

“How’s your mom doing?”

“Oh, she’s okay. She cried a little, you know, her only boy back off to the races.” Bucky’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Christ, you know it’s cold in here, right?”

“Yeah, it’s not so bad.”

“You’d say that if you were freezing to death.”

“Nah, I’d just think about all the dumb shit you’re up to and steam would blow out my ears.”

“Hey,” Bucky protested, “for all you know I haven’t done any dumb shit at all.” But it didn’t sound right. Mechanical, rote.

“Buck,” said Steve. He let it hang on the air for a minute. “You all right?”

Bucky shook his head. “I’m all right enough. Christ, it’s only been a couple of months. You’d think I was gone for years.”

“You might be,” said Steve. “When do you think you’re going to get leave again?”

“Before we declare war, that’s for sure. Everything’s moving like molasses out there,” Bucky was staring off into the distance. “The Germans are pulling all this shit and everyone’s acting like they’re just going to stop? Nah. It’ll be a while, but we’re going to end up in the middle of this war.”

They sat in heavy silence for a minute.

Bucky sighed, glancing at the clock. “Look, I got to get going. You want to walk with me to the station?”

“Yeah,” said Steve, even though it was still freezing out and his coat wasn’t going to do him a whole hell of a lot of good. “Let me get my shoes.”

A little later in ’41, they went all-out on the draft. Widened up the ages and suddenly there were men flooding in where there had only been a trickle. Bucky’s batch had done most of the hard construction work, so by then there were real barracks, even if they were still practicing with brooms and flour sacks full of dirt half the time.

Somebody got the bright idea to add a theater, which went a long way toward making the whole thing more bearable.

Steve kept writing, kept sending packages. Most people’s friends were starting to peter out by then. The first batch of draftees were supposed to be done in October, but Bucky had a feeling that wasn’t going to happen.

He went back on a 72-hour pass around Midsummer. He spent the second night out with Steve, dancing—well, he was dancing. Steve wasn’t. Steve was sitting on a barstool, drink in hand; then Steve was missing—where was he? Caught a glimpse of bright blond hair out of the corner of his eye. There was Steve, leaning up against a wall, watching him dance.
He grinned, spun his partner with a little extra flair. Steve lifted one corner of his mouth in a crooked smile, chin up, like he always did when he was waiting to get hit.

Afterwards, they sat in silence on fire escape outside Steve’s place. They didn’t have anything to drink, and besides, they were already a little drunk. Steve was fussing with a notebook, sketching a little. Bucky stole a look—the skyline through the narrow channel of their alley, buildings sticking up from it raggedly.

Bucky tipped his head back against the brick, and Steve glanced over at him.

“You really have to wear the uniform?” he asked, softly.

“Everywhere.” Bucky let his eyes drift shut. “Court martial offense if I don’t.”

“Good thing it suits you.”

He chuckled, eyes still closed. “Everything suits me, ‘cause I’m such a looker. Didn’t you know?”

Steve didn’t say anything for a few minutes. Then he said, as Bucky ground out a cigarette, “Seems like most of the soldiers at least try chasing some skirts while they’re back.”

“Yeah, I got better shit to do,” said Bucky without looking at Steve.

Steve said, “Mmm,” and let it go. Bucky could hear the soft noise of the pencil scratching.

They started maneuvers that fall. It was fun, actually. Well, sleeping on the ground, not so much. But getting to use some of the skills they’d been training on—Bucky did a pretty decent job, he figured.

Maneuvers ended right around the beginning of December, and everybody headed back to their bases. A couple of hundred thousand guys, stinking up the landscape, sweating and grinning and complaining about their feet as they headed home.

The day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Bucky didn’t hear about it at first. He was on KP and he was up to his elbows in greasy water all night, and then staggering through the day with a sack of potatoes or a stack of plates.

But when he did hear about it, he had to take a minute, had to sit down. Nobody gave him crap about it, either.

“What the hell?” he said, finally, out loud to no one in particular. Nobody answered him.

If the guys coming in when the draft expanded had been a flood, this was a deluge. It was funny, in a way, Bucky who’d been so raw coming in and who still hadn’t seen a lick of action now being one of the old hands, the experienced guys. It had been over a year; he was a Private First Class; their fates were still mysteries.

What had been a hick town was now a hick town with a booming military base next to it, getting bigger than the town was in a hurry. It kept getting bigger and bigger, and Bucky was looking at it, wondering how many more men were going to show up.
He got a letter from Steve, he figured it must have been sent the day of. Steve just said, *Christ on a crutch, I hope you’re ready. Everybody here is losing their damn minds about it.*

At the recruiting center, Steve pasted a big fake smile on his face when they called him back.

The doctor said, “Have you ever looked at your own records?”

“No, sir,” he said. “But I don’t think there can be anything too bad in them.”

The doctor raised his eyebrows. “You don’t think a heart that’s fit to bust is anything to worry about?”

Steve shrugged. “Everybody’s heart has got to go sooner or later.”

“Yeah, well, I put you on a boat and yours is going to go a lot sooner. Sorry, but that’s a no.”

Watching the men struggle up the hill, all Bucky could think was, *Jesus. We’re screwed.* Which was funny, wasn’t it, because he’d been just as big a lunkhead when he showed up at first, but it had been almost two years, and now he was trying to get these guys to act like a unit instead of a bunch of farm hicks and city boys.

The calisthenics were the part the men probably complained the most about, but the part Bucky hated most was still inspection, some sergeant getting up in his face about a loose thread or a dull shoe.

That night after the parade exercises, Dopey—his real name was Harvey—came back from the showers, towel around his waist. Lucky Lynn yelled, “Show it off, baby!”

Dopey grinned and made a show of turning around slowly, like a girl at a strip show, teasing the bottom of the towel. The guys hooted with laughter as he faked like he was going to drop it.

“Real nice, Dopey,” said Nick. “You’re a classy dame.”

Dopey blew kisses to them off the tips of his fingers and then flipped them off. He dropped the towel and changed.

1942 was a year that mostly went by like this:

Steve got up in the morning.

Steve shaved.

Steve read the paper.

Steve went to teach his classes.

Steve did some pieces of art on commission.

Steve worked on a mural for the WPA. They liked it, and he got a few more commissions as a result.

Steve worked odd shifts at the drugstore.
Steve wrote letters. A lot of letters.

Bucky came back every couple of months on a 48-hour or 72-hour pass. He looked tired every time, but he’d still smile, and he’d complain about the guys he was training. He didn’t talk himself up. Of course he didn’t.

Steve watched Bucky when he came back, and they’d go out for a drink. They wouldn’t talk much; they’d have dinner at Bucky’s parents’ house where Harold and Steve would sit thin-lipped without talking, and whenever Bucky ended up at Steve’s place for a bit they’d be quiet again.

Steve fell asleep alone in his bed. Every night.

In August, Bucky heard about a guy out in Wisconsin—friend of a guy in his unit, Moping Moe—who’d been caught by MPs in a queer bar.

“Sittin’ in the brig,” said Moe, shaking his head, “when he never did nothing like that. I ought to know, I know the guy. He’s normal!”

“That’s rough, buddy,” said Lucky. “But he had to know, right? That it was—that kind of bar?”

“Yeah, I don’t know, I guess he knew. But he just wanted a drink!”

“Rough break,” said Bucky. “Everybody needs a drink now and then.”

The last time Bucky came to visit was in September. The trees were turning colors, and the kids were going back to school, the streets quieter during the day. Steve gave his evening class to another teacher so he could spend the day with Bucky, and they ended up going into the city, supposed to be going dancing.

“You know there just aren’t places in Hinesville like there are here,” said Bucky on the train. “Not even in Savannah.”

“What’s Savannah like?”

“Very Southern. Very old money. It’s ridiculous, everybody takes forever to say anything.”

“Bet they get a kick out of you.”

“I think they’d rather get a kick in at me.”

“Oh, come on.”

“No, it’s true. The old money don’t like us sniffing around their daughters.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “You do much sniffing?”

“We get leave for a day, come on, I’m not looking for anything but a dance.” There was something tight around Bucky’s eyes. “But the looks we get from the fogeys lined up at the bar! It’s ridiculous.”

“They just don’t know you’re a gentleman.”

“Yeah, they think all the soldiers are just disasters in disguise.”
“They’re not wrong about *that*, necessarily,” said Steve, and Bucky grinned and whacked him in the arm.

“Shut it,” he said. “You’re just jealous I get to go to a bunch of clubs for rich assholes and order the cheapest drink on the menu and then get the cold shoulder a lot before I go back to base.”

“Deeply,” said Steve. “You got me.”

“Our stop.” Bucky cupped Steve’s elbow, pulling him along. “Let’s go.”

When they got up to the street, the air smelled like hot asphalt, even though the sun had nearly gone down. “You got a place in mind?” asked Steve.

“Yeah,” said Bucky, “little place where we can dance or get a drink.”

Bucky found a girl to dance with while Steve found a table, but after a couple of dances Bucky came back over, beer in hand, and dropped into the chair next to Steve.

“Worn out already? You must be getting old.”

“Hush, Junior,” said Bucky. “Man spends all day drilling, his feet get tired.”

And in the end it didn’t matter why so much, did it. Just that they got to sit and shoot the breeze, Steve’s cheeks getting hotter as he drank, Bucky’s smile getting looser, until they finally got the train home and Buck slung his arm around Steve’s shoulders, humming something only he could recognize.

Getting the news that it was time to go overseas—really time, finally time—made Bucky feel like his head was two sizes too big. It didn’t feel real.

There was supposed to be a stop-off in Brooklyn, because they were going to catch their ride out of the Navy Yard. Bucky’s heart beat wildly: could he send a telegram—maybe he could—no. It wasn’t a good idea.

Steve stared at the letter for a long time. *We’re heading out. Can’t tell you when or where, but I’ll write when we get there. It could be a while though.*

The trip from the train to the ship didn’t take long, and inside three hours they were shipping out. There wouldn’t have been time, after all.

*I’ll write when we get there.*

*Hey, Steve. I don’t know if I can tell you where I am but it sure as shit is not Paris. The trip was fine, big damn boat, had a little stop-over in a place where they really like their Queen. I did not get seasick at all. Had a visitor or two but they did not get to make a trip back to Papa Fuhrer courtesy of our pals. Got pretty tired of being cooped up though. Well, we are not exactly cooped up now.*
There is almost too much space. I don’t really know what to do with myself most of the time. It is nice, though, the guys we are working with have books, so I am finally getting around to reading some things. I am missing that Abe Lincoln book pretty hard now. It is all books about crime and detectives and most of them don’t even have any parts that would make a nun blush.

I don’t know how long we will be here but if you send letters they should get here. Victory mail is fastest. Probably. Sometimes I see whole bales of the stuff go by so it is not like it is on a regular timetable.

He didn’t write about England, a cobble-stone lined alley, a rough brick wall with his back pressed up against it, and he didn’t write about the landings. The water made being loaded down with heavy equipment even worse. Christ, nobody thought these things through. That was the first time he saw a man die, bullet hole puncturing his uniform, surprised look on his face, a kid he didn’t even know who couldn’t have been more than nineteen tumbling forward into the knee-deep water when he’d barely gotten down off the ramp. But they made it through the landing, stumbling up to safety sopping wet and hauling the godawful packs, and eventually got themselves set up, working with the Brits.

The sun in Tunisia was so bright. It wasn’t like the sun in Brooklyn. One of the British guys wiped his forehead on a hot, boring afternoon, and said, “What I wouldn’t give for a good fog right now.”

“A good what?” asked an American sitting near him—Ralls—and laughed.

“Fog, that’s a good lad,” said the British guy scathingly. “It’s enough to make me miss London. And I was not all that fond of London.”

Bucky was a rifleman, and he was getting used to it. The rifle itself was easy; the heft of it, the places his hands went to instinctively now, after training on it for years. The red, gritty sand was annoying, kept getting in where it would jam the rifle if he wasn’t careful. It was just another part of his shoes by now. Had to keep cleaning the mechanism.

“You’d think we’d get desert training,” said Doug.

Bucky shrugged. “You’d think a lot of things.”

Steve tried again. He didn’t mention it in the letter. Bucky kept saying, over and over again, It’s a hell of a thing. I’m glad you’re there and not here.

Steve did push-ups, ate his vegetables, never could convince himself to drink raw egg.

The doctor was frowning at his heartbeat, stethoscope cold against his skin, the same, as always, and said, “With a heart like this, there’s no way. I’m sorry, but there’s just no way your heart could take it. And your lungs, too.”

“Look,” said Steve, “I could be useful. If I die, I die, but at least I could do it over there.”

The doctor kept shaking his head, and Steve had to unclench his fists.

The company commander was dumber than a sack of shit and twice as mean, and the sergeant
Bucky spent most of his time dealing with instead wasn’t a whole fucking lot better.

Bucky ducked his head under the brief flurry of bullets that came pinging in, ricocheting off the occasional rock. He was dug in—a two-man slit trench, one of the Brits had told him, drunk off his ass from a secret stash on Bucky’s third night in North Africa. And it was good advice, really. Bucky and Private Kane, Doug, worked well together, Bucky laying down the sporadic covering fire it took for Doug to get the beginnings of the hole well and truly dug.

The sergeant had cottoned on pretty quick once he saw what Bucky and Doug were up to, taking credit for it, of course, and now everybody in their platoon did the two-man slit trench, after their examples—Bucky and Doug and the fucking sergeant.

But this objective wasn’t going to come easy. It was a hill, just a stupid fucking hill, like every other stupid fucking hill in this area, all of them somehow inexplicably named like that was going to make them important, and all of them fucking infested with Jerries. The best hills only had Italians, who weren’t all that committed to the war or the glorious visions of their leaders. But it seemed like every hill Bucky ended up headed to was full of angry Germans, better-armed and full of themselves.

There was a body not that far away that had been laying out on the open ground so long it had started turning black, swollen and leaking fluid, split down the side of the face. He tried not to look at it.

The first couple of dead bodies they’d seen like this, not the newly dead of the landing, he’d felt an ugly wrench in his gut. But he’d thought of Coney Island and Steve turning green on the Cyclone, and that had helped, in a sick way. He still couldn’t have laughed. But it helped.

The sergeant kicked him awake. Didn’t realize he’d fallen asleep. He blinked into the dawn—it came all at once, here, instead of having the decency to start slow, so there’d be a good time for mobilization. “Come on, Barnes,” he said. “We’ve got to get up that hill by nightfall.”

Somehow, they did, but they lost it again not long after.

You could send canned telegrams if you wanted to, a couple of stock phrases. He sent one to his mom: Have arrived safely in North Africa and am well. Hope you have received my letters I miss you.

You could only pick two sentences. It left no room for “love” but he figured she knew.

Dysentery was a real fun thing. It went through about a third of the guys like wildfire, and Bucky got to spend the better part of seventy-two hours in a kind of horrible daze, dragging his sick ass back and forth to the latrine.

The fever made him feel like he could break like glass; it made him finally feel like he was something separate from his body.

Getting water in wasn’t really a challenge, though, and he mostly kept it down just fine. So he figured he could be doing worse. Some of the guys got so bad they had to go to the medics. He just kept up the back and forth until he slept for a couple of hours, then more, and when the fever broke, he slept like a corpse. He knew, because one of the guys, Stanovich, woke him up prodding him with the toe of his boot. Gingerly.
“Oh, thank Christ,” he said, when Bucky woke up groaning and swatted at him. “I thought you were dead.”

“Shut the fuck up, asshole,” said Bucky, and pulled his jacket up over his head. The hot desert wind was wicking away the sweat that had soaked him. He was going to need a shower soon, and more water.

He managed to get himself to the showers, jury-rigged in the middle of the camp, pipes that would manage to either barely spit huge drops of water at you or completely soak you in a fine but stinging spray, depending on where you stood. He picked a spot where he’d get soaked, and as brief and uncomfortable as it was, it felt like a luxury. He opened his mouth and let the water pour in as he scrubbed at his tight prickling skin, taking gulps of it.

Of course, by the time he got his feet jammed back into his boots, he was already lightly coated with the red dust again. But at least he didn’t reek of sickness. Shaving wasn’t going to happen, not until they had another inspection visit.

Kasserine Pass was a fucking disaster. Bucky walked out of it a Corporal, once the paperwork went through. His sergeant never walked out.

It was a little more complicated than that. It was like this: they got the orders. Sergeant Penn talked with the company commander and the other sergeants, heads together, voices low, before breaking and coming to talk to the squad.

“Oh, privates,” he said. “Get your shit together. We’re headed out.”

It was Valentine’s Day, of all the fucked-up things. Well, the Jerries were going to get a whole lot of Valentines, if the tanks grimly rolling along had anything to do with it.

When they got cut off, Sergeant Penn went about half-mad with rage. He was spitting mad, waving angrily at the Jerries coming up out of nowhere, and then the top of his head was just—gone. His body went backwards, and Bucky turned his face away, a bright sort of shock ripping into the continuing dull panic he’d been in for the last half-hour. He spotted a Jerry up on a low ridge, breathed out, and took the shot; against the odds, the guy crumpled and went down.

“Come on!” Bucky bellowed. He half-dragged Doug back, past the corporal, who was groaning and bleeding heavily from his leg, which was on at the wrong angle. Once they got the field telephone, he yelled, “We need artillery cover! Now!”

They had questions about coordinates—he was frantically scrabbling at the map. The corporal dragged himself up and yanked it out of his hands and gave them where he figured they were, give or take. Friendly fire might scare the Germans long enough to get them the hell out of this fucking ambush.

The long, whistling trajectory of incoming—it could be friend or foe, and either way it could blow them up. But it didn’t.

The Jerries stopped firing for a little while. It was long enough. He saw a lot of men dead on the ground on his way out. Graves Registration wouldn’t be coming for these bodies any time soon.

That was the day he learned that retreat wasn’t a dirty word at all, if there was a line of Jerries ready and waiting to cut you off from the rest of the troops and pick you off one at a time, like lambs to the slaughter. Sidi Bou Zid was not worth it. Not even a little bit. Almost a hundred tanks, between all
the losses. How many men? Don’t think about it.

They had to keep running for five days. Then were dug in for three, before reinforcements came.

Corporal Edwards got promoted to Sergeant Edwards, and he said, “Well, Buck, looks like I’m going to need a new corporal. How about it?”

Bucky squinted at him in the light, took a drag off his cigarette. “What the hell,” he said. “Sure.” He didn’t believe Edwards would make it happen, but he must have. When he got the new stripes, he held them in his palm for a minute, looking down at them, the red dust still in his mouth and powdering his boots, just a new hill to go die on waiting for him.

He sent Steve a letter. He hadn’t gotten any since they landed, but he kept writing, figured Steve would get them eventually.

Dear Steve, he’d given up on the casual insults pretty fast when he realized that any letter could easily be the last one, Hope you are well. Haven’t gotten any mail here in a while. Seems like the ships are full, or maybe it is the planes that are held up. Anyway, it is a quiet party.

Most of the guys send letters that just tell people what a great time we are having. I send those letters to my mom. I am telling you that so you know not to tell her.

It is hell over here. It’s hot as hell in the day and cold as hell at night. I miss little things, like socks and shaving more than once every blue moon. And latrines, Christ, if I never have to sit next to every asshole in the platoon while I’m trying to take a shit, it will still be too soon.

The guys are always reading. It’s good, I guess. Except on long marches we got rid of most of the heavy books, so we are down to just a couple, and we have worked out who gets to read them when.

I think I write more now than I did in school. When I can’t get my hands on a book I write letters instead. I probably have to erase about half of what I write. Can’t tell Mom about the guys who aren’t coming home. I’m scared shitless you will get in somehow. He erased that. I know you are probably still trying to get in, but buddy, knock it off, okay? War is no place for somebody with talent.

He had to stop writing for a while. He just massaged his right hand with his left, working the stiffness out of it.

I’m a Corporal now. Figured I should tell you. Not much in the way of dirty jokes about that one.

Not much you can send me anymore, either. Never thought I would miss your godawful cookies from Basic but wow, do I ever. But if even letters aren’t making it over I would bet dollars to donuts we are never going to see any food anybody sends.

It is getting dark. I better finish this up. The sun goes out like a light around here and we can’t leave any lights outside on or the enemy will spot us.

I miss Brooklyn so bad. I miss you. Take care.

Love,
Bucky

He put it in the queue for censorship before he could think better of it.

Steve went to an exhibition, of sorts, in the city. It was out in the open air, in the plaza. It was called The Nature of the Enemy, which he could be pretty sure of as that was a sculpture in black letters that were several feet high, and it was a series of exhibits intended to show citizens the horrors they were working against.


Buy a Bond and Sign the Bomb. Sign the Block-Buster Headed For Hitler.

Steve couldn’t afford a bond, and signing a bomb seemed—well. Probably good for morale, but still. Vindictive. And that wasn’t a good way to go into this. If you were going to set out to kill someone, to end a human life, you had to do it with a clear head. You had to know what it was you meant to achieve through it.

Otherwise, you weren’t any better than the cartoonishly evil Nazi with a puffed-up chest and wrinkled shirt sitting in the judge’s seat in the Abolition of Justice display, facing down a noble-looking man who might bear a sideways resemblance to Steve, as Steve sometimes was in his fantasies: tall and straight-backed, despite the way his wrists were crossed loosely behind his back, dwarfed by the kangaroo court.

The Militarization of Children display kept drawing his eye back, over and over again. Kids had it hard in the war. He knew that. But there was something about the figures in their gas masks, lined up in a row, rifles over their shoulder and still in short pants, that got to him.

The quotes at the bases probably weren’t accurate. He hoped. Then again, in a world where everyone had gone insane, maybe they were. Maybe Goering had said “Our business is not to do justice but to destroy and exterminate.” Maybe Goebbels had said “The people who criticize us should consider themselves lucky to still be alive. It would be too much of a good thing if those who live at our mercy should be allowed to criticize.”

The huge pictures at the end—he couldn’t stop looking at the ships in flames. Transport ships, like the ones that kept ghosting in to Brooklyn, sitting and waiting where people could peer down at them off the bridge if they didn’t mind getting hassled by cops. Bucky was—and so many others. They were huge ships. How many men did they hold? How many men had already gone over?

A woman with her hair done up in little curls, loose to her shoulders, was laughing in front of one of them. Her friend was leaning in, smiling. There was light pouring over them, and behind them, the sucking darkness of the ships burning.

One of the things about Tunis was the whores. They were everywhere. Every time he got out for a couple of minutes, it seemed like they were all over him. And most of them looked—nice, like regular women, girls, sometimes, too young to be doing this. But the things they said and did left no doubt. They knew exactly what a GI would pay for.

At the brothel, the guys would line up, and on their way in, the docs would do a short-arms (get it, Barnes, heh, elbow to the ribs) inspection, and on the way out, they’d get a dose of prophylactic
straight into the head of their cocks. He figured the reason they got the pro on the way out was because anybody getting it on the way in wouldn’t be able to get it up for what he’d paid for.

The guys would never, never have shut up about it if he hadn’t gone. One of the real young kids from Iowa or some shit hadn’t when he had the chance, two weeks ago, and they were still calling him choirboy and asking if he was saving himself for marriage and a couple of the crueler dogfaces had started making cracks about how he’d look better on the other end of a cock anyway.

Bucky went. He stood in line. He paid. And the woman he went in to looked at him without seeing him—or saw right through him, right to the bone. Her eyes laid him open, flayed him. He saw the freckles on her collarbone, her breasts; the thick, curling pubic hair; the stomach with stretch marks from pregnancies. Neither of them said anything.

He finished, didn’t bother tucking himself in since the trip back out just took him past the docs.

Wondered what part of the Hippocratic Oath covered drugs up the dick for GIs far from home.

Months in, he finally got a batch of letters from Steve. They were on V-mail, shrunk so he could fit a whole envelope practically in his palm, but he could still read it just fine.

Work is good. Brooklyn is pretty quiet. Stark’s got some kind of new automatic thing he’s testing out, supposed to replace the trolleys.

The museum job is great. I’m actually teaching a couple of classes, so I get to work with some older people who are just starting, plus some people who are a bit farther along. It’s really nice to see things through their eyes. Reminds me what it feels like when you start being able to make your drawings actually look like real things.

I know you’re probably keeping busy. The papers are full of the war right now, so I feel like I have a pretty good handle on where you’re likely to be, which is nice.

Your mom invited me over for lunch last week so I went. She just wanted to talk about you. Don’t worry, I kept to the party line. You’re doing great, it’s a picnic. Also your mom made me take about a dozen sandwiches home. I think she’s afraid I’m going to starve to death if she doesn’t feed me, doesn’t matter how many times I tell her the teaching actually pays okay.

There are new crappy movies out every week about the war. I keep wondering what you would think if you saw them. Do you? Are there movies out there?

Love,

Steve

So you can stop worrying I’m not eating, Bucky heard, in Steve’s voice, and your mom is doing fine. Which he knew, she wrote all the time, and he had a letter from her that had come in at the same time. But he’d opened Steve’s first.

Dear Bucky,

Do you have a new nickname over there or do they stick with Bucky? I ran into a guy on leave and he said everybody gets nicknames, his is Short Stack. It’s not nice but it is accurate. He said I would definitely get nicknamed Shorty.
Still not moving, though. Same address.

He hadn’t gotten in, then, though he wasn’t telling Bucky if he’d tried. Go figure.

Dear Bucky,

You know Sister Anne who was Mrs. Murtaugh’s husband’s sister? She passed away last week. I feel like a jerk but I’m sure she’s still going to haunt my dreams when I’m afraid I’ve done something bad. Sometimes I wake up and my knuckles ache.

Before he got through the stack, his Sergeant came around and said, “Bucky, come here, we need to go over some requisitions.” He was good at math, so he’d been getting suckered into helping with the calculations.

“Yes, sir,” he said, and got up off his bed. He dropped his cigarette into the sand and ground it in with his boot. The letters, he shoved under his pillow for later.

Steve met a soldier on his way home from visiting his mother’s grave.

The soldier was standing on the el platform, looking confused, trying to read the signs. Steve said, “Can I help you get somewhere?”

He looked around and smiled, a big grin, his eyes taking in Steve. “Yeah, if you could tell me how the heck I’m supposed to get to the St. George Hotel?”

“You’re almost there, actually,” said Steve. And somehow that turned in to getting invited for drinks, and he figured, what the hell, so he went.

When he walked in with the soldier—Mel, he’d insisted on—he felt the hair on the back of his neck rise.

“You don’t mind it, do you?” asked Mel, anxiously. “My buddies just told me this was our kind of place.”

“No, it’s fine,” said Steve, mouth running ahead without him. He’d known—he knew it was this kind of place. But it was one thing to know it was around and another thing to go in, with a soldier, who was tall and willowy and dark-haired and who had his hand on Steve’s elbow to steer him through the crowd, up to the huge bar on one side. This side—this side seemed to be where—our kind of guys were standing.

“Hey! Bill!” Mel called over the chatter. Bill turned out to be a brawny Midwestern guy with a flat Kansas voice, and when they were introduced Bill’s eyes dipped below Steve’s waist before coming back up to his face, and Steve could see it, could see the look just like the looks he’d gotten from girls at dances. Insufficient.

“You know,” said Steve, “I should probably get going pretty soon.”

He stayed for a quick drink that made his cheeks flush. When he left, Mel looked upset; Bill looked relieved. The other guys hadn’t shown yet. His arm was still warm from where Mel had been resting his big, calloused hand on it. He didn’t look back.
The part where Bucky got to go home felt like he’d won some kind of lottery. Nobody got leave. Nobody. But some of the guys, about five of them from the whole installation, got word that they were getting a three-week rotation, and by the numbers that may have meant it was going to be a century of war before all the guys got to go home, but he’d take any unfair advantage. And here he was, off a plane, headed back to the neighborhood. He stopped at his family’s house, to the tears and screams. He told them he was going to be a sergeant, and they were impressed, and his father actually managed to look proud. It looked a little bit like he was constipated, but it was the thought that counted.

When he knocked on the door, Steve opened it; he was there, looking—Christ, looking older. That was a new one. Even before, he’d just looked thinner.

“I’m only back until I get a new set of orders,” he said to Steve. Steve nodded, jerkily.

“Want to get a bite to eat? The automat?”

“Yeah.” Bucky nodded. “Yeah.”

At the automat, Steve watched Bucky eating. They were sitting in silence, perched on the wire-frame chairs, the room half-empty around them.

Bucky looked thinner—the uniform was still tight across the shoulders, but the solid thick waist was narrower. And his face was thinner, too. Ever since he lost the baby fat his face had still had a kind of round quality. Not anymore.

“How was it?” Steve asked, feeling the inadequacy of the words and hating them.

Bucky shrugged, letting his sandwich dangle from one hand while he grabbed for a napkin with the other. “Awful.”

“Sounded like it.”

“Steve, I just... I can’t see why you want to go. It’s not like there’s anything noble out there to do. None of it is.”

“I just want to be useful.”

“You’re useful here.”

“I’m a joke here.”

“To who?” He could see the anger flare in Bucky’s face, before Bucky passed a hand across his face. “Fuck, Steve. Anybody thinks you’re a joke is a sack of shit.”

“Yeah, you’re telling me.”

That got a little laugh out him—a little awkward snorting laugh. Which was a lot better.

All told, he had more than two weeks back, the travel time cutting in at either end. He spent most of it with his folks, listening to his dad talk about the war like some kind of damn idiot, but he never
corrected him, not once.

He spent some parts of it over at Steve’s, sitting up with a beer in his hand, listening to the radio. Steve loved that thing, always had, listened to it with his ma, and ever since his ma died it seemed like it was always on every time Bucky came over. Like the empty place needed filling up with something, and that something was music.

They talked a little, but more than not, they’d just sit in silence, sharing lost thoughts.

“How’s your heart doing?” he asked, once, out of an idle curiosity. Steve couldn’t be doing too badly, not with the good color in his cheeks.

Steve shrugged. “Fine.”

“Asthma kicking up?”

“No.”

“Good.”

They left it at that.

He figured going to confession while he was back might be a bit much. The priests back here didn’t know, not like the chaplains overseas. They’d heard the worst of it. Hell, some of them had seen it, too.

But he was back over a couple of Sundays, and his family dragged him. And when he was in that little booth, he managed to keep it short. I’ve killed for my country.

“Not a sin, my son,” said the priest. “As long as you regret that this is necessary.”

“Oh, I regret it,” he said. “You got no idea how much.”

He found Steve getting his ass kicked in an alley. Jesus Christ. Can’t leave him alone for two minutes. It’s been a lot more than two minutes. How many fights was Steve getting in while he was gone? “You just don’t know when to give up, do you?” the guy was asking. Like Steve had ever had an answer for that.

He stepped to the side—invisible against the wall—and came up behind the guy like a ghost. He was ready to just pull the big dumb ox off and leave it at that, and he heard his own voice—“Pick on someone your own size”—and knew Steve was going to hate that. But it didn’t matter, because the asshole didn’t know when he was licked. A right hook and a kick and he was gone. Didn’t even have to put down the paper.

He put on his swagger like a coat and walked down the alley to where Steve was pulling himself back up to his feet.

“Sometimes I think you like getting punched,” he said.

“I had him on the ropes,” Steve said, panting a little. “Ah, shit.” He touched his face gingerly. What was—great, he’d dropped another fucking deferment card. Didn’t have to look at it to know what it was. 4F. Again. He gave Steve a little shit over that.
“How many times is this? Ah, you’re from Paramus now? You know it’s illegal to lie on the enlistment form. And seriously, Jersey?”

When Steve looked up from swiping the back of his hand across his mouth, Bucky could see the minute it dawned on him; his face went still and drawn, looking him up and down, mouth still hanging open a little like he’d forgotten to close it. The pressed uniform, the new stripes sewn on. “You get your orders?”


Steve huffed out a breath, eyes drifting to stare off into space, chin dropping. “I should be going.”

He threw his arm around Steve, squeezed tight, painfully tight. He found a smile somewhere. “C’mon, man. It’s my last night! Got to get you cleaned up.”

“Why,” said Steve, deeply skeptical, “where are we going?”

“The future.” He flung away the card and handed over the paper with the ad for the expo, and Steve frowned down at it.

They went back to Steve’s apartment because Bucky’s mom would have been ticked about the fight. Even after all these years, she still thought of Steve as a twelve-year-old who got pneumonia every winter.

Bucky stopped Steve at the bathroom door with a hand on his chest, and stripped his shirt off him. No use getting blood on a white shirt. Steve watched him do it, hands sure on the buttons.

He hung the shirt over the bathroom doorknob and grabbed a towel. He got it wet in the sink, cold water, and washed Steve’s face, fingers spread against his jawline, bracing him. Steve stood in his undershirt. It was worn so thin there were places it was almost see-through.

When he finished, he dried Steve’s face with the corner of the towel and let him go. Steve just looked at him for a minute. Then went to get a fresh shirt.

When they walked out the door, Steve could see—could really see Bucky put it on, the whole thing: the way he talked and shrugged, rolling his shoulders, smiling. It was unnerving, seeing it and at the same time seeing behind it.

Bucky was hustling him toward the Stark Expo, and his voice was calm, fond. Believable. “I don’t see what the problem is. You’re about to be the last eligible man in New York. You know there’s three and a half million women here.”

Steve didn’t meet his eyes. “Well, I’d settle for just one.”

“Good thing I took care of that.” Bucky was smiling, chest puffed out. Waving at—a girl, two girls. Steve’s heart gave a painful little jerk.

“What did you tell her about me?”

“Only the good stuff.”
He watched out of the corner of his eye as Steve tried to push his bangs out of his eyes. Christ, Steve was always jumpy around girls. Nervous as a cat.

You couldn’t be like that. People noticed.

She grabbed Bucky’s hand and dragged him up. “It’s starting!”

Howard Stark looked kind of ridiculous, his neatly trimmed mustache, slick shit-eating grin. But the hovering car—that was cool. “Holy cow,” he murmured.

When it crashed, he craned his neck to grin at Steve, mouth already running. “Hey, Steve, what do you say we treat these girls—” But there was no Steve there. Gone again.

He followed Steve to where he had to be, standing and staring at the enlistment poster.

“Come on, you’re kind of missing the point of a double date. We’re taking the girls dancing.”

Steve looked distant. He was somewhere else in his head already. “You go ahead, I’ll catch up with you.”

“You really going to do this again?”

“Well, it’s a fair. I’m going to try my luck.”

“As who? Steve from Ohio? They’ll catch you. Or worse, they’ll actually take you.” The fear was an ugly hollow in the pit of his stomach. He took half an involuntary step forward.

“Look, I know you don’t think I can do this, but—”

“This isn’t a back alley, Steve. It’s war.”

“I know it’s a war, you don’t have to tell me—”

“Why are you so keen to fight? So many important jobs—”

“What do you want me to do,” Steve said without any real anger, “collect scrap metal in my little red wagon?”

“Yes! Why not?”

“I’m not going to sit in a factory, Bucky!”

“I don’t—” Talking over each other, around each other, like they always had. Voices merging in a hum of heatless annoyance.

“Bucky, come on. There are men laying down their lives. I got no right to do less than them. That’s what you don’t understand. This isn’t about me.” And of course Steve could meet his eyes while he said it, full of the righteousness he’d worn since he was a kid.

“Right. ‘Cause you got nothing to prove.”

Steve was getting ready to say something, and Bucky had a feeling he wasn’t going to like it, when his date’s voice floated over them. “Hey, Sarge!” Distant, sing-song. “Are we going dancing?”
He spun around. “Yes, we are!” he called, his voice syrupy. Looked back at Steve; their eyes met, and his flickered away, and back again, a long, silent moment. He took a deep breath, blew it out. “Don’t do anything stupid until I get back,” he said, starting to back away with long strides.

“How can I? You’re taking all the stupid with you.” It sounded automatic. It would do. It would have to do. Steve’s eyes ran quickly up and down him again. He went back, just a couple of long steps, to pull him into a brief, fierce hug.

“You’re a punk.”

“Jerk.” He hugged Steve, felt Steve’s firm pats on his back. “Be careful,” Steve said, as he pulled back, the corners of his mouth pulling down, and then as Bucky walked away again, louder, “Don’t win the war ‘til I get there.”

Bucky turned back, saluted grimly.

“C’mon, girls,” he said, walking over to where they were waiting by the fountain, putting his hand on her shoulder to guide her down the steps. “They’re playing our song.”

After that, he thought about getting drunk, really drunk, and seeing if he could fuck his date. He was pretty sure he could. He was a handsome soldier, and she was unattached, unclaimed, at the age where a nice-looking boy was a lot more fun than Monopoly.

He smiled instead and took her home. He crawled into bed in his mother’s house and rested his head against the pillow, smelling the smoke of the crowd going stale in his hair. It turned his stomach, but it wasn’t the smoke of cordite. That was something.

When the MP came in, Steve felt the familiar oh, shit in the pit of his stomach—getting caught—great. Fuck. Not the glorious ending he’d hoped for, but at least Ma was dead, because this would kill her.

But then the—doctor? He must have been a doctor—walked in. He held himself differently than the other doctors did, somehow. Shabby brown suit, ill-fitting, hanging off him. Beard verging on overgrown stubble.

“Thank you,” the doctor said to the MP in a thick German accent, quietly and dismissively, and the MP left. He turned to Steve and his voice got louder, maybe mocking. “So, you want to go overseas? Kill some Nazis?”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Excuse me?”

“Dr. Abraham Erskine. I represent the Strategic Scientific Reserve.” He held out his hand, and Steve took it, accepted the lengthy shake.

“Steve Rogers.” Erskine nodded, glancing down at the file. Steve asked, “Where are you from?”

“Queens. 73rd St and Utopia Parkway.” Dr. Erskine had a little and fuck you for asking thing going on with the corners of his mouth, and he adjusted his glasses. “Before that, Germany. This troubles you?”

“No,” Steve said, raising his eyebrows, shaking head.
Erskine started in on him about why he was there, what he wanted to do.

Steve took a breath, started to say something, started to say something different. This didn’t sound like somebody who wanted to arrest him. *Don’t screw this up.* “I don’t want to kill anyone. I don’t like bullies. I don’t care where they’re from.”

Erskine nodded, glanced sidelong at him. “Well. There are already so many big men fighting this war. Maybe what we need now is a little guy. Huh?”

Steve could feel hope leaping in his chest; at least, he was pretty sure that wasn’t just the murmur.

Erskine pushed back the curtain, leading him out of the room. “I can offer you a chance. *Only* a chance.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Good.” Erskine sounded genuinely pleased. “So where is the little guy from? *Actually.*”

“Brooklyn.”

“Congratulations, soldier.” Erskine pulled out a stamp, used it, handed the file to Steve.

Steve opened the file, and staring back up at him: 1A. He took a deep breath, and looked up smiling.

When the plane landed, Bucky was so tired—got no sleep, thinking any minute he was going to start hearing fire. He peeled himself up off the floor, and clambered out, pack in hand. The train to the camp lulled him until he almost missed his stop. He bailed off the train and stood for a minute, blinking, before he got his bearings.

When he made it to the camp, he was dead tired, looking for a cot, any cot.

“Sergeant Barnes!” somebody shouted. He picked it out.

“Doug!” he yelled back.

Doug came up, his shambling walk, familiar grin. “Hey,” he said, “good to see you. We’re stuck in Glasgow for a little while. You know the girls here are like glue? There haven’t been any good men here in way too long.”

“I don’t know if I can keep my eyes open long enough to see girls.”

“Look, we’re supposed to be heading out pretty soon. So if you want to get any socializing done, now’s the time.”

“Doug, I just wanna sleep,” he said, plaintively.

“Suit yourself.” Doug shrugged. “Come on, princess, we’re bunking over here if the beds meet your highness’s needs.”

As soon as his head hit the mattress, he was out like a light.

Steve didn’t have to do the second physical. Erskine made sure he got sent straight to Camp Lehigh.
He did have to talk to a shrink once he got there, but it was all more variations on the theme of *so you want to kill Nazis*, and one brief half-hearted attempt to get him to admit to any sexual perversions. He looked the shrink right in the eye and said, with bottomless sincerity, “Well, sir, I’ve been hoping to meet the right girl and get married, but that hasn’t happened for me yet.”

The shrink waved him out, must have passed him. He couldn’t believe it.

He took the uniform he was handed. It was huge, swimming on him, but he wasn’t about to complain. The quartermaster gave him a sharp look, daring him to say something.

He picked the cot in the Quonset hut by virtue of being the last guy to show up, so he got the only one the other guys hadn’t taken. It also had the advantage of not landing him on anyone’s shit list. Nobody tried to pick a fight over it.

Hodge was, of course, a raging asshole about Steve being in the same program as *him*, and when Steve refused to fight him (not now, not so close), Hodge kept calling him a coward and a faggot, *sissy pansy fairy*. He got a reputation he knew he wasn’t going to shake. Hodge wasn’t the only one, though he was the worst. But Steve knew. Land a punch and he could be out.

Not going to give anyone *any* excuse to send him home.

Jesus, even the socks were the size of boxing gloves on him.

They were lined up for inspection the first time he saw her.

“Recruits, attention! Gentlemen, I’m Agent Carter. I supervise all operations for this division.” Steve’s eyes slid sideways—he knew, eyes front—but he had to see her. She was *magnificent*. From her styled hair to the powerful muscles of her calves. She deserved a portrait, in oils, life-sized—

“What’s with the accent, Queen Victoria? Thought I was signing up for the US Army,” Hodge’s voice rang out, and Steve’s head turned a little towards them to catch her response.

Her face didn’t give anything away. “What’s your name, soldier?”

“Gilmore Hodge, Your Majesty.”

“Step forward, Hodge.” When he did, she specified: “Put your right foot forward.”

He grinned slyly and talked a little shit, which was how Hodge didn’t see the punch coming that knocked him flat. Steve couldn’t help it; he could feel the corners of his lips lifting into a satisfied little smile.

“Agent Carter!”

She turned around, maybe a little too quickly. “Colonel Phillips.”

“I can see that you are breaking in the candidates. That’s good.” And aside, to Hodge, “Get your ass up off the ground and stand in that line at attention until someone comes and tells you what to do.”

“Yes, sir!”

Colonel Phillips turned to glower at them. “General Patton has said that wars are fought with weapons but they are won by men. We are going to win this war because we have the best men.” (Steve caught the look his way, the weighty pause. Add Phillips to the *unimpressed* list. Impress
him.) “And because they are going to get better. Much better. The Strategic Scientific Reserve is an allied effort made up of the best minds in the free world. Our goal is to create the best army in history. But, every army starts with one man. At the end of this week, we will choose that man. He will be the first in a new breed of super-soldier. And they will personally escort Adolf Hitler to the gates of Hell.”

Steve had left instructions with Mrs. Leamy, his landlady with tender eyes and a hard narrow mouth, for mail forwarding. So far, so good; he got Bucky’s letter just a couple of days after he got to the camp.

Dear Steve,

No letters yet, but then we are in a whole new place so maybe the mail has not caught up with us yet.

Hope you are making some progress on that mural. It sounded like a lot of work but I know they will be happy with it.

Steve felt a guilty twinge. He could tell Bu—no. No, he wasn’t going to tell Bucky. He could feel it already in his gut. Bucky would worry, and Steve might not get selected, and if Bucky ended up worrying about him while he ended up back in Brooklyn anyway, what good did that do?

So he wrote back and made something up about the mural, and talked mostly about things in the national news.

“Squad, halt! That flag means we’re only at the halfway point. First man to get that flag gets to ride back with Agent Carter.”

Steve watched the other men scramble, Hodge dragging himself as far up the pole as he could manage. Steve was still bent mostly double, dragging in as much air as he could get, hands braced on his knees. Once everyone else had given up and started to fall in, he walked over to it.

He went straight for the linchpin and gave it a good tug. The pole came down smoothly, and he grabbed the flag. The sergeant stood there looking gobsmacked.

Agent Carter in the Jeep was obviously trying not to laugh, looking back over her shoulder, her hair shining in the light.

“Thank you, sir,” he said, handing it over, and hauled himself up into the Jeep.

Carter’s smile got bigger, and he watched sidelong as she tried not to laugh, curling her lips in around it.

On the way back, she didn’t talk to him much, thank God, he had no idea what to say to her. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen and I love the way you punch men taller than you weren’t great conversation starters. But she did say, “How did Dr. Erskine find you?”

“I’m not sure, ma’am,” he said. “I was trying to enlist, and he was kind enough to come in and have a few words with me.”

“I can imagine,” she said, and let it go.
Learning how to drive could have gone better. Steve was a city boy. If he needed to go somewhere, there was always the el, the subway, transit around every corner. Who needed to drive? (Every once in a while Bucky had driven him places in the family car, that big metal boat gliding around corners.)

The jeeps and trucks at Camp Lehigh were a far cry from the elegant sedans in Manhattan, more like the milk-trucks rattling around out in Brooklyn. Steve could work the pedals all right, but it was a stretch sometimes if he needed to be shifting gears on top of it.

Bryans, one of the other candidates, who’d been a farm boy and driving since he was twelve, took pity on him. He showed Steve some tricks. By the end of training, Steve could get the jeep out and around for a loop of the camp without any wobbling over the imaginary center line. His pride was bruised, but not badly.

Now, the motorcycle—that was more fun. It seemed built more for somebody like Steve, and he could lean in to it, lean in until the wind barely touched him. Why did anyone still ride horses?

He found himself, briefly, picturing Agent Carter hanging on to his waist to ride behind him. It gave him the ghost of a smile and he almost skidded out on his next turn.

Steve was going to be damned if he gave anyone an excuse to send him home, vet him, at this stage. There were calisthenics every morning, hikes most afternoons. He never complained. His lungs might be burning, he might hurt in every muscle he had, and there might be times after exercises when he could feel his heart hammering in his teeth like it was trying to escape. But he was going to do it all, everything the other guys did, and he’d do it as well as he possibly could. Better. Push. Push harder.

Agent Carter’s voice drifted to him as he levered himself up on his aching arms, his wrists feeling like they were about to splinter. “Faster, ladies! Come on. My grandmother’s more life in her, God bless her soul.” Somehow the taunts sounded even more cruel in a British accent.

They were into the jumping jacks portion of the calisthenics when he heard the shout.

“Grenade!”

*Here? How?* Didn’t matter; it was there. It was skittering across the ground, a malevolent dark blot. The guys scattered. Steve lunged for it and scrabbled with his arms to bring it under him, the hard lump pressing in under his ribs. Out of the corner of his eye he could spot Agent Carter starting to run toward him.

“Get away!” He flailed with his free arm. “Get back!”

After a few seconds, it dawned on him that it wasn’t exploding.

“Dummy grenade.”

“All clear, get back in formation.”

Steve looked up, gasping for air. What the *fuck* were they doing? “Is this a test?”

Colonel Phillips was glowering. “He’s still skinny,” he said in a voice that probably wasn’t intended for Steve to hear.
Dr. Erskine gave him a fond smile, self-satisfied.

Steve’s birthday came and went, unremarked. Except that he got a letter from Bucky—which immediately sent a wave of something like paralyzing guilt through him; he hadn’t written since that first letter, and even though Bucky always talked about how unreliable the mail was overseas he was probably worrying—and also Erskine (who else would have?) left a bottle of beer under his pillow. He looked at it, smiling, before the other guys started to filter back in; when he heard the door creak he stashed it again. Save it for a rainy day, Rogers.

But he settled in with the letter.

Dear Steve,

I’m in fog country again, but it is not that bad out right now. Some of the locals are telling me this is enough summer. I would have to cordially disagree. But at least it does not get sweltering, like it always did back home. I do not miss being about a million degrees and sleeping on your crappy roof.

We are probably headed for action in the not too distant future, so any prayers you feel like saying for my soul (or paying someone else to say) would be in order. There are great chaplains over here, really. I missed them when I was back home. The priests back there have no idea.

There are things it is tough to ask for absolution for. I don’t think there is any amount of Hail Marys that would get me out of this one.

I hope you are safe and well. Mom says in her last letter that you have not been by in a couple days. She worries. Of course she worries, but I mean you need to eat and it’s not like she isn’t cooking for everybody anyway.

Love,

Bucky

“Steven,” said Dr. Erskine, “a moment, if you please.”

“Yes, sir,” said Steve, setting aside his book and sitting up. It was evening—aft dinner—and he’d been looking forward to this chapter, on formations for land battles. But Dr. Erskine wasn’t someone he wanted to keep waiting.

Dr. Erskine came to sit on the cot next to his, and said, evenly, “Steven, I have made the choice of who to select for the experiment.”

“Oh,” said Steve, whose heart was suddenly thundering again. Dr. Erskine looked grave and that meant—he wasn’t—was he. Christ. Back home again, this time without a job or an apartment. They’d taken him this far, maybe they’d let him—sort mail, or something, a desk job. Anything. He’d beg.

“Will you do it?” Erskine’s eyebrows lifted a little, at the end, and the note in his voice was profoundly sad.

It took a long minute for Steve to process that, and then, through the blood rushing in his ears, he
said, “Yeah. Yes. Of course.”

“You may die,” said Dr. Erskine. “In fact, it is quite likely. This will not be the first time this has been tested on a human. Previous tests were not successful.”

“I don’t care,” said Steve.

Dr. Erskine still looked sad, but he smiled a little, and said, “I did not think you would.”

Hodge just about had an apoplexy when he found out, but the rest of the guys were pretty decent about it. They got shipped out almost immediately. He didn’t know what happened to most of them.

The idea that they were going to Italy next didn’t really sink in for Bucky until they were on ships. This was familiar, at least. The long chug out to sea, high in the north so the air was frosty on his face, and then the turn back, so they could slide into the Mediterranean, that was a little new, but the constant high-alert hum of waiting for the Jerries to spot them—any minute now. Any minute now there’d be the scream of a torpedo. There’d be a U-boat. It was just a matter of time. The hours dragged by.

They got close, and closer. Bucky shrugged into his gear. He got his men and went to wait by the landing craft in the darkness, chill with wind coming off the water. No torpedoes.

Finally it was time: down the side of the ship, fingers half-numb already on the nets, and into the Higgins boats. The waves crashing up over their heads, over the high walls of the craft, loud as bombs, and all the guys getting seasick, puking all over everything. It was like being in Hell, except in Hell at least you knew you were already dead, and the worst had happened.

Here, the worst was always possible. And could happen any time.

Sicily was—he made it through Sicily just fine.

They were clearing a building when he came across a Nazi, who had his back to Bucky. He had a gun in his belt. Bucky was so close, tripping over him, there wasn’t room to get his rifle up, to shoot clean.

He got his arm around the guy’s neck and just hauled back with everything he had. He wasn’t powerful enough to snap the neck, so he had to hang on until the guy’s hands stopped scrabbling fruitlessly at his arm, stopped struggling, and then longer, just to make sure.

He left the body there, didn’t say anything about it. The other sergeant gave him a funny look when he came back out and gave the OK sign. That was it.

Dr. Erskine came back, the night before the experiment.

“Why me?” asked Steve, when he’d worked up the nerve for it.

Dr. Erskine paused before answering. “I suppose that is the only question that matters. This is from Ausberg.” Tipping the dark bottle so the label was in the light, he glanced down at the label. He told Steve about Schmidt, power-mad, Hitler’s tool. And a trial of the serum.
“Did it make him stronger?” Steve could feel his pulse pounding. The Holy Grail of a lifetime. Stronger, and a soldier, and he could finally go overseas. Maybe a unit full of men like him, and they’d—

“Ja. But,” tilting his head, “there were... other effects. The serum wasn’t ready. But more important, the man. The serum amplifies everything that is inside. So good becomes great. Bad becomes worse. This is why you were chosen. Because a strong man, who has known power all his life, will lose respect for that power. But a weak man knows the value of strength and knows compassion.”

“Thanks. I think.”

Erskine drew in a breath as a hiss. “Whatever happens tomorrow,” he said, pouring the glasses, “you must promise me one thing. That you will stay who you are. Not a perfect soldier, but a good man.” Pointing at his chest with good and man.

“To the little guys.”

Steve said, after watching Erskine drink for a few more minutes, “Will you do me a favor?”

“What is it?”

He pulled an envelope out from where it was tucked into a book. “If I, if I don’t make it, will you send this? It’s—he’s my next of kin. Nobody else left.”

Erskine took the letter and nodded slowly.

The letter wasn’t much. Just to tell Buck he’d tried. And failed. But died trying, at least.

The Army dumped them in Brooklyn the night before, at the “secret” base in the park that everybody knew about, but Steve didn’t try to see anyone; he was a test subject, and anyway, there was no one to see.

The morning of the procedure, Agent Carter knocked on his door. He’d been up for a while, already dressed and ready. She escorted him to the test site. Watching the neighborhood go by—it was funny, he hadn’t been away for that long. But it already felt old, alien. Even the familiar places, it was like he was looking at them through the wrong glasses.

“I know this neighborhood. I got beat up in that alley.” Pointing out the window. “And that parking lot. And behind that diner.” He looked down, after that, at his lap.

“Did you have something against running away?” Her eyes were forward, but her voice just had a kind of gentle curiosity. A little dubious, maybe.

He shook his head, looking over towards her but not meeting her eyes. “You start running, they’ll never let you stop. If you stand up, push back, they can’t say no forever, right?”

“I know a little of what that’s like. To have every door shut in your face.” She glanced briefly over at him.

“Guess I just don’t know why you’d want to join the army if you were a beautiful dame. Or a beautiful—a woman. An agent. Not a dame. You are beautiful, but.” Christ, what was he doing?

Watching him, a little smile on her lips, she said, “You have no idea how to talk to a woman, do
you?"

“I think this is the longest conversation I’ve had with one.” He grinned in spite of himself, but it fell off his face. “Women aren’t exactly lining up to dance with a guy they might step on.” It came out—bitter, and ugly, and he didn’t like that. It sounded like he blamed the—well, maybe he did. But he shouldn’t. He knew that.

“You must have danced.” Her accent dragged out the a in danced, softened it like pity, and that made it worse. But he was settling in to this, awkward as it was.

He shrugged a little. “Well, asking a woman to dance always seemed so terrifying.” (That part wasn’t a lie.) “And the past few years it just didn’t seem to matter much.” (Also not a lie.) “Figured I’d wait.”

“For what?”

“The right partner.”

Getting out of the car, still flustered over the conversation, he pulled his hat off, and only realized what he was doing and went to put it back on just as they walked into the building.

Through heavy pair of dark curtains, and bookshelves swinging back. It felt like walking into a mystery. Steve looked sideways, to Agent Carter, glanced back at the MPs; she looked perfectly composed. When they got into the experimental chamber, he walked right up to the edge, staring over the railing at the hive of activity below. His treacherous heart thrilled, the beat like a vibration in his chest. He looked over to Agent Carter again. Her eyes met his, and the fear in them was not reassuring. She turned and headed down the steps. He followed her.

“Good morning,” said Dr. Erskine, quietly and kindly, shaking his hand. A flashbulb went off much too close to their faces. “Please, not now,” he said, testily, and the photographer faded back.

He turned back to Steve. “Are you ready? Good. Take off your shirt, your tie, and your hat.”

Steve glanced back at Agent Carter, and then started taking it off. He had to climb up a metal stepladder just to get up to where he could lie down on the chair. It was imposing, in black leather and steel. Goosebumps came up on his skin from the chill of it.

“Comfortable?” asked Dr. Erskine.

“It’s a little bit big.” They traded a little laugh. “Save me any of that schnapps?”

“Not as much as I should have, sorry. Next time. Mr. Stark, how are your levels?”

“One hundred percent. We may dim half the lights in Brooklyn, but we are ready. As we’ll ever be.”

Erskine reminded Agent Carter to go back to the observation deck, but she twisted to look back at Steve before she went.

Erskine’s speech to the observers rumbled in Steve’s ears. His voice was pleasant, a little gritty. He sounded calm—not serene—but calm. The leather was warming against Steve’s back.

“We begin with a series of micro-injections into the subject’s major muscle groups. The serum will cause immediate change. Then, to stimulate growth, the subject will be saturated with Vita-Rays.”
The cold pads come down over his chest, and the ranks of needles lined up in the pieces that fit over his arms. A nurse with a regular syringe stood to his left, just out of his good line of sight now, and gave him an injection in the arm. He glanced up Dr. Erskine and said, “That wasn’t so bad.”

Erskine made a little wry, half-regretful face. “That was penicillin.” Steve frowned at him—for what—VD? He couldn’t think—but there wasn’t time left to think. The countdown started.

“Serum infusion beginning in 5. 4. 3. 2. 1.”

Now this, this hurt. He was clenching his eyes, his jaws. His eyes flew open—the pain in every major muscle group—was it unbearable? No. No. He’d bear it. He’d borne worse. Into his head came an image, unbidden: a child in short pants, wearing a gas mask, carrying a gun. Ready to march, goose-stepping. It was from that exhibit downtown, hastily sculpted but haunting, and it got bigger and bigger in his mind’s eye. Bucky’s face. No. Gas mask, slow suffocation. Militarization of Children. This. This is what it’s for. He held onto it. The pain crested, started to subside.

“Now, Mr. Stark.”

The chair tilted upward, and the lid began to close, like a coffin, like an iron lung, his brain suddenly filling in that picture in a sharp panic. Steve had to breathe, had to breathe carefully. Like an asthma attack, Steve, count through it, count through it (Bucky’s voice, his ma’s), one, two, three, the child in a gas mask, the lid was shutting with a heavy clunk. Breathe. Breathe. There was a knock on the lid. “Steven? Can you hear me?”

He took a deep breath. He could, his lungs still worked. Make a joke. Use the part of your mind that remembers how. “It’s probably too late to go to the bathroom, right?”

He heard, as if from a great distance, “We will proceed.”

Oh, so the pain from the injections had only been the beginning. That had been topical pain, surface, superficial. On and in him but not part of him. This was different; this new pain penetrated into his organs, his bones. It poured through him like water. He had no body. He was only the light, and the light was the pain. There was a noise, swelling, louder and louder, and he realized dimly that it was him. Someone outside was yelling shut it down! Shut it down! Steven! Banging on the lid.

“Kill the reactor!”

He forced his mouth to work. “No! Don’t! I can do this!”

The light was blinding even through his closed eyelids, absurdly bright. Until it softened and died. Something died in him with that light. There was some part of him that was gone, now, that had lived out a petty eternity in between the light going on and the light going off.

There was the soft whine of the machinery winding down, and then it opened. He was taking huge, gasping breaths—head lolling on his shoulders—he couldn’t hold it up. He was so tired.

There were people there, immediately, to support him. Like nurses, or like his ma and Bucky, helping him up to the bathroom in the middle of a fever that left him weak. The room was disorienting, at a new, strange angle. “Did it,” he muttered, slurring in exhaustion.

“Ja,” said Dr. Erskine, with something like tenderness. “I think we did.”

“You actually did it.”

Agent Carter was standing in front of him. It was hard to make his eyes focus, to make her come into
focus. “How do you feel?”


“How. Um. You look taller.” Her hand darted out to, just for a split second, touch his chest.

He saw Erskine look up, saw his face go still and afraid. And then the explosion, and shots rang out. Erskine’s shirt went red in a small, deadly circle. And Steve dropped to his knees by Erskine, hearing Agent Carter shooting, but unable to make sense of the noise yet.

Erskine tapped his chest, twice. And his eyes shut, and he sagged into death.

Steve started running. And he didn’t stop, ran like he had only run in his dreams before. He crashed into Agent Carter and apologized, but started running again as soon as he could get back on his feet. *All that practice getting back up was good for something.* He didn’t stop, even with broken glass in his feet stabbing him with every step, even getting shot at through the roof of the taxi, until he was kneeling over a HYDRA agent who was laughing into his face and then dying.

“Who the hell are you?”

“The first of many. Cut off one head, two more shall take its place. Heil HYDRA!”

Two dead men in one day, the first men he’d ever seen die like that, so close, so very personal. It was a hell of a day.

It was there at the docks, standing there, dripping wet, that he finally looked down and really saw himself.

He thought about writing to Bucky. He did. But what the hell was he going to say?

“Think you got enough?”

“Any hope of reproducing the program is locked in your genetic code. But without Dr. Erskine, it will take years.”

“He deserved more than this.”

“If it could work only once, he’d be proud it was you.” He looked over at her, and she looked up, back, at him. He had a fragmentary image of kissing her—it would be so—but his arm stung from the needle. He could feel his body trying to heal around the mark already.

Arguing with Phillips about whether he should be part of the team tracking down HYDRA was useless.

“I asked for an army and all I got was you. You are not enough.”

The Senator walked up after Phillips had moved away. He was jiggling his hat in his hand, looking smug and sly. “With all due respect to the Colonel, I think we may be missing the point. I’ve seen you in action, Steve. More importantly, the country’s seen it. Paper!” The aide handed him one. “Enlistment lines have been around the block since your picture hit the newsstands. You don’t take a soldier, a symbol like that, and hide him in a lab. Son,” clapping his hand on Steve’s shoulder, “do you want to serve your country on the most important battlefield of a war?”
“Sir, that’s all I want.”

“Then congratulations.” He shook Steve’s hand. “You just got promoted.”

Steve breathed out hard. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Nothing to it. Sell a few bonds, bonds buy bullets, bullets kill Nazis. Bing, bang, boom, you’re an American hero.”

“It’s just not how I pictured getting there.”

“The Senator’s got a lot of pull up on the Hill. You play ball with us, you’ll be leading your own platoon in no time. Take the shield. Go!” And the guy shoved him through the curtains.

If this was a test, well, why not? There had been tests before. So Steve started practicing. He worked on his lines when he was pretty sure he was alone; and then, he started working on them in front of the girls. They made him sand down the Brooklyn edges. “Nobody wants to hear a hero who sounds like a street rat,” said Gertie. She’d had professional elocution lessons, and she taught him to make his $os$ sound round and high-class, to make sure he stopped dropping $gs$ on the ends of words. “Project,” she said, a command, “enunciate.”

He had never thought, before, about how much work had to go into a sentence to make it sound sincere. He kept thinking about Bucky, smiling and cocky as all hell, and how Bucky would put that on and take it off when it suited him. And how long had it been? How long had Bucky been doing that? Not when they were kids, no, he’d learned it, picked it up somewhere along the way. When they were teenagers, maybe. By the time he started—no, by the time Steve was—no. He couldn’t pin it down. There had to be a time, though. There had to be a division between the Bucky he remembered standing there in the street with a ball in his hand, and the Bucky he remembered walking away from him at the Expo.

When had Bucky started putting it on when it was just them? He must have, because it had been—it had been a shock when he hadn’t, when they came home that last time, Bucky’s hand on his face. The look on Bucky’s face.

“We can’t all drive tanks,” he said, with a smile he had practiced in the mirror and in front of the girls who would put up with him until even Marlene agreed it was winning. Marlene was a tough sell. She’d been in Hollywood and she’d been on Broadway, and she’d met stars so big she swore their names alone would make Steve wet himself.

One night, just a couple of cities in, the girls tried to get him drunk. Everybody was backstage after the show and Sylvia said, “Hey, Cap, you want to get a little toasty?”

“What?” he asked, absently, scrubbing at his face with the edge of a towel as he peered into the mirror, trying to get the last of the cold cream out of the crease around his nose.

“I’ve got gin,” said Sylvia. “I was saving it, but I don’t know what for.”

“Oh, let’s drink the gin,” said Alma. “I could use something to take the edge off. My feet are killing me.”

“What do you say, Cap?” asked Lorraine. “Going to join us?”
He said, “Sure,” even though it was going to be a waste of their gin. Why not. The girls hadn’t
generally liked him at first, had taken a while to hash out that nobody was going to touch him, that he
wasn’t going to touch anybody, that he wasn’t going to play favorites. (It was, of course, misleading.
Marlene, with her hard eyes, and quiet Julia, who had taken over mending his costume, were his
favorites. But no one needed to know that.)

They sat around the girls’ rooms, about a dozen of them packed into one of the little spaces. “To
getting in the movies,” said Wanda, who had beautiful teeth, white and even and pearly, and shining
completely artificial bleached hair, and who had to be the least modest of all of them. Steve had seen
her in states he’d never imagined he’d see a woman like her.

“To the movies,” echoed Sylvia, who had dug out the bottle and was slooshing the gin into the little
glasses they’d rustled up from the hotel kitchen.

“What do you think?” Velma said to him, leaning back against Marlene’s shoulders. Her breasts
were huge, looked soft and pillowy, and it was only a lifetime of training that let him keep his eyes
on her eyes. “Are they going to make movies with us?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “They don’t tell me much.”

“Do the voice, do the voice!” said Phyllis, leaning forward off one of the cots the hotel staff had
pulled out for them.

He rolled his eyes. “Come on, Phyl.”

“Do it!”

He took a deep breath. “I don’t know,” he boomed, voice resonant and clear in the confines of the
little room, too loud. “They don’t tell me much.”

“There we go!” cackled Phyllis. “There’s our boy.”

“Right,” said Lorraine, sipping her gin.

Steve couldn’t remember ever imagining that he’d be in a situation like this, sitting in a dingy hotel
room full of beautiful girls in various states of undress, but if he had, he would have bet it would
have been a little like this—knowing that none of them would try anything with him.

“Drink up,” said Marlene, and Steve obeyed.

“So, Cap,” said Sylvia from where she was sprawled on the floor, twisting to look at him. “Where’s
your girlfriend?”

“Don’t know anybody answering that description,” he said, setting down his empty glass. Alma
made a face at him and refilled it.

“No, for real,” said Velma, sounding almost bored. “You’re really something. Tell us.”

“Haven’t we been good?” asked Phyllis, licking a stray splash of gin off her mouth. Her lips were
still a little dark from the lipstick, even though she’d gotten most of it off. “Don’t we deserve to
know?”

Steve shook his head. “Doesn’t matter how good you’ve been. There’s nothing to know.”

Sylvia was squinting at him in level disbelief. “You just don’t want her to know you’re fucking
around on the road?” she asked, knowingly.

“Nope. No one to know. And nothing to know.”

As long as the grilling went on, and it did continue, in between snippets of stories from the girls about their boyfriends back home, men they’d met on the road, love and loss, he kept saying, *Nothing to tell.* And it was true, wasn’t it. No girl back home. No girl anywhere. The closest he had to something with a girl was Agent Carter, and she was in Europe, well out of reach.

*You must have danced.* Christ, that could still sting.

Between the shooting and then the constant travel and sharing rooms, it took a week or two after the —the transformation before Steve was alone and in a state to do much about it.

It was a single room at a seedy hotel. It was the size of a broom closet, in fact might have actually been a broom closet, but he had it to himself for the night.

The show that day had gone over well. His feet never got tired anymore, not like they used to when he’d been standing at the drugstore or hovering over his students’ shoulders. His head didn’t hurt, nothing ached from the noise, his throat was clear despite all the perfume.

He was curled up on his side—hard to break the habits of a lifetime, hard to sleep any differently, even though he wasn’t cold, might never be really cold again.

He gently cupped his cock through his pajamas, and it twitched obligingly. *Nothing hurts,* he thought, and pressed harder, grinding down against it. It pulsed, hardening, and he slipped his hand under his pajamas, wrapping his hand around himself.

For a minute there was the disconcerting sensation of something happening in stereo: he was touching a cock, but it wasn’t his; a hand was touching his cock, but it wasn’t his. He inhaled sharply, silently, and started jerking himself roughly.

*A big hand on his cock, a big cock under his hand*

*A big hand on*

He came biting the back of his other hand, hard. It was never quite like that again.

Steve got a letter forwarded to him while he was on the road, which was maybe more than he really wanted the US Army to do for him.

It was short, scribbled really, V-mail with two addresses crossed out on the envelope. Bucky said, *Well, we won. Sicily is all Allied now. Have not gotten any letters in a while, the mail out here is atrocious. Mom’s are coming through, though, and she says she has not heard from you in ages. Are you ok? Let me know.*

He saw Julia seeing him holding an envelope, and she raised her eyebrows, but didn’t say anything—put her index finger up in front of her mouth. He felt a wash of relief and gratitude.

In Catania, Bucky thought to himself, *Christ, I hope they didn’t take him.* And when he talked to the
chaplain, he said as much. He said, “I want us to win as much as anybody, but I want him out of it. I want him safe. He’s my best friend.”

“Friendship is very important, son,” the chaplain said. “It is one of the things that can sustain the soul through times like these. I believe in my heart that your friend is writing, and that his letters are delayed, but if that is not the case, then he has good reasons.”

“Yeah,” said Bucky, “see, good reasons are exactly what I’m afraid of.”

“Who’s strong and brave, here to save the American Way?”

A couple of the meaner girls thought it was funny to whisper dirty things to him backstage, right before a show, to see if they could make Captain America blush and stutter. It only got to him the first couple of times; after that, he learned to listen to whispers of You ever thought about the crowd seeing you naked, staring at your cock? and You ever come on a pair of big, sweet titties, Cap? without flinching.

It was an education.

“Maybe you are a virgin,” said Sylvia, settling back into the bench. The truck’s engine rumbled under them.

“Maybe I never said that,” said Steve, comfortably. It was an act, but he was getting better at that.

She glanced sideways at him and snorted in disbelief. “You’re really something,” she said, and it wasn’t a compliment, or even an insult, necessarily.

“No, see,” she said, wrapping his hand around her waist, which was tightly encased in a girdle—he could feel it slick and unyielding under the thin fabric of her dress, “you have to hold like this and then step this way—come on, you have to lead. I’m trying to show you how you lead, you can’t just do what I’m doing.”

He sighed. “You sure you want to do this?”

“It’s fine,” she said, shaking her head a little, the curlers wiggling under the headscarf. “Just don’t step on my feet. Or loan me your boots if you can’t help it.”

He stepped on her toes, but didn’t break anything, and she was very nice about it.
“Who vows to fight for what’s right, night and day?”

As the newspapers picked him up, there was a steady increase in public attention. More and more people, mostly women, waiting at stage doors. Things to sign, babies to kiss. He did it all, smiling the whole time.

“You have to smile with your eyes,” said Marlene, “or you look like the insincere fucker you really are.”

He smiled with his eyes.

Sometimes the women got handsy. He was pulling off his cowl in the barracks tent they were staying at in this city, a divider hung up between where he and Barry were staying and the girls’ side, and he sighed and ran his hand through his hair.

“Gets to you, doesn’t it?” said Wanda.

He looked up. She was stripping out of the costume with clinical efficiency in what could only be described as public space. He looked away again—maybe slower than he should—maybe on purpose.

“What does?”

“All the touching.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s the problem with being beautiful,” she said, flashing him a smile that was all sharp white teeth as she bent over and started rolling her stockings down. “People think you’re public property.”

“I think I am,” he said, “legally speaking.”

She laughed out loud and grabbed her shoes up off the floor in one hand before she walked back to the girls’ side.

“Series E defense bonds! Each one you buy is a bullet in the barrel of your best guy’s gun.”

A flashbulb went off in his face as he smiled at a woman whose photo of him he was signing.

The picture was in the papers the next day. Slow news day.

For some reason, fans liked to give him things, and one of the things he’d been handed recently was a copy of Leaves of Grass. It made him smile—he remembered book reports on Whitman, what, ten years ago, the teacher’s conspiratorial smile, the suggestion that this material was adult but Steve would be entrusted with it.

He cracked it open, and found it very different than he remembered it.

*Man or woman, I might tell how I like you, but cannot,*

*And might tell what it is in me and what it is in you, but cannot,*

*And might tell that pining I have, that pulse of my nights and days.*
Behold, I do not give lectures or a little charity,
When I give I give myself.

He closed it, and set it aside, that night, with the lightbulb shining grimly over the barren little room he was sharing with Barry and Al.

“Something bothering you?” asked Barry, who had his nose in a new Raymond Chandler mystery. He refused to actually grow the mustache, so he was always red around the lip from the spirit gum.

“Nah,” said Steve. “Just, I had to read this book in school.”

“Oh, those are no good. Just leave it behind.”

He didn’t. He opened it again on the road the next day.

My rendezvous is appointed, it is certain,
The Lord will be there and wait till I come on perfect terms,
The great Camerado, the love true for whom I pine will be there.

“Who will campaign door to door for America, carry the flag for America, Hoboken to Spokane, the Star-Spangled Man with a plan!”

“Looks like you’re getting your wish,” he said to Phyllis. “They’re going to do a couple of movie spots for newsreels.”

She grinned. “Can’t wait.”

It turned out there were fewer chorus girls in the movie shorts, but they still got their faces in a couple, and Steve liked the change of pace. It felt awkward at first, but he got used to the bandolier of bullets draped across his chest, walking in place in front of a projection screen, crouching in front of prop tanks that couldn’t have limped across a studio. Besides, he was already used to the makeup process, and it was nice to have somebody else to do it for him.

“Cut! Guys, don’t look at the camera.”

On a break, one of the grips brushed up against him at the snack table. He glanced up, ready to apologize, but the set of the man’s face, the ways his eyes roamed down before coming back up to meet his, suggested it had not been accident. The words died on his lips, and there was a long minute before the grip shrugged and smiled and said, “Sorry, Cap,” and walked off.

When he went to a screening for the longest movie, he slumped down in his seat, but he couldn’t quite keep the smile off his face. What a fine, silly thing, Steve Rogers in the movies.

That night he picked up the book again. He kept setting it down and not picking it up again for days at a time, maybe a week. Sometimes reading it felt like a physical blow, like he had to bear up under it.

The boy I love, the same becomes a man not through derived power, but in his own right,
Wicked rather than virtuous out of conformity or fear,
Fond of his sweetheart, relishing well his steak,
Unrequited love or a slight cutting him worse than sharp steel cuts,
First-rate to ride, to fight, to hit the bull’s eye, to sail a skiff, to sing a song or play on the banjo,
Preferring scars and the beard and faces pitted with small-pox over all latherers,
And those well-tann’d to those that keep out of the sun.

“Steve? Steve.”

“Hmm? Yeah, sorry,” he said, looking up.

Al was frowning at him. “I wanted to know if you’re going to wear the helmet for the bit tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I think so. Right? It goes with that number—”

“Yeah, yeah, I think so.”

...the expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face,
It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists,
It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and knees, dress does not hide him
The strong sweet quality he had strikes through the cotton and broadcloth,
To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more,
You linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side.

Bucky knew one of the guys in the company was a fairy. Hell, everybody knew. He didn’t even try to hide it—he was the chaplain’s assistant, knew how to sing, sewed half the costumes for the shows the guys put on.

Sometimes Bucky would see him on his knees behind the canteen, the fabric of somebody’s slacks puddled around their ankles on the ground, but he always looked away, always made himself walk away.

Nobody gave the guy shit. Mostly. Yet.

“We all know this is about trying to win the war. We can’t do that without bullets and bandages, tanks and tents. That’s where you come in. Every bond you buy will help protect someone you love and keep our boys on the ready. The Germans will think twice about trying to get the drop on us.”

He turned around and punched Barry, who was really an entirely adequate Hitler, to a cymbal crash. The chorus girls were all smiles, lacing their hands together over their hearts.

He hoisted the motorcycle loaded with three chorus girls over his head, and there were thundering sound effects for fake artillery fire. Everything was so bright, brightly colored, beautiful. Nothing like
the grim backstages, mildewing carpet, smell of diesel on the truck.

He was trying to fall asleep, lying in the swaying truckbed, and he thought, *I wonder what real artillery fire is like*, and thought *I should send*, and knew he wasn’t going to.

_Have you ever loved the body of a woman?_

_Have you ever loved the body of a man?_

_Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all in all nations and times all over the earth?_

Sitting in a hastily thrown-together theater in Catania, really an overgrown tent with ideas above its station, Bucky settled in to watch a war movie.

There were a couple of shorts first. A newsreel, and then some promotional something, with a guy who was—well, built like a brick shithouse. Flailing a shield around. Captain America. They didn’t take long thinking that one up, and what was going on with that stupid hood with little wings on the side?

But the guy, he looked like something out of Steve’s old bodybuilding magazines. And if Steve had ever had any notion what Bucky borrowed them for—well. Sure. Exercises. Some of them a little more for the forearm than others.

He tried to pay attention to the plot, but it was tough. And not really worth it.

Sitting in his bunk after one of the shows, Steve wasn’t even sure which city they were in. There were a lot of states, and he’d been criss-crossing them, never more than a couple of days in the same one. Always on to another city, another show.

He stared at the paper. It had been too long, way too long. Bucky was worried about him. Bucky was in Sicily, Bucky was probably bored out of his mind now that the Germans had retreated. (God, he hoped Bucky was bored.)

He started. *Dear Bucky*. That part was easy.

*I’m sorry it’s been taking me so long to write. I’ve been pretty busy, and I’m tired, but I am safe. So far so good, no raids on Brooklyn.*

*With everything getting rationed, I figured maybe I should change digs. I have a neighbor who makes sure I get my mail, though, so keep sending it to the old address. I might move again pretty soon so there’s no use giving you the new one, I’d just have to change it again. This way I just have to keep one person updated.*

*I hope you are doing okay over there. The news made it sound pretty hairy.*

*Love,*

*Steve*
When he got the letter and saw Steve Rogers on the envelope, Bucky let out a breath he’d been holding every day at mail call for weeks.

He wasn’t dead. Okay. And the return address was—huh, somewhere in bumfuck Nevada? Well, whatever. Maybe Steve was taking a road trip or something. Helping somebody paint a mural, what the fuck ever.

The letter didn’t clarify that much, and Bucky flipped the envelope back over and glared at the tiny print. Half-smeared, like Steve wanted to make sure he didn’t know where it was coming from. He checked it against the second address.

No. They wouldn’t take him.

He asked one of the guys from Nevada where the town was and whether there was a base near there. There wasn’t. That was good.

There was a sketch in the margin that had come through the microfilm transfers, light and a little broken but still there. It was Steve giving him the thumbs-up. He shook his head—such a punk kid—but that was the one he stuffed in his pocket, alongside his cigarettes.

The USO shows were nice, always a distraction. It could get hard to hear sometimes, with all the guys—thousands of them, tens of thousands—cramped into stadiums that had been half-bombed out. Messina wasn’t any different, but the guy on stage was doing enough slapstick that Bucky didn’t need to be able to hear perfectly to get the gist. The Tommies had rolled out the day before, a line of tanks leaving town, and everybody knew it was going to be their turn shortly.

The guy on stage was introduced as the Clown Prince of Baseball, and he did a bunch of skits about things going wrong at a game. He started off by asking if there were any guys from Brooklyn there, and when a guy just a couple rows down from Bucky stood up and waved vigorously, somebody else yelled something uncomplimentary about the Dodgers and they got a solid five minutes of material out of that. He laughed, hard, and it felt rusty but good.

The next morning, they were on the move.

The offensive up the peninsula wasn’t good. But it was better than Africa. There were Jerries everywhere, around every damn corner, but they were actually on the move, forcing them back and back and back.

“You’re going to see the boys in Europe,” said Al, and Steve sat straight up, letting his boot fall to the ground.

“Really?” He’d been suggesting it for weeks. Getting close to begging for it.

“Yeah, we’re working with the USO. We’re flying out in a couple days. Don’t know when. Don’t tell anybody. I’m warning the girls but that’s it, nobody else gets to know. Barry ain’t coming with us, nobody wants to see a fake Hitler out there and he might get some attention he don’t want.”

He tamped down the urge to write to Bucky, ask where he was. He should have—he’d have time. He’d find out.
Christ, what was he going to say to Bucky? What was Bucky going to say when he saw Steve?

_Without shame the man I like knows and avows the deliciousness of his sex,_

_Without shame the woman I like knows and avows hers._

When they got to Italy, they started in the south, where it had been safe the longest. They worked their way up, the girls singing and dancing as Steve bellowed patriotic things. The girls were more popular than Steve pretty much everywhere, but then again, they had better legs.

Where Steve actually did okay was in the hospitals. He’d stop in, and smile, and somebody would take pictures of him with the guys who were laid up. He saw guys missing limbs—well, missing just about everything, especially the basket cases. No arms or legs left. Just had to get carted around in baskets like babies in bassinets.

He did sketches for them, which it turned out they loved. Artists would come through sometimes and do drawings, sometimes caricatures, sometimes taking requests, and Steve was enough of an artist to make it work. He drew more than a few pin-up girls while he was there, but he mostly drew the boys—their faces, still animated and bright while they talked about their favorite baseball teams or what celebrities were up to, something they’d been reading in Stars and Stripes or the weekly. He could always get a laugh out of them by bemoaning the fate of the Dodgers. Some of them said they were keeping the sketches, but most said they were going to send them home.

So maybe he wasn’t the hero he’d dreamed. At least the hospitals were something. The reek of carbolic acid reminded him of his ma, anyway, and there were more than a few minutes he lost slipping into memories that felt bright and soft-edged, her voice humming something he could just barely remember in their kitchen. Her bare feet padding across the floor in the night when she’d come in with her shoes off, trying not to wake him up.

_(what indeed is finally beautiful except death and love?)_

“Orchids to Captain America,” ran a page two item in Stars and Stripes, “for knowing when to keep his mouth shut; he hasn’t tried to kiss any babies or baby-faced doughboys since starting his whirlwind tour of Italy, but he has drawn some nice pictures for our boys in the hospital. We think some of them might not pass the censor, and that’s reason enough to be glad the guy in the winged hood is out here, even if he isn’t punching any Nazis in the face.”

Marlene read it to him and said, “You believe the nerve? Not even mentioning us.”

“They just couldn’t figure out the words to say how lovely and charming and talented you were.”

“They better find some,” she said, and laughed, leaning back on the bus bench. It was making Steve’s ass go numb, but she sprawled out like she owned it.

“Marlene,” he said, “you’re a rare treasure. Never change.”

_But when I hear of the brotherhood of lovers, how it was with them,
How together through life, through dangers, odium, unchanging, long and long,

Through youth and through middle and old age, how unaltering, how affectionate and faithful they were,

Then I am pensive—I hastily look away fill’d with the bitterest envy.

He called in a favor, through Al’s oblique channels, and when Marlene opened up the paper four days later she laughed out loud. “Steve, you asshole,” she said, fondly.

“Whatever do you mean?” he asked, raising his eyebrows.

“There’s a letter from a Pfc. Rogers about how the best part of the Captain America show is the ‘lovely, long-legged, lithe and lissome dancers, whose voices are like the radiance of angels.’”

“Fella must have good taste.”

“Don’t think I don’t know it was you, buster.”

“Me? I would never. I’m no shill.”

She smacked his leg. “Honey, if you weren’t off-limits I’d have you for breakfast. Now get your fucking boots off my gear or I’ll slit your throat and spare the Jerries the trouble.”

...merely of two simple men I saw to-day on the pier in the midst of the crowd, parting the parting of dear friends,

The one to remain hung on the other’s neck and passionately kiss’d him,

While the one to depart tightly prest the one to remain in his arms.

Bucky’d been dug into a foxhole for almost a week, relief supposed to show up any fucking time now, when the fucking blue light spitting tank showed up.

When the Jerries got to them, there weren’t a lot of options. Surrender or die.

Bucky was a lot of things, but suicidal wasn’t one of them. So he nodded grimly to the guys, and one by one, they put their hands up. Maybe the guys in positions further back were going to get away from this one. But Bucky’d gotten lucky a lot of times in a row, and this was it. Time was up.

“For you, the war is over,” said the Jerry that captured him. Laughing. Then repeated it in German, then in English again. These ones had different uniforms than all the others they’d seen, black and sleek. Goggles that made their eyes invisible.

They hadn’t heard a lot about POW camps, but Bucky had a bad feeling as soon as he saw theirs. It wasn’t a camp, really. It was a factory. And from the beginning, the Jerries didn’t do anything the trainings said they were supposed to, which gave Bucky a real bad feeling about their odds of getting out of there alive.

There were already guys there, a couple hundred at least, crammed into cages that held maybe a
platoon each. When they dumped him in he was groaning, and somebody said, “Who’s the new guy?”

“Bucky,” he said, and gasped as he levered himself up to sit with his back against the cage.

“Nice,” said the guy, who turned out to be Japanese-American. “That’s a stupid name.”

Bucky said, “I will get back to you when I come up with a comeback for that.”

“I’ll be waiting with bated breath, Ace,” said the guy. He turned out to be named Jim Morita and Bucky liked him, because Morita was always ready to give absolutely everybody shit.

They got food (barely) and water (regularly enough), and a bucket for a bathroom. They all smelled like hell all of the time, but Bucky got used to it. After being in the trenches, this was just maybe one level worse. And at least the guys could take their boots off. Some had had their boots taken off for them, and they figured it was to help keep them from running. Not that anyone had much of a chance—or inclination—to run. They’d seen the blue-light weapons.

It didn’t take long for the guards to start picking at them. Bucky’s German, he kept secret. They might screw up and say something in front of him. Mostly, they talked shit to each other, which prisoners they figured for weaklings, which ones looked strong enough to bet on how long they’d last. He hated them for that. Sometimes the conversation drifted and he couldn’t quite follow it, something about who was strong enough for something, and that sounded ominous, too. Plus they kept saying “For you, the war is over,” which they seemed to find hilarious.

There were some pilots. They had burns—long-healed—marking out where their goggles had shielded their faces from the heat of a cockpit or a gunner’s position in flames. A couple of guys Bucky recognized from artillery. But mostly infantry.

One day one of them, the one Dum Dum in a nearby cage had nicknamed Fathead, jerked his head over at Bucky and said in German, “What do you think, schwul?”

Queer. Bucky’s blood ran cold. He didn’t let his face change. Of all the places to be singled out, to be a target. Christ.

“How should I know?” asked the other guard, sounding bored.

“I’m only saying, I think he looks it.”

“You think everybody looks it. You’ve got a degenerate mind.”

“Hey!”

“Be quiet, Heinrich, I’ve got a headache and this is going to be a long shift if you keep talking.”

Heinrich shut up, but with a belligerent jut to his jaw.

The thing was, they weren’t even really trying to break them. They were getting perfunctory attempts at extraction, just the same bored-looking official periodically having them pulled into an office to try to get them to give up the other guys in their squads who (please Jesus) hadn’t been caught. Bucky just gave them the same tight smile and name, rank, serial number, every time.

They didn’t even seem mad. And one guy at a time, regularly, would get yanked from the cells, and
escorted away, and they wouldn’t see him again.

This didn’t feel like they really cared about information. It felt like they were bodies. Sure, they did some of the work—but never all of them, because it took so much guard supervision it hardly seemed worth it, so they worked in shifts. And it still didn’t feel like the forced labor was what they were there for.

“To the lab?” asked one of the guards, once, when they were hauling a guy away.

“Yes, the lab,” the other guard said. “Where the hell else, genius?”

Jesus. A lab.

A guard Bucky started thinking of as Big Ears said, about a week in, “Do you know where they’re sending the shipment?”

“They didn’t put it on the label. Isn’t that strange?”

“They always put it on the labels.”

“I think they’re not sending it to the usual places.”

“Where else would they send it?”

“I heard a rumor.”

“Don’t try to be mysterious, just tell me.”

“There’s a base they haven’t told us about.”

“Another one?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know where?”

“Do I look like an asshole? Even if I knew I wouldn’t tell you.”

“So you don’t know.”

“No.”

The next time they dragged out a prisoner, one of them said, “The usual?”

The other guy wasn’t one of their regular guards. “Yes. Test to destruction.”

That was when Bucky’s skin started to crawl, and he started to think hard about escaping.

“How many of you are ready to help me sock old Adolf on the jaw?” Dead silence. “Okay, uh, I need a volunteer.”

Somebody in the crowd shouted, “I already volunteered, how do you think I got here?” General laughter followed, a rumble of agreement.

“Bring back the girls!”
He turned, glancing to the side, searching for Al’s face. “I think they only know the one song, but uh, let me—I’ll, I’ll see what I can do.”

“You do that, sweetheart.”

“Nice boots, Tinkerbell!”

How familiar. He settled into resigned disappointment. “Come on, guys. We’re all on the same team here.”

“Hey, Captain, sign this!” His jaw clenched as the wise guy pulled down his pants, flashing his bare ass. Then guys start throwing food. The girls came rushing back out, breathing heavily as they thundered up the rickety wooden stairs.

Al’s face was tight with second-hand embarrassment. “Don’t worry, pal. They’ll warm up to you. Don’t worry.”

“Really, Steve?” hissed Marlene on her way past him. “Only know the one song? Fuck you.”

“You know I can’t ad-lib for shit!” he whispered after her. She gave him the finger behind her back.

Pouring rain was soaking everything—even out of the rain, the paper felt damp under his hands. But the noise of the pen scratching on it was soothing.

“Hello, Steve,” he heard in an achingly familiar voice.

He twisted to look back. It was Peggy, hair a little damp, as beautiful as he remembered. “Hi!”

“Hi.” She shifted her overcoat in her hands as she came to sit.

“What are you doing here?”

“Officially, I’m not here at all. That was quite a performance.”

“Yeah, uh,” he said, turning away, “I had to improvise a little bit. The crowds I’m used to are usually more... twelve.”

“And I understand you’re America’s new hope.”

“Bond sales take a ten percent bump in every state I visit.”

“Is that what Senator Brandt tells you?”

“At least he’s got me doing this. Phillips would have had me stuck in a lab.”

“And these are your only two options? A lab-rat or a dancing monkey? You were meant for more than this, you know.” He turned to look back at her again, and then away. “What?” she asked, more gently.

“You know, for the longest time I dreamed about coming overseas and being on the front lines, serving my country. Finally got everything I wanted.” He looked up and around, taking in the tent. “And I’m wearing tights.”

Her mouth tightened, eyes sad, but they got distracted as a cacophony started up, horns honking. An
ambulance showed up, tearing through the camp.

Steve stared out at the men, who didn’t seem to care much about the rain. “They look like they’ve been through hell.”

“These men more than most. Schmidt sent out a force to Azzano. Two hundred men went up against him, and less than fifty returned. Your audience contained what was left of the 107th.”

A spike of adrenaline started in his stomach before he’d consciously registered the words, the world bottoming out.

She was still talking. “The rest were killed or captured.”

“The 107th?” he said in a rush.

“What?” She was looking at him in confusion.

“Come on!” He took off across the ground, Agent Carter running behind him, holding an overcoat over her head.

“Colonel Phillips!” He was pretty much begging for the information, he knew, but he would have done worse than argue with Phillips about this. Worse than beg.

Phillips finally cracked a little and said, “I have signed more of these condolence letters today than I would care to count. But the name does sound familiar. I’m sorry.”

He could feel his stage-face slipping. Get it together. Get it together. “What about the others? Are you planning a rescue mission?”

“Yeah, it’s called winning the war.”

“But if you know where they are, why not at least—”

“They’re thirty miles behind the lines. Through some of the most heavily fortified territory in Europe. We’d lose more men than we’d save.” Phillips turned away from the map—the map. Look at the map. “But I don’t expect you to understand, because you’re a chorus girl.”

Sure. Hit the sore spot. Just let me see—look at the map, look at it. Need to remember. “I think I understand just fine.”

“Then understand it someplace else. If I read the posters correctly, you’ve got someplace to be in thirty minutes.”

“Yes, sir. I do.” He was staring at the map. Phillips hadn’t noticed. Or maybe he had, maybe this had been on purpose. Pointing it out, on the map, it was like a dare, maybe he meant for Steve to do what he couldn’t—didn’t matter. Either way. It was burned into his brain.

“If you have something to say, right now’s the perfect time to keep it to yourself.”

When the guards came for Bucky, he was at best halfway through collecting what they were going to need to try a jailbreak.
He didn’t stand a fucking chance. He was debating between trying to do some damage or just going peacefully, not let on, keep morale up, but when one of the guards fucking touched him it was like something in his brain shorted out, and he found himself with his forearm crushing the goddamn voicebox of that fucking piece of shit, talking to him, softly, in German, whispering I am going to kill you, you are going to die.

It took three guards to take him down. By the time they dragged him off that guard, he was blue in the face, and kept coughing, choking, long after Bucky’s arm had been hauled off his throat, and Bucky thought, savagely, I hope he dies, and then said it out loud, in German still, “I hope he dies, I hope you all die, you are going to be corpses and you are going to rot—” and they hit him again and his head snapped back and he tasted blood and saw stars. He wrenched at his arms, almost got one free before they hit him on the back of the head with the butt of a gun. He was out for just a few seconds, but long enough when he started coming back to. They were dragging him down to the end of the factory floor, and down a short hallway, toward what had to be the lab.

Thoughts felt hazy and disconnected. When one of the guards jerked him up roughly, he puked on them. There was a little bit of satisfaction in that.

The satisfaction was short-lived. They strapped him down, and left him, head splitting, body aching from more kicks than he could count. Not that he could count very high right then.

After a few minutes, a face swam into view over him; actually, it looked like two faces. Bad sign. Concussion, Barnes, you have a concussion.

“I apologize for my men,” said the face, in halting but good English. “They are very enthusiastic. I had hoped you would not be damaged.”

“Sergeant James Barnes,” he said. “3-2-5-5-7-”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” said the face. “We are not here to talk.”

He felt a sudden patch of chill on his arm—what—rubbing alcohol? And then the prick of a needle, the slide of it up into his vein.

“Or rather,” said the face, “if we are here to talk, it is not about your military secrets. I am much more interested in what sort of man you are.”

“Sergeant James Barnes,” he said, and grinned, through the pain and a sudden wave of nausea on the back of a strange, ugly feeling, cold, creeping up his arm.

“Sergeant James Barnes,” said the face thoughtfully. It was round and pale, like a moon, if the moon really was made of cheese. “You seem very strong, and very angry. These are not bad things, you see.”

“Sergeant James Barnes,” he said, again, “3-2-5-5-”

“Oh, dear,” said the face, and sighed. “Well, if you are going to keep talking, I might as well give you another dose.”

Something happened with the needle in his arm, and then his whole body felt very far away.

“That’s better,” said the face, but he hardly heard it. There were colors leaking out of his eyes. And his skull. His skull was a fountain. Something was rushing out of the back of it. He shut his eyes, but it didn’t matter. But they still didn’t ask him anything.
Agent Carter found Steve cramming supplies into a bag. She tried to talk him out of it—at least, he figured that was what she was trying to do—and followed him to the jeep. His heart was still pounding. He was going to find Bucky. Bucky was going to be alive. Bucky was going to be so mad at him, for the experiment, for taking the risk, but Bucky was going to be alive. Don’t think. Just move.

“Steve!” She sounded as close to anguished as she ever got.

He stopped and said to her, intently, staring at her like he could beam into her brain how important this was, “You told me you thought I was meant for more than this. Did you mean that?”

Her hair was wet rain; her eyes staring out from under it, burning. “Every word.”

“Then you got to let me go.”

She gave a ghost of a smile. “I can do more than that.”

The face said, “I hope you will tell me how this feels.”

Bucky said, “Sergeant James Barnes. 3-2—” but the pain rushed into his skull, the light pouring through his veins, and he had to stop talking, because he had to start screaming. Again.

“The HYDRA camp is in Krasburg, tucked between these two mountain ranges. It’s a factory of some kind.” The map lay in her lap, her finger tracing out the location. The noise of the plane, the vibrations, filled the air around them.

“We should be able to drop you right on the doorstep.”

“Just get me as close as you can,” Steve called up the front. “You know, you two are going to be in a lot of trouble when you land.”

“And you won’t?”

“Where I’m going, if anybody yells at me I can just shoot them.”

“They will undoubtedly shoot back.”

“Well, let’s hope it’s good for something,” he said, tapping the shield briskly.

Stark called to them from the front of the plane: “Agent Carter, if we’re not in too much of a hurry, I thought we could stop off in Lucerne for a late-night fondue.” He sounded so sleazy about it; Steve rolled his eyes.

Peggy looked annoyed, and dismayed. But she still defended him, through gritted teeth. “Stark is the best civilian pilot I’ve ever seen. He’s mad enough to brave this airspace. We’re lucky to have him.”

He nodded, barely. “So you two—do you—fondue?”

She glanced down, didn’t dignify that with an answer. “This is your transponder. Activate it when you’re ready and the signal will lead us straight to you.”
“Are you sure this thing works?”

“Been tested more than you, pal!” shouted Stark.

That was when the flak started—shells exploding outside the plane, lights and bangs. Tracers lighting up the sky, one for every six bullets.

“Get back here!” Agent Carter looked simultaneously terrified and murderous. “We’re taking you all the way in!”

He yanked the door open. “As soon as I’m clear, you turn this thing around and get the hell out of here!”

“You can’t give me orders!”

“The hell I can’t! I’m a captain!”

And then he was plunging out, down, down, the rushing air in his ears, crazy bursts of light in the air around him, the smell of explosives. Not like the ride at the Fair, then. Nothing at all like the ride.

But exhilarating, all the same.

He did get stuck halfway up a tree, but he yanked at buckles until he could get himself out of the parachute harness, and dropped the rest of the way to the ground with only a few nasty cuts from branches.

Finding his way through the woods turned out to be easier than he’d expected. Searchlights sweeping the area led him right back to it. He leaped onto the back of a transport, found himself staring at two men wearing masks and goggles—faces completely hidden. Faceless, anonymous. Practically invisible. “Fellas,” he said, by way of greeting, and then they were sailing out of the truck. When they got there, it was simple, again, to wait, and then to hit. So much more power in the new arms. *Don’t think.* Keep moving.

He crept through the tanks, side-stepping carefully, quietly. Didn’t need to be silent in this industrial place, there was noise everywhere. Just quiet enough.

On the factory floor, it was hard to figure where the prisoners would be. The bizarre, absurd blue light, glowing everywhere, was something—new, but not completely new; it reminded him of the Vita-Rays, except this was cold where they’d been warm.

He stumbled over the prisoners almost by accident, but the guards walking patrol above them tipped him off. He took one down with a punch from behind, and grabbed for the keys.

“Who are you supposed to be?” asked a tall black man, staring up at him through the bars, looking deeply dubious.

“I’m—Captain America.”

“Beg your pardon?” asked a man with a British accent.

“Is there anybody else? I’m looking for a Sergeant James Barnes.” He kept looking, but couldn’t see the familiar walk, hear the voice. No one seemed to know who he was talking about or where there
might be other prisoners. Hundreds of guys he was turning loose, and none of them knew, or at least
he couldn’t get close enough to get loud enough. (Don’t think. Don’t think about Graves
Registration. Don’t think about—don’t think, don’t think, the last time you saw him his hand on your
face in the bathroom, the white of the porcelain sink, metal tap, his hand on your face and his eyes
on your eyes, boring into you, so close, too close, the rough drag of the wet cloth and his hand on
your face and his fingers on the buttons of your shirt don’t think don’t think)

“There’s an isolation ward in the factory, but no one’s ever come back from it,” said the British man.
He’d be there. He had to be there.

“All right. The treeline is northwest, eighty yards past the gate. Get out fast and give ‘em hell. I’ll
meet you guys in the clearing with anybody else I find.”

“Wait. You know what you’re doing?”

“Yeah. I’ve knocked out Adolf Hitler over 200 times.” He knew that wasn’t going to be clear, didn’t
care. He took off.

He could tell from the shouting that the give ‘em hell part was being carried out per orders, which
was satisfying, although the gunfire meant some bad things were probably happening.

An alarm sounded almost immediately, klaxons blaring through the factory. The explosions got
much, much louder.

Steve was sweeping the floors, up through the facility, back to the factory floor. There had to be a
ward. Where the hell was the ward? He spotted something at the far end that looked—possible.
Probable. Call it probable.

When he spotted the man in the corridor, he was obviously not a soldier. Was he a doctor, a
scientist? Running away like a scared rabbit. Steve could have gone after him, but if he was a
scientist, that meant he must be leaving—a lab. This would be the isolation ward. Had to be.

He heard a groan. He knew the voice, even before the words started. He ducked in sideways,
through the door. There was a figure on a gurney with a web of straps holding him down. Familiar.

“Sergeant Barnes. Three two—five five—”

“Bucky! Oh, my God.” He looked down at the straps, couldn’t think how to undo them, started
ripping them apart with his bare hands. The fabric cut into his palms as he tore it free. Bucky’s head
lollled to the side, unseeing eyes flickering over him. “It’s me! It’s Steve.”

“Steve. Steve?” He smiled. Good Lord, he actually smiled. His hair was sticking to his forehead,
limp and damp. There were red marks on his arm, the skin looked tender, a soft mottling of blue
bruises. Keep it together.

“Come on.” He grabbed Bucky, half-rolled him up off the bed, hands under his arms. “I thought you
were dead,” which was half a confession. There were cuts on his cheek—blood—he touched
Bucky’s cheek, fast, with one hand.

Bucky looked him up and down. I looked at you like that once—He looked so bewildered. “I
thought you were smaller,” he said, voice thick and slurring.

There was a map on the wall. Another map. Memorize it. Fast, faster, like the line of a model’s body
in figure drawing, like the edge of Bucky’s face on the fire escape. No time.
“Come on,” said Steve, looking to the side, arms wrapped around Bucky. He felt so light, now, like Steve could pick him up like a ragdoll.

“What happened to you?”

“I joined the Army,”

Bucky moved and it wasn’t clear whether he meant to shrug off Steve’s grip, but Steve let go, reluctantly. Bucky could walk on his own. Well, stagger. But it worked, and it left Steve’s hands free; he needed to get them out, get Bucky safe, away from this place. Bucky’s face was shining with sweat—he’d felt hot, like a fever.

“Did it hurt?”

_Not like this._ “A little.”

“Is it permanent?”

“So far.”

Bucky kept sliding to the side when he tried to walk, staring, blinking after Steve.

(It was him. Somehow, it was. He knew. He was dizzy and sick but he knew, he knew, he knew. You didn’t forget, you couldn’t be fooled. There wasn’t a drug on Earth that could make Steve unrecognizable to him.)

(But how, how, why, was Steve so—how could he be—)

“So, Dr. Erskine managed it after all. Not exactly an improvement, but still. Impressive.”

Steve threw a punch that caught Schmidt in the cheek. It felt wrong, didn’t take the force right. “You got no idea,” Steve said, viciously.

“Haven’t I?” The punch dented the shield—holy shit, he could see the shape of each finger through it. Steve landed a kick, but it didn’t do half what it should have done.

The catwalk started moving, separating them.

“No matter what lies Erskine told you, you see, I was his greatest success!” Schmidt peeled the face off, and under it was—Jesus. A red face, like a skull.

“You don’t have one of those, do you?” asked Bucky, grimly.

“You are deluded, Captain!” called Schmidt. “You pretend to be a simple soldier, but in reality you are just afraid to admit that we have left humanity behind. Unlike you, I embrace it proudly, without fear.”

“Then how come you’re running?”

The elevator door closed behind Schmidt and his scared rabbit. The explosions were getting worse.

“Come on, let’s go. Up!”
Steve boosted him up, over the rail, hands gentle on his arms. “One at a time.”

Bucky was woozy, inching along the girder. He could feel Steve’s eyes on his back. Looking down—Christ. The flames beneath him. He needed to move faster. He made it with a leap he threw himself into, just in time, the girder collapsing beneath him. He was clutching the railing, holding himself up.

“There’s got to be a rope or something!” he shouted to Steve.

“Just go!” Steve shouted. “Get out of here!”

“No! Not without you!” His eyes were burning, was it the flames from the explosion, the fumes, the heat? Go without Steve, what a load of horse shit, he had to know, he had to know, that was never going to happen.

He could see Steve’s mouth set, grim, and then he took the running jump, and the explosion was happening, shit. Bucky flung his arms out and grabbed as Steve swung up over it and fell into him and onto him and he almost caught an elbow to the eye, rolling until they came to rest. Steve pushed up off him and they stared at each other for a second.

“Goddamn,” Steve said, grabbing his hand, “let’s go!”

“You said it,” said Bucky, and let the new and improved, absurdly strong Steve haul him to his feet like he weighed nothing.

Getting outside the perimeter was easier than Bucky had figured, mainly because pretty much everybody from HYDRA was dead and it didn’t look like they had backup ready. Couldn’t count on it never getting there, but they’d have a little time to get started moving. It was dark; it would be light soon enough and they could get some distance between them and the base.

“Joined the fucking Army, huh,” said Bucky, when they got to where they could see the guys clumped up at the treeline.

“Yeah,” said Steve, sounding sheepish, like he knew what he’d done.

“Then what the fuck happened?”

“Medical experiment,” said Steve. “Harmless, really, just made me taller. And stronger.”

“Do you glow in the fucking dark?” asked Bucky, suppressing the urge to laugh hysterically.

“Not so’s I’ve noticed.”

“What happened to your voice?”

“Uh.” Steve’s face was doing something complicated. “They had me do some, uh, publicity, and I had to learn—well, I had to learn to talk right for it.”

“STEVEN. FUCKING. ROGERS. Are you Captain America?”

Steve snorted a little laugh, gestured down at his clothes. “Costume didn’t tip you off?”
“I think I got a concussion. I got an excuse. You fucking moron, what were you even thinking?” he ground out, past a combination of choking laughter and choking rage.

They were reaching the men, and Steve said, “We need to figure out who can walk, who we can carry, and who’ll have to ride on the tanks.”

“Yes, sir,” said Bucky, and snapped a lazy salute. It was worth the twinge in his shoulder to see Steve roll his eyes, embarrassed smile on his mouth. “You know where we’re going?”

Steve pulled out a compass and flipped it open. “Yeah, we’re going to be heading south by southwest. If we cut that way we should run into a creek. There’s a series of paths, I think we can mostly keep to them with the tanks. I was planning on going on foot straight through the forest but the tanks are too good to leave.”

“Damn straight, those things are fantastic.”

“Yes. Hoping they buy me a little wiggle room with the brass.”

Bucky shot him a look, but let it go. Steve looked at him for a minute—goosebumps coming up on Bucky’s chest, prickling over his collarbone, exposed in the freezing air—and took off his leather jacket.

“Stevie, aw, what are you doing,” said Bucky as Steve started to drape it around his shoulders. “I’m fine, I’m fine.”

“So am I,” said Steve. “I’ll take it back if I get cold.”

“It’s pretty nice. Maybe I’ll fight you for it.”

“Think I can take the guy I found drooling on himself.”

Bucky flipped him off but stuck his arms into the sleeves of the jacket. It was big on him. He got a gun off one of the guys who’d grabbed two, taking it and hefting it with care.

Bucky was pretty quiet most of that first day, after he spent some time sorting out with the men who was going to be where for the march back. Steve kept sneaking glances over at him as they walked. He kept his hand on his gun the whole time, but sometimes he’d list a little to the left, or he’d stagger.

“You all right, buddy?” asked Steve once, quietly.

Bucky blinked hard a couple times and said, “Yeah, yeah. Just still feeling it.”

“What did they—” Steve hesitated. “Is there anything they did,” to you, “that—that I should do something about?”

Bucky’s face took on a little grimace, and for a second Steve was alarmed, until he realized it was supposed to be a smile. It didn’t reach Bucky’s eyes. “Already did, Stevie,” he said. “Already did.”

The forest was actually beautiful, if somebody had time to appreciate it. Just the occasional dusting of snow. There weren’t many birds. Most of the trees were pine, so they were still deep, robust green even while the other trees just had gray skeletons of leaves clinging to them.
Sometimes the paths were wide and sometimes they were so narrow that the tanks would rip up huge chunks of grass from either side, plow into the occasional tree. Steve and Bucky were leading, the tanks rolling behind, down one narrow path. Men clumped up behind them in little groups.

“So, how’d you find us?” Bucky asked Steve.

“Had your location from a map.”

“Really? What are you, some kind of one-man strike force now?”

“Well, no. Mostly, I sell war bonds.” He tilted his head to one side a little, looking up into the heavens, and added, “I don’t have to do the singing or the dancing, so it’s fine.”

Bucky turned his head to stare at Steve. “So what are you doing here?”

“Seemed like a good idea.”

“Is—Steve. Why did you come out here? Did somebody t—no.”

“I heard about the factory,” said Steve, but he had a guilty hangdog look.

“Yeah?” Bucky’s lips tightened down, curling inward, until he could press his teeth into his upper lip. “What did you hear?”

“That, uh. That the 107th had POWs there. I was performing with the USO in the area.”

“And you just happened. To show up.”

“Well.”

“Steve.”

“I may have gotten, uh, a ride in.”

“STEVE.”

“On a plane. They dropped me off. It wasn’t… it’s not an operation, there’s no okay from the brass.”

“You parachuted in to Nazi territory to liberate a factory by yourself. Do I have it right?”

“Yeah, that’s about it.”

“For Christ’s sake, Rogers, you trying to get shot?”

“Hey, a lot of guys shot at me but look at me now. I’m fine.”

“I’m going to break your head if you try shit like this again.”

“Good luck, it’s only gotten thicker.”

Bucky shook his head slowly, trying not to jar another shock of pain and nausea loose, laughing.

“You are the living end,” he said, and it came out admiring in spite of himself. They traded a smile, Steve looking rueful, and even though the face was half a foot up from where it should be, that was Steve’s smile; Steve’s face; Steve.
Chapter 2

Monty came up to them both around noon to say that some of the guys riding on the tank he’d been pacing were feeling like they might give walking a try.

“You think they’re ready?” asked Bucky, his face hard.

“I do.”

“Okay. Give them a try, if they can take it, swap them out for some of the guys with rough feet.”

Monty glanced back at it, smiling. “Not quite an M-3, is she?” he asked, fondly.

Bucky laughed. “Not quite.”

Steve was watching them with that look, distant, like he was just taking it in. When Monty had walked back to the tank (he had named her Brunhilde), Bucky said, “Turns out we were both in North Africa. He was up in Casablanca, I was mostly down in Tunis. We got to talking.”

Steve nodded thoughtfully.

“Dugan and Jones were with me when we were captured. Good guys. Solid. Most of Jones’ unit bit the dust. Dugan’s the one with the fucking stupid mustache driving the Merryweather and Jones is showing somebody how to drive Uncle Bill.” He nodded over to a Japanese-American guy who was ribbing one of the walking wounded, distracting him. “Met Morita in the cells. Sharp as a tack. He’s a medic. Whole family’s in an internment camp back home.”

“This your way of introducing me around without introducing me around?”

“Just pretend you know their names because you’re that fancy and important.”

“Can do.”

“I’m a little sad you don’t say ‘Roger that.’”

“I am never going to say that.”

That night they had to sleep in the woods with zero supplies, unless you counted the tanks, which were occupied by the guys who were definitely going to die if they were left exposed. November in Austria, fuck. Some of the guys had grabbed coats and other souvenirs off the dead Jerries, so they were in better shape, but some of the guys only had the rags they’d been left in. “Nobody freeze any body parts off, we’ve got lots more walking to do. Grab a buddy. Double up,” said Bucky. “Triple if you have to. Hell, make a dog pile if you can stand to smell each other, the more the merrier, fellas. Just stay warm. Shift positions if you start freezing. Nobody try to tough it out.”

The men paired up obediently, some of them curling up into bigger piles. Steve was looking at them with something happening at the corner of his mouth, a twitch.

“Come on, Cap,” said Bucky. “That goes for you, too.”

“I don’t think I’m in much danger. I don’t really get cold anymore.”
“Fantastic. You can keep me warm. I’m fucking freezing.” He waved a hand carelessly. “I’d offer you our finest bed, but you know what, that’s actually the ground, so you can pick the spot.”

Steve said, “Buck. I don’t know—we don’t know what’s out there. I’ll keep watch.”

They’d already picked out the guys who volunteered as having slept the most recently for the first night watch. “Fine. I’m not keeping watch with you.”

Steve looked apologetic. “You should sleep.”

“Damn right I should. Morita?”

Jim was in earshot. “Yeah, Sarge?”

“You want to snuggle, sweetheart?”

Jim fluttered his eyelashes. “You know it, honey. Come on,” he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, “I found a nice pile of pine needles.”

Bucky didn’t look back at Steve as he followed Jim, who let Bucky shove his freezing hands into Jim’s armpits. Bucky wrapped his legs around Jim’s feet to return the favor and mostly draped the leather coat over the two of them.

“Can’t fucking believe you got us out of there safe,” Jim mumbled.

“Not sure I’m safe yet. Still kind of seeing double.”

“Shit. Good job not puking today.”

“You’re telling me.”

“Don’t puke on me, though.”

“I’ll try not to.”

“Shut up,” said somebody a little further off.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Bucky, and he waited until Jim relaxed and he started up with a little half-lisping snore before he let himself have a few deep, measured, aching breaths, rigid with the effort, tears sliding out of his eyes for a couple of awful minutes. God knew he had plenty to cry over. There were things he hadn’t—hadn’t done, or said—and Christ his head still hurt, and things were never going to be the same. Permanent. Nothing was permanent except this fucking war, how it took everything.

Steve could see pretty well in the dark now. He tried not to look off to where Bucky was sleeping. If he was sleeping. Christ. Get it together.

He was jittery, waiting for something to go wrong. Anything. This had been too easy. Colonel Phillips had said heavily fortified, but so far they’d barely run into anything, and it felt like HYDRA had to be breathing down their necks.

His stomach felt like he’d swallowed a bag of bricks, and every time a twig snapped he jerked. Getting in had been easy. Just him. Getting out, getting back, that was a different story.
But Bucky was alive. And mad as hell, grinning through it. Alive.

The first shift of watch was ready to sleep, waking up the second watch a couple hours later. No Germans so far.

“You know, I’m really not tired,” said Steve. “Think I’ll stay up a little longer.”

They gave him funny looks, but they didn’t argue. His head tipped back against the tree trunk, and he must have dozed for a little while. Not long. But he did feel better.

Dawn was a long time coming, but they didn’t wait for it; when the sky started getting light, they woke up the rest of the guys.

“I’m still waiting for something to happen,” Steve said to Bucky, when they were out in front of the guys for a while, out of earshot. “Somebody’s going to know that base went up.”

Bucky shook his head a little. “They might not have the resources in the area to back them up. They weren’t your regular Nazi troops. Maybe they’re not on good terms.”

“Why would they have attacked you if they weren’t?”

“I don’t know, but nobody said Heil Hitler the entire time I was in there. Just Heil HYDRA.”

“So you think they’re in trouble and the Fuhrer’s letting them sweat it out to teach them a lesson?”

“I hope so.”

“I hope so, too,” said Steve. “Not like we’re in shape to put up much of a fight right now.”

Bucky glanced back behind them at the men, marching out of step. Each one was just walking as best he could.

“Yeah,” he said. “We’re really not.”

They hit the stream near noon, perfect timing. Some of the guys were about ready to drop from thirst.

“This is fantastic,” said Bucky, kneeling by the water. It was cold, way too cold for anybody to be thinking about bathing in it, but it was clear enough and tasted clean. He was scooping it into his mouth, trying not to drink too fast. He cupped his hands and splashed it up over his head, shivered a little as it dripped down his neck. “Any canteens in the tanks? We need to take as much as we can with us.”

He looked up and Steve was staring at him, and he had to clamp down on a surge of impatience and anger.

“Steve,” he said. “Any canteens in the tank? Hell, anything at all we can use to carry some water?”

Steve shook himself all over, like a dog. “I’ll check,” he said.

A couple of guys came over a few minutes later. They didn’t have much, but Dum Dum had found a couple of containers that would work in a pinch—empty ammo boxes, mostly. They rinsed them as best they could and then filled them, the ones that stayed water-tight. The water out of them would
taste a little like cordite, but it was a lot better than nothing, especially for the wounded.

They settled into a marching rhythm. Bucky fell into step next to Steve.

“So,” he said, and Steve startled, looking over at him. “Tell me about this experiment my dumb friend signed up for.”

Steve hesitated. “I don’t—I don’t know what all I’m supposed to say about it.”

“Well,” said Bucky, slow and hard, “why don’t you give everything a try, and we’ll see how that works.”

So Steve took a deep breath, and started telling him about the fair. *That far back.* And how many— well, that fucking explained the letters not coming, didn’t it? The hot second Steve had something of his own. And lying to him, lying.

“I wanted to write,” said Steve, voice low, too quiet for the guys marching nearest them to catch. “I didn’t know what to say. You’d worry.”

“Damn right I’d worry,” muttered Bucky. “I’m worried *now.* What the fuck is going to happen when you march us back in there?”

“If we make it back.”

“When we make it back. Come on, don’t make me be the sunny-side-up sucker here.”

“I don’t know. Maybe a court martial.”

“Or your own squad.”

“Could be.”

“You have got *shit* for combat experience.”

“Yeah, you’re telling me,” muttered Steve, glancing out around them at the guys, who all looked like hell. “Thank God you’re here.”

A couple hours in, he said, “So, you going to tell me about that girl you met? Agent Carter?”

Steve’s face flamed up and he said, “She’s from Camp Lehigh.”

“Oh, the broad who trained you?”

“Taught me everything I need to know about punching a guy.”

“I can see where she’d get the practice.”

Steve told him the story about Carter standing toe-to-toe with Hodge: *Tell me, are you familiar with the ancient art of Ju-Jitsu? Me neither,* before she landed a beautiful punch right on his nose.

Bucky laughed out loud, and even the corners of his eyes crinkled up with it, which was something. That was good.

Bucky kept darting looks at him all day when he thought Steve wasn’t looking, which. Well. Steve
couldn’t blame him. It was a lot to take in.

They ran into some trouble in the evening, before it was dark. Bucky was out in front with another guy who’d said he was a good shot, and when the guy—Pruitt—put up a hand, he faded back. Pruitt took a couple steps forward and to the side, and what do you know, he was a good shot. The Jerry came down out of the tree, hard, and when there was a rustle up a couple trees over, Bucky took that shot, too. They were both wearing regular Nazi uniforms, not the slick black clothes from HYDRA.

It turned out there was a little nest of Jerries not far away, and when Bucky nodded at Pruitt with raised eyebrows and Pruitt nodded back, they just took care of it themselves.

No need to get Steve involved in this. This didn’t call for a heavy.

They left the camp with ten dead men in a circle around the remains of a campfire, ringed with rocks.

They had to spend a second night in the forest. They’d made a solid twenty miles, not bad with that many wounded, starving, or both.

“Buck,” said Steve, “you’re bleeding from your ear.”

“What? Oh.” He reached up to touch it. “Not my eardrum, anyway. I can hear fine.”

“Good.” Steve looked constipated.

“Spit it out. What’s going on?”

“I’m going to sack out,” said Steve.

“Oh, good, you’ll get at least one night’s sleep.”

“You want to—?” Steve jerked his head.

“Yeah, sure,” he said. “Just let me get a drink and take a piss.”

When he found Steve, settled in under a tree just back from a tank, he almost laughed. There were groups of men on either side of them, zero privacy. It made him feel sharp, contrary.

“All right, honey,” he said, setting his gun in arm’s reach, peeling off the coat and scooting back. “Give me some sugar.”

Steve made a low pained noise, and then his arms folded over Bucky’s chest, a moment’s hesitation before they tightened and he was pulled back against a wall of heat. Christ, Steve wasn’t kidding. There was no way he could get cold, not putting off heat like that. Bucky tucked the coat edges around himself, back over Steve a little, before he pulled his arms in to fold over his stomach.

Bucky lay there in the starless dark, in the silence, listening to the eerily silent forest; listening for guns, listening for the sound of footsteps or the distant rumble of tanks.

Steve’s breathing wasn’t changing, and his arms weren’t loosening. He was still awake, too.

A spray of wind rattled some leaves. Inanimate. Nothing human to worry about there.
Steve’s thumb, just at the front of his left collarbone, moved, just a little; just back and forth, stroking over his shirt.

He knew he fell asleep at some point, shifted restlessly in the night as cold broke in and woke him. When morning came, Steve eased himself up away from Bucky’s back and the sky was just starting to get light. The chill rushed in where he’d been so warm.

His stomach rumbled, a long, loud sound. “Nobody ever brings me breakfast in bed,” he said, and Steve choked out a hushed laugh, hummed a couple of bars of *This is the Army*.

“Of course you liked that movie,” grumbled Bucky.

Steve offered Bucky a hand and pulled him lightly to his feet. Bucky ached all over, and he was pretty sure there’d been a rock under his thigh.

Steve said, like they were just continuing an earlier conversation, “I think we should roll in around noon today.”

“Good. Great.”

Bucky handed him back the jacket as it started getting brighter out, and Steve shot him a look; Bucky raised his eyebrows, just barely, and Steve took it, pulling it on.

Bucky fell out of step with Steve as they got to the gate, hand still on his gun, but finger off the trigger. A HYDRA tank rolled behind them, and the men followed in a filthy, bloody bunch.

Steve turned to Bucky, smiling; Bucky didn’t smile back. There was a cold, ugly knot of tension in his chest. Steve looked away.

They kept marching, right up to a colonel. Must be Phillips. The men started peeling off as Steve saluted. “Some of these men need medical attention. I’d like to surrender myself for disciplinary action.” That fucking asshole.

“That won’t be necessary,” said Phillips, and actually smiled.

“Yes, sir.”

A beautiful woman in uniform stepped up, hair pinned up, looking a little winded, frantic—Carter, this had to be Agent Carter. “You’re late.”

Steve pulled out the busted transmitter and held it up to her, smiling a little. “Couldn’t call my ride.” His voice sounded different; smoother, calmer. Bucky stared at him. It must have been—it was his *stage voice*. Jesus. When did that happen. She was *buying* it.

Her chest heaved with emotion; she looked like she’d like to kiss him or murder him or both.

“Hey!” Bucky shouted. “Let’s hear it for Captain America.”

The commotion broke out, cheering, clapping, slaps on the back. Bucky stood right behind Steve, watching, a smile on his face that even he could tell wouldn’t look like an actual smile. His lips twisted, he clamped them together, clenched his jaw. It was close enough.
The doctor they made him see right away cleaned up the blood—a cut, shallow, nothing that needed stitches—and decided that he did, in fact, have a mild concussion, and also, *son, what the hell kind of drugs did they give you?*

“I got no idea,” he said, and it wasn’t a lie.

That night saw them getting transported back to HQ, the command center miles behind the lines. On the truck, Bucky just shut his eyes and let his head roll on his shoulders, trying to sleep. Steve was sitting next to him on the bench, warm as always, and he felt himself roll into towards Steve a little. He went with it. Arm pressed arm, leg to leg. He dozed a little. Not much. But he kept his eyes shut, and his kept his breathing even.

When they got in, it was one in the morning. “Get some sleep,” said Agent Carter. “Don’t trip over anyone. We’ll fly out when it starts to get light.”

The bed in the barracks was narrow, a little chilly but warmed up fast.

In the morning they let him have a shower before they got on a plane. He kept it quick, about a minute and a half, and pulled on blessed clean clothes.

“Where we headed?” he asked.

“London,” Agent Carter shouted back over the noise of the engines kicking up. “The other POWs will be returning by boat for full medical evaluation and debrief.”

Steve looked worried. “You sure you’re okay?” he asked, for the third time.

“Yeah.”

He didn’t have to ask why he got the star treatment along with Steve. None of the other POWs had come out of the lab. Nobody else had come out of the lab alive.

The doctor they had him talking to this time came with a notepad, in a room underground, which gave him the creeps. All stone bricks and no daylight.

“Please tell me about what happened,” the doctor said. He had a kind, broad, open face. He looked tired.

Bucky didn’t have it in him to sass. So he told it straight. Getting pulled out, starting a fight, getting beat up. “I think I had a concussion by the time they got me in there,” he said. “I threw up on one of the guys. Still felt like throwing up.”

“And did they give you any medications?”

“Yeah. Uh, I don’t know what. But they put a big needle in my arm and then they just... left it there, hooked up different things to it.”

“Do you have any sense of what those things were? Did they do anything to you?”

“Some of them made my heart race. Once, uh, I could feel my heart just go crazy and I thought I was going to die, and then they put something else in and it, uh, it stopped.”
“It stopped the irregular heartbeat?”
“No, I mean, it stopped my heart.”

The doctor lifted his eyes from the notepad and stared at him blankly.

“I know it sounds crazy,” he said, defensively, “but that’s what happened. It felt like I died.”

“I see.” The doctor was shaking his head, frowning, writing something down. “Did they threaten to do it again as punishment?”

“No. See, that’s the weird part.” Bucky leaned forward. “It was like, uh, it was like they didn’t care what I had to say. They didn’t even ask me questions. They just did stuff.”

The doctor’s hand stilled for a minute, holding the pen loosely. There was a line between his eyebrows, somewhere between angry and sad.

“Did they give you anything that made you hallucinate?”

Bucky shuddered at that, a whole-body shudder. “Yeah. Uh, God, yeah.”

“Tell me about that.”

“I thought—I kept seeing colors swirling. And I thought the back of my head came off.”

“I see. Any other hallucinations?”

“No. I don’t remember any. I thought Captain America was one, but it turned out he was real.”

The doctor nodded, let himself give a brief smile before it dropped off his face. “Did they say anything to you?”

He sat in silence for a long couple of seconds before he said, “Yeah. Sort of. I heard him talking, I think he was talking to himself. He said, he was speaking German, he said, ‘The new compound?’ like it was a question. So I think I got something, something really experimental.”

The doctor’s forehead creased in a whole set of lines over that one.

“I don’t remember them asking me any questions, but that doesn’t mean they didn’t. Sir. So I don’t know what to tell you, except I don’t think they did but I’m not sure.”

“Do you remember what the next injection after he said that felt like?”


“Please describe the pain as much as you can.”

“It—well, okay, it started where the needle was. And then it was moving up my arm and down my arm, too. And it really did feel like burning, it felt hot. And then my, uh, my muscles started twitching, I could feel them twitching. I wasn’t trying to make them do it or anything but they started on their own. And it just sort of took over my whole body. I was strapped down, you know. So I couldn’t move. And they had, um, they had something in my mouth so I couldn’t bite down. And I couldn’t talk.” He was sweating. He could feel it, rolling down his forehead. His hands were clenched on the arms of the chair.

The doctor paused for a minute, a long minute. Let him get himself under control again.
“Do you remember when they put the guard in your mouth?” he asked.

Bucky shook his head. “No. Before that. That was, uh, I think from the light—the room had outside windows—I think from the light it was near the end of the first day. Cap came and got me on the second day.”

“Did that injection seem to alter your perception?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did things look different? Feel different? Did it feel like time was speeding up or slowing down?”

He stopped to think, as hard as he could, as he could make himself. “I think I passed out for part of that night. So I don’t really know about time. It felt like things looked... sharper. Clearer.” He stopped, suddenly. “They still do.”

The doctor didn’t seem surprised. He just nodded, still scratching something out on his notepad.


The doctor looked up and sighed, fidgeting with the pencil. “I’m not sure I should speculate, but if I had to guess, Zola—the man who had you, we’re pretty sure it was Dr. Zola—was obsessed with, hm, superhumanity. He may have thought he could make you stronger.”

“Like Steve,” said Bucky, blood suddenly running cold.

“Roughly. But we know his progress was nowhere near Dr. Erskine’s, so he may have been just testing components—seeing if he could improve sight, or other organ systems.”

“Test to destruction,” said Bucky. “He was—was he making the others stronger and then seeing what it took to destroy them?”

The doctor’s lips tightened. He looked back down at the notepad.

“I believe so,” he said. “Or he was trying to.”

Bucky didn’t tell Steve that. Bucky didn’t tell Steve much of anything at all.

“Why are you telling me?” asked Bucky.

The doctor didn’t say anything at first, and then he said, staring into the distance, “I suppose I think you have a right to know.” He shook himself a little, then looked back down at his pad. “But I need to ask you a few more questions.”

When Bucky came back from debriefing that day—it took a couple of days, all told; he could only do a couple hours at a time, talking about the factory, talking about the lab, talking about the tanks and the countryside and the weapons, how they were captured, what the guards said—he did tell Steve about the guards talking about shipments. “I think there’s another factory,” he said, “or maybe even something bigger. It makes sense. None of the locations you were talking about really make sense for an overseas strike.”

Steve was nodding, frowning at a little map they’d given him. He’d been in some kind of conference all morning but he was heading to a meeting with the brass that afternoon, to try and convince them about the bases and about a team. “I think we could do it,” he said to Bucky, eyes shining, all painful
earnestness. “I think we could take out HYDRA’s physical plants, really knock them out.”

“Sure we can, buddy,” said Bucky, smiling at him, and he got a big smile from Steve in return.

“Fifth one’s here in Poland, near the Baltic, and the sixth one was about here, 30, 40 miles west of
the Maginot line.” An aide swept the map away. “I just got a quick look.”

“Well, nobody’s perfect.” Peggy was smiling. Steve’s eyes followed her helplessly, mouth curling up.

“These are the weapons factories we know about. Sergeant Barnes,” and the name felt like taffy in
his mouth, had to come out slowly, “said that HYDRA shipped all the parts to another facility that
isn’t on this map.”

Phillips grunted approvingly. “Agent Carter, coordinate with MI-6. I want every Allied eyeball
looking for that main HYDRA base.”

“What about us?” she asked, sharp as ever.

“We are going to set a fire under Johann Schmidt’s ass. What do you say, Rogers? It’s your map,
think you can wipe HYDRA off of it?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll need a team.”

“We’re already putting together the best men.”

Yeah, Phillips, I know what your best men look like. “With all due respect, sir, so am I.”

And it was funny, wasn’t it, that after all the fuss about having a mixed-race crew when he was just
making shorts for the theaters, he was going to aim for one for real? But Morita and Jones were made
of steel. They could handle the flak.

The next session, the same doctor. That was good. This time it was a different room, and there was
some equipment set up, things with wires.

“Sergeant Barnes,” said the doctor, “if you’d be so kind, could you get on this treadmill? I’d like to
see how your heart has held up under the strain.”

“Sure thing.” Bucky stripped to his skivvies, climbed on, and ran, wires trailing from his chest. And
kept running.

By the time he’d been running for an hour without even starting to get tired, he knew something was
terribly wrong.

The doctor kept watching the tracing of his heart beating. Eventually he had Bucky stop, and he
went through and tested all his reflexes, struck a tuning fork and made Bucky close his eyes and say
where he could feel the tuning fork and when, had Bucky close his eyes and pushed him one way,
then another, to see if he’d fall down. He didn’t.

At the end, he said, “What do you think, doc?”

The doctor said, “I think you’re fit to return to duty.” And there was something in his face that was
set and unreadable. “And I wouldn’t mention how well your heart and lungs seem to be doing, right now. To anyone.” There was a pause, again, before he added, “They seem to have improved remarkably since your captivity. I see no need to measure them again.”

Bucky nodded, figuring maybe he understood something; maybe he understood why a doctor wouldn’t want to tell the brass that a POW came back different. *One freak is plenty in this outfit. Already played pincushion.*

Steve figured he’d have to be a lot of things not to want Bucky on his team, one of which was *stupid*, so he didn’t think about what any problems might be. What needed to happen, needed to happen.

“Hey,” he said, when he got back to the barracks and found Bucky sitting up in his shirtsleeves, reading a book. Bucky had been acting strange. It was like he had a whole new shell here. *Sarge* instead of *Bucky*, the kind of stony-faced leader the men could get behind, and even when it was just them he always seemed like he was waiting to get called in to action. None of his old shit-eating grinning bluster. Just—the Sarge.

Bucky glanced up at him. “Hey.”

“You think you can get those guys from the march together? Maybe at the pub tonight?”

“What for?”

“They’re letting me put together a team.”

“Heeeyyy,” said Bucky, grinning as he sat up, swinging his legs over the side of cot. “That sounds like a plan. You want all of them?”

“Yeah, Dugan and Jones, obviously, Morita, Falsworth. And Dernier. He seems to like explosives quite a bit.”

“Understatement of the year. I’ll round them up, sure.” He raised his eyebrows. “You think Phillips is going to let you have three whole white American boys on the team?”

“I think I can get away with a fair amount right now. And who wouldn’t love Jones? He looks like a walking advertisement for strapping young men.”

Bucky clicked his tongue, going back to his reading. “Ah do *declare*, Mr. Rogers.”

*A glimpse through an interstice caught,*

*Of a crowd of workmen and drivers in a bar-room around the stove late of a winter night, and I unremark’d seated in a corner,*

*Of a youth who loves me and whom I love, silently approaching and seating himself near, that he may hold me by the hand,*

*A long while amid the noises of coming and going, of drinking and oath and smutty jest,*

*There we two, content, happy in being together, speaking little, perhaps not a word.*
“So let’s get this straight.” Dugan slammed his stein down, wagging a finger.

Gabe leaned in. “We barely got out of there alive and you want us to go back?”

“Pretty much,” said Steve.

“Sounds rather... fun, actually.” Monty smiled a little, looking helplessly delighted.

Morita belched. “I’m in.”

He caught Dernier saying something about making them cry like babies. Jones said something back to Dernier, _J’espere_, too fast to catch. _I hope._

“Moi aussi!” Dernier laughed like a maniac. _Me too._

“We’re in,” said Jones.

“Hell, I’ll always fight.” Dugan looked self-satisfied. “But you gotta do one thing for me.”

“What’s that?”

“Open a tab.”

Steve grinned and got to his feet, turning back to the bar. He caught Dugan muttering, “Well, that was easy,” with good humor.

“Another round.”

“Where are they putting all this stuff?” grumbled the bartender.

Steve settled in next to Bucky. “See? Told you,” said Bucky, grinning, raising his glass, “they were all idiots.” The idiots were bursting into song over at their table. Steve knew it, dimly, from the radio —Rudy Vallee.

Steve smiled, but it slipped a little as he watched Bucky carefully. “How about you? You ready to follow _Captain America_ into the jaws of death?”

“Hell, no,” Bucky mumbled, smiling faintly without meeting his eyes. “Little guy from Brooklyn who was too dumb not to run away from a fight,” and his throat worked, “I’m following him.” He took a drink. “But you’re keeping the outfit, right?” The smile he flashed Steve then was so like himself, wicked and round around the edges, with something that was almost a wink thrown in, that Steve felt his face doing all the wrong things. He glanced up at the picture on the wall.

“You know what? It’s kind of growing on me.”

He could feel the hush for a second before it happened, and then Agent Carter walked in. In a red dress, looking like she’d been made to specifications. They rose to their feet in tandem, turning to face her, Bucky moving a little more slowly.

“Captain,” she said, her voice as firm as ever despite the dress, the bar.

“Agent Carter.” He could feel himself smiling.

Bucky’s eyes slipped over her like a touch, from feet to head. “Ma’am,” he said, and it was warm
and respectful and sarcastic and angry, all at once.

“Howard has some equipment for you to try. Tomorrow morning?”

“Sounds good.”

She turned to look at Bucky; he said nothing, she said nothing. He cut his eyes sideways at Steve.

“I see your top squad is prepping for duty?” She was amused, not mad.

Bucky said, “You don’t like music?”

“I do, actually.” She didn’t even glance at Bucky; she was staring straight into Steve’s eyes. “I might even, when all of this is over, go dancing.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Bucky swallowed hard, staring at her. It was the most half-assed attempt Steve had ever heard from him. Quiet, like he knew it.

“The right partner,” she said, her voice like velvet. Steve stared at her, taking her in. “0800, Captain.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be there.”

When she left, Bucky looked stricken. “I’m invisible. I’m, I’m turning into you. It’s like a horrible dream.”

“Don’t take it so hard.” Steve patted his shoulder briskly, twice, and managed to sound smug. “Maybe she’s got a friend.”

In her wake, when Steve and Bucky came back out and sat down at the table with the men, Dum Dum said, “That beautiful woman was not born, she was issued.”

“Razor-sharp,” said Monty, admiringly. “I’d hate to upset her.”

“I don’t recommend it,” said Steve. “You know what she did to a guy who tried to talk dirty to her back when I was at basic?”

“What?” Monty’s face shone with interest.

“Sock him in the face. I think she broke his nose.”

Bucky cracked a grin. It didn’t look right, but it was there. That was something.

Later, Steve said, “Wait, did you say too dumb not to run away from a fight?”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Concussed. Come on, give me a break.”

“You been waiting for me to point that out?”

“Figured maybe you’d let it go. Should have known better.”

He lost a coin flip to name the group. Dum Dum won, and went with Howling Commandos, after something the bartender had apparently muttered at him earlier.

He didn’t realize Bucky had left until a few minutes later, he wasn’t sure how long. He’d been
talking to Jones about integrating the unit, the first one since the unit that made the rah-rah war movies.

By the time Steve got back to the barracks, Bucky was in bed, silent and facing away.

He sat down and pulled his boots off, and sat with one of them in his hand for a couple of minutes before he snapped out of it and set it down.

“Excuse me. I’m looking for Mr. Stark.”

“He’s in with Colonel Phillips.” The woman ran her eyes over him. “Of course, you’re welcome to wait.” She was blonde, and stacked, and beautiful; the kind of woman who would definitely never have had time for him before he was Captain America.

But she had time for him now, was pressing him into a corner, and pulling him after her, shifting ground. He felt—well, he felt hot, a clinging, crawling kind of heat that suffocated him, kept him from saying anything. She had him by the tie, pulling. He was bigger than her, stronger than her. He could step back. He should say no. He should—

“Captain!” Peggy’s voice was like a bucket of ice water. “They’re ready for you, if you’re not otherwise occupied.”

“Agent Carter, wait!” He hurried after her, her heels clicking on the floor.

“Looks like finding a partner wasn’t that hard after all.”

He wiped at his mouth. “That wasn’t what you thought it was.”

“I don’t think anything, Captain, not one thing. You always wanted to be a soldier, and now you are. Just like all the rest.”

“Well, what about you and Stark? How do I know you two haven’t been... fonduing?”

She turned to look at him, her face falling, disappointed, shading into anger as she turned away again. “You still don’t know a bloody thing about women.”

Well, where along the way was he supposed to have learned?

“Fondue’s just cheese and bread, my friend.”

Steve said, “Really? I didn’t think—“

Stark cut in over him. “Nor should you, pal. The moment you think you know what’s going on in a woman’s head is the moment your goose is well and truly cooked. Me, I concentrate on work. Which, at the moment, is about making sure you and your men do not get killed. Carbon polymer. Should withstand your average German bayonet, though HYDRA’s not going to attack you with a pocket knife. I hear you’re, uh, kind of attached?”

“It’s handier than you might think,” said Steve of his shield, thinking of the fist denting in to it.

“I took the liberty of coming up with some options. This one’s fun. She’s been fitted with electrical relays that allow you to—“
Something caught Steve’s eye, a plain gray round, but it had a sort of sheen to it that drew him. “What about this one?”

“No, no, that’s just a prototype.”

“What’s it made of?”

“Vibranium. Stronger than steel and a third the weight. It’s completely vibration absorbent.”

_Vibration absorbent._ That sounded interesting. He slid it over his arm. “How come it’s not standard issue?”

“That’s the rarest metal on Earth. What you’re holding there, that’s all we’ve got.”

“Are you quite finished, Mr. Stark? I’m sure the Captain has some unfinished business.”

“What do you think?” He tried out a smile—not one of his shiniest.

Her eyes fell to a handgun on the table; he could see her thinking, and then she picked it up and emptied four bullets into the shield while he hauled it up in front of himself in a hurry. When she’d finished, she set it back, and smiled as she let out a breath. “Yes, I think it works.”

Neither of them could take their eyes off her as she walked away.

“I had some ideas about the uniform,” said Steve.

“Whatever you want, pal.”

“I heard you got shot at,” said Bucky, when Steve sat down on his cot.

Steve groaned, lying back. “I’m guessing everyone’s heard that by now.”

“You’re not doing so hot with this.”

“Not yet, anyway.”

There was a moment’s silence, and then Bucky said, staring at the ceiling, “Give her some time to cool off. She just needs to blow off some steam.”

“You think?” asked Steve, feeling his heart catch a little.

“Yeah.” Bucky didn’t look at him. But he could see, out of the corner of his eye, Bucky’s lip curl up in a crooked smile. “You saw her at the bar. Couldn’t take her eyes off you.”

“She might just be thinking about how to murder me,” he muttered.

Bucky barked out a laugh. “Hell, most of us are most of the time. Doesn’t mean we don’t like you.”

At the pub that night, Bucky got pretty drunk; Steve had seen him worse (wounded eyes shining at him with a clear, sweet rage), but this time Bucky was drunk enough to sing. The pianist took requests, and that was how Steve found himself listening to that Rudy Vallee song in Bucky’s voice, thick and loud, clear as a ringing bell. Somehow so much worse than when the guys had been
singing it before. Some of them ended up singing along, since they knew it, but Bucky’s voice was still louder than theirs, cutting through the racket.

There is a tavern in the town, in the town (there was loud laughter and punching of shoulders)

And there my true love sits him down, sits him down,

And drinks his wine as merry as can be,

And never, never thinks of me. (Bucky made an exaggerated sad face, and the guys all busted up laughing)

Fare thee well, for I must leave thee,

Do not let this parting grieve thee,

And remember that the best of friends

Must part, must part. (this part didn’t get as loud a response—too many newly dead ghosts in the room for that)

Adieu, adieu kind friends, yes, adieu

I can no longer stay with you, stay with you,

I'll hang my harp on the weeping willow tree, (Bucky made a gesture as if he were hanging up a harp and Dugan clapped enthusiastically)

And may the world go well with thee.

He left me for a damsel dark, damsel dark, (Steve’s face—he could feel it heating—no)

Each Friday night they used to spark, (don’t blush)

Used to spark, (don’t)

And now my love who once was true to me

Takes this dark damsel on his knee. (what are you doing singing this)

And now I see him nevermore, nevermore;

He never knocks upon my door, on my door;

Oh, woe is me; he pinned a little note, (more of the theatrical miming—christ, people were eating it up, Bucky kept catching the eye of the prettiest girl in the place and raising his eyebrows)

And these were all the words he wrote: (he was doing fine, wasn’t he, it was Steve’s face, it was Steve)
Fare thee well, for I must leave thee,
Do not let this parting grieve thee,
And remember that the best of friends (don’t squeeze the stein handle this hard you will crack it)
Must part, must part. (that, there was the only time Bucky looked at Steve; right at Steve, right into
him, like the piercing blue light from the weapons)

Oh, dig my grave both wide and deep, wide and deep;
Put tombstones at my head and feet, head and feet
And on my breast you may carve a turtle dove,
To signify I died of love. (christ no what is this is it over)

Bucky finished to applause from all around the bar, stood up on the piano bench to the protests of the
pianist and the pained noises of the bartender, and took a deep bow.

The pretty girl he’d been making eye contact with came over to say something—Steve could have
sworn it was “—such a wonderful voice—” and Bucky looked down at her, smiling. He leaned in
and whispered something in her ear and she giggled. The noise felt shrilly penetrating, but it didn’t
seem to bother any of the other guys.

“Hey, cheer up,” said Morita, bumping his shoulder with his own. “I bet you can carry a tune, too.”

“Maybe Agent Carter would appreciate a song dedicated to her honor,” said Monty, clearly
struggling to keep from smiling at the thought.

Dugan laughed out loud. “What do you say, Cap, a song for us? As long as we’re getting free
entertainment?”

“You call this free?” asked Steve, and Dugan laughed his deep, booming laugh. “No, I think I’ll
spare you that. They never had me sing on stage for a reason.”

Across the room Bucky was chasing the giggling down the girl’s throat. Steve felt it like acid, like
bile rising.

He tried not to watch. Morita was telling a dirty story. Focus. But then he glanced again and Bucky
was looking right at him, and he didn’t know what his face looked like. Bucky’s lips twisted.

Bucky leaned forward again and whispered something else in the girl’s ear, and she hauled off and
slapped him like nobody’s business. The noise reverberated in the bar.

When Bucky rejoined them at the table a moment later, Dugan said, “You gotta tell me what you say
to the girls, Sarge, looks like you make quite an impression,” and then laughed at his own wit,
smacking his thigh and pointing at the red mark on Bucky’s face.

“Well,” said Bucky, settling in to his chair, “not all of us have Cap’s light touch with women.” The
guys snickered and smirked.
“Some of us respect a lady,” said Steve gamely, through lips that felt numb.

“Yeah, and some of us want to get some action before we die,” said Bucky.

“Truer words,” said Gabe, raising his stein. Steve choked on a laugh and raised his to knock against Gabe’s.

Bucky looked carefree. He looked happy. Steve had a gnawing feeling that he had a pretty good handle on how to look that way, and he did his best impression, too. Dialed it down some—he was supposed to be the commanding officer—had to be more grave and still. He could hear Gertie: talk like a king and they’ll treat you like one.

“How’s your singing voice?” he asked Morita, who looked a little surprised, but turned out to be a decent tenor, and by the end of the evening the pianist was pretty sick of them. But maybe nobody was going to remember Bucky’s choice of song, which was important.

The first mission wasn’t a straight shot in to a base, not yet. Phillips figured they needed more intel, and he wasn’t wrong.

They wanted to target the French base first. It was in occupied France, but close to Vichy territory, which meant it might be a little easier to get out if something went pear-shaped. Steve was standing over the strategic map, gesturing at the base. “I’m saying, I’m not sure why we’re thinking the French base before the Italian base. Troop movements are going to bump up against it, soon, and we don’t want a repeat of what happened last time Allied forces met HYDRA.”

Phillips sighed heavily. “Because we believe this base has higher factory production, probably no POWs, and we have intel sources in the area. How many times will I have to say this, Captain?” The title was still mocking.

Steve shook his head. “I’m concerned for the troops, but you’re sure we can keep them clear for now?”

“I’m not sure of anything,” Phillips ground out.

Behind Steve, Bucky’s eyes went from him to Phillips and back. It was tense—deciding on the first mission, he figured, had to be.

At least he was in the room now.

If anybody had told Bucky when he was a kid that he’d be teaching Steve to hotwire a Jeep under the gun in enemy territory, he would have fervently hoped that they were wrong.

But here they were, Steve’s hands steady on the wires, Bucky sighting down the barrel at the Nazis coming after them. Not in good range yet. Wait for it.

The engine turned over.

“Thank Christ,” said Steve, and hit the gas. They shot out of there like a bat out of hell.

Bucky pulled himself back down, tucked into the front seat. “I could have gotten them,” he shouted over the noise of the engine and the absurd splattering thunder of hitting pothole after pothole.
“Save your bullets,” Steve yelled back.

He didn’t look over to Bucky until they were out of that town, roaring down the open road at violently unsafe speeds. Bucky had kept an eye out behind them, but he’d done it twisted in Steve’s direction.

Now when Steve’s head turned to look at him, he looked back. And Steve was smiling, a huge beautiful smile.

Bucky smiled back, helplessly, the adrenaline still singing in his blood. It felt like muscles he hadn’t used in months, years maybe, coming online.

Of course war was different with Steve. Of course even hell was better with Steve. Why hadn’t he thought it would be?

With the recon intel in place, Phillips okayed the base raid. The Commandos “need the element of surprise,” he said, “no jumping from planes two feet from the goddamn base this time, am I clear?”

“Yes, sir,” said Steve, blandly. Bucky had to fight another smile, bit his lip on the inside.

So they ended up bivouacking in the forest the night before. The only thing worse than November in Austria was apparently December in northern France. Bucky said, “Two-man pup tents for a reason, gentlemen, don’t be shy and don’t freeze anythi—”

“Off, we know.” Morita cut him off, sounding bored. “Your one-man campaign against trenchfoot is familiar to us all. Sarge.”

Gabe and Dernier were already getting their tent components pulled out, and Monty’s eyes darted between Dum Dum and Morita before saying, “Well, then, who’ll be taking first watch?”

“We will,” said Dum Dum, patting his gun lovingly. “And this guy,” he added, jerking a thumb back over his shoulder at one of the guys who’d come with them for firepower.

“Duly noted. Morita?”

“Coming, honey,” said Morita, flinging his pack the extra three feet to where Monty was waiting. The other two non-Commandos were getting theirs set up, too.

Steve had their pup tent up by the time Bucky got back to him. Their eyes met for a second.

“Better get in the bag, Cap,” said Bucky, and pulled his mummy bag out. A brisk shake had it mostly unrolled, and he climbed in, tugging up on the stiff zipper.

“We got to see if Stark can make us something better,” mumbled Steve, wrestling to get his body into the mummy bag. “I’m going to be three inches shorter by morning.”

Bucky laughed a little, a quick puff of vapor out of his mouth showing in what moonlight filtered through the tent. “I don’t think you’re ever going to shrink again, buddy.”

Steve snorted. “Don’t wash me in hot, then.”

They both had to stifle chuckles, and for a split second, out in the woods, it felt almost like they were kids falling asleep on the couch and the floor again. Except Steve’s body was pressed against his, side to side, the whole length of them, and Steve really was too big for the mummy bag.
After a couple of minutes, Steve grunted and unzipped the bag enough to get his arms out. “That’s better,” he said, yanking the hood back. “I’ll take my chances with freezing. Got to breathe.”

“No frostbite jokes,” said Bucky. He was sure the guys could hear them, if they wanted to. “Not even from you, tough guy.”

“Duly noted.” Steve said dryly.

Bucky dropped off pretty quickly, all things considered, and woke a couple hours later, when the rock digging into his back was getting unbearable. He twisted a little to get away from it, up onto his side, and if that pushed him halfway up against Steve, well, Steve could deal with it. Steve had already been at an angle, sleeping with his back up against the slight rise in the earth in the well around this particular tree.

Steve—he heard a soft breath, like surprise. Steve was awake, then. He opened his eyes, and Steve’s eyes were glittering in the darkness, so close to his. So close.

Steve just kept looking him in the eye while he reached out, wrapping an arm around Bucky’s waist.

Bucky let out a startled huff of air through his nose, but Steve didn’t move after that. Just left his arm there. Heavy, warm, draped over Bucky’s waist, fingers—fingers pressing lightly into the fabric over the small of his back. He was suddenly, humiliatingly hard, pushed against Steve’s leg. Bundled up in the mummy bag so he couldn’t, couldn’t do anything with his hands, the noise would have, they would have heard.

Steve still didn’t move. Didn’t close his eyes. So they lay there, eyes inches apart, not moving, until they heard Dum Dum shifting, the slight rustle as he shook the next watch awake. No voices, just the slick dragging noise of the mummy bag and soft whine of the zipper, men standing up. Their feet were nearly silent in the pine needles.

Bucky shut his eyes, then. He couldn’t take it anymore. Steve’s hold on him slowly slackened, and he did, eventually, fall asleep.

When Gabe stuck his head in to wake them at first light, Bucky had turned in his sleep, his back toward Steve, and Steve’s head was sprawled back gracelessly over a root that made a half-decent pillow. They were hardly touching.

The French base was disguised as an abandoned factory. That was just the surface level, though; underground the operations were sprawling, extensive. “Do I want to know how we know this?” Steve had asked Peggy, before they left, and she’d smiled tightly.

“Some very good people were very interested in the rather vague location we had for them, Captain,” she said. “And we have been fortunate enough that they have retained their radio.”

“And we’re sure the location is good? That flag could have been anywhere in a significant radius.”

“The sources are confident. That’s all we’re going to get, I’m afraid.”

Steve had nodded. Good enough for Peggy was good enough for him.

“Christmas is coming up, Captain,” she’d said, staring at him intently. “Do you have any requests?”
He glanced up at her, away from the map, and he could feel his smile taking him by surprise, growing. “You know, I gave away a lot of pictures,” he said. “I think I’d like to get one.”

She made a disapproving noise at that, looking back down at the map, but he could see the little smile on her lips.

They were up on the hill over the dilapidated factory shell, staring down; they’d already gone over the plan until everyone could recite it from heart.

Steve made eye contact with each one of them, then nodded sharply. They crept down the hill, tree to tree, just shadowy ghosts in the predawn.

When they burst in through the doors in a tight knot, the HYDRA men inside clearly weren’t prepared. They went down in a hail of bullets, under Steve’s shield, glinting as it flew through the air. They went down under Steve’s fists and feet and Bucky just kept firing, and they pushed their way to the entrance to the underground complex.

Steve had insisted on planting the bomb himself until Bucky pointed out that he’d be the one HYDRA couldn’t stop looking at. “You’re a huge visual target,” he’d said. “Any one of us is in a better position to plant it before we beat a tactical retreat.”

“Withdrawal, lad,” said Monty, with a trace of a smile.

“I know what I said. We’ll get it placed and get the hell out of there, and see if we can’t stall the hostiles in there long enough that when it goes, they all go.”

“We have to be sure there are no prisoners,” said Steve.

Morita said, “Yeah, no worries. Sarge and me on recon?”

Bucky nodded sharply. “Sounds good. You guys keep them busy. Dum Dum, you’re a big guy, try to be a big target too.”

Dugan grinned mirthlessly. “Shouldn’t be a problem.”

So one of the regular guys, in a regular uniform, had the bomb, and Steve just beat the hell out of Nazis until Morita and Bucky reappeared and Bucky said urgently, “We’re set, let’s beat it,” and Steve shot the signal across the narrow hallway to the grim soldier who pushed a button on the bomb and then ran like hell.

Their timing was perfect, genuinely perfect. They made it just over the ridge, HYDRA soldiers pouring out of the factory like ants after them, before it blew. And from the cloud of shrapnel that went over their heads, cooling as it rained down over them in little burning fragments, the enemies behind them wouldn’t have made it out intact. Steve got his shield up over his head, and the guys turned their faces down so the bits of heated metal clinked uselessly off their helmets, singed through the netting here and there.

Steve stood up and turned to go check on the wreckage. Bucky stopped him with a hand on his arm, and he turned to look at him in surprise.

“Captain,” said Bucky, “I’ll take care of it.”

They stared at each other. Steve shook his head. “Start to finish, Sarge,” he said, and went back over
He could see right away why Bucky had tried to stop him. The ground had cratered out where the factory had been. Closer, there were black figures all over the landscape. The shrapnel wounds were ugly. There were men littering the hill, men with shredded faces, men whose intestines were pouring out of their stomachs—legs twisted at unnatural angles. Nobody, right up to the sharp ridge at the top of the hill, had gone unscathed.

He stood and he surveyed the devastation from Dernier’s clever bomb with Stark’s components, and it was ugly and brutal, and he took a deep breath. He could feel Bucky’s eyes on him, not on the carnage.

“Good work, men,” he said, quietly, but still in his stage voice. He could feel them start to relax around him.

A Jerry near him whimpered in unmistakable agony, voice swelling to a throbbing cry. He threw his shield without looking, putting real force into it, and he knew the neck snapped when the wails abruptly stopped. The shield came back to his hand, and he hung it on his back.

“We don’t know how much of a lead we’ve got. Let’s get out of here,” he said. And they did.

Bucky watched Steve looking out over the dead and dying, holding the shield after the mercy killing. They weren’t going to have time to put every Jerry out of his misery, and Steve knew that. His face was like marble—sad, but not surprised, not angry.

He looked like God must have looked, staring down at the world after the Flood.

Bucky took point on the hike to the rendez-vous. There was no chance to talk. Steve didn’t know what he would have said, anyway.

On the plane out, Steve’s head rolled on his neck, over to look at Bucky. Bucky wasn’t asleep. His eyes were closed, but he wasn’t asleep.

He looked exhausted and grimy. There were smears of blood on him, spatters of it, and Steve suddenly wondered if he was covered in blood, too. He looked down, and there were stains. Fewer of them, more spray and fewer big drops. The shield was—the shield was dirtier. The blood was drying, dry, a dark brownish red. He remembered the brilliant red of it in the pitiless factory lights as heads snapped back and blood fountained from noses, as gunshots erupted through the black clothes of the HYDRA soldiers.

Bucky with his eyes shut didn’t look young anymore. He was—it was almost his birthday; he was about to turn twenty-seven. Steve was twenty-five. They were older than so many of the kids in the war, getting drafted straight out of high school.

How had they gotten this far?

(They might not get much farther. *I will therefore let flame from me the burning fires that were threatening to consume me, I will lift what has too long kept down those smouldering fires, I will give them complete abandonment, I will write the evangel-poem of comrades and of love...*)
When they got back to the SSR HQ, the mood was celebratory. Peggy smiled, and even though she was greeting all of them, she only had eyes for Steve.

Bucky smiled fixedly at the back of her head.

After the debriefing, they were turned loose. “You may be interested to know,” said Peggy, “that there is currently even hot water in the showers.”

“You’re treating us real nice,” said Bucky.

She managed a small smile for him, too, but it was tired.

“It would hardly do to treat you to a cold shower if we could help it,” she said, and Bucky half-snorted on a laugh.

Maybe that was what he needed. But he’d been in the field long enough to know that you never turned down a hot shower. A bed, yeah, sometimes you didn’t want a bed after you got used to going without. But a hot shower—you always got one of those while the getting was good.

“I’ll catch up with you,” he said to the other Commandos, and stepped outside for a cigarette that turned into two, then three. He hadn’t been craving them, like he had before Azzano, but he still liked them. The brief rush after each inhale, letting his limbs feel loose and relaxed for a minute.

The other guys were in the water, back out of it, and in bed by the time Bucky got to the showers. He caught a glimpse of the beds in the barracks as he went by, sheets humped up over bodies, the slack noise of snores already starting. The shower room was mostly dark, just a block of light sliding across the wall from the corridor lights. He didn’t pull the chain for the light bulb.

He cranked on the water—this one had individual spigots you could turn, so you didn’t have to all shower in a huge group—and stood under it for a long minute, facing the wall, then harshly dug his fingers into his hair. Pulling.

That was about when he realized that it had gone even darker and there was somebody else in the room. Steve hadn’t been there when he walked in. He was sure. It was his job to be sure. But Steve was there now, and the door to the hall was pushed almost completely shut, just one line that was brighter in the darkness.

Steve walked up behind him. He could hear him, bare feet almost silent on the slick floor, feel him. Then Steve stopped. There was a moment were the only sound was water falling.

Bucky took a deep breath, let it out. Leaned forward, bracing his hands against the tiled wall, spreading his legs. Invitation.

Steve’s hands—one of Steve’s hands landed on his hip, gently, carefully. Tentative. The thumb circled a little, stroking his skin. He shut his eyes.

Steve stepped closer. Bucky could feel the heat of his body against his back, feel breath on the back of his neck. Steve was dressed, t-shirt and slacks. Had he showered and then waited? Had he not showered yet?

Noiselessly, Steve kissed the back of Bucky’s neck. Bucky bit his lip.

Steve’s other hand slid over his hip, around, up his chest. Bucky was starting to shake. He was getting hard, aching with it. The water sliding over him was hot, steam rising up off the floor, billowing around them. Steve had to be getting wet. The soaked thin cotton of his shirt was rubbing
against Bucky’s back, and then Steve pushed even closer, crowding him, and Bucky could feel
Steve’s cock hard against him through the slacks. He pushed back into it.

Steve’s arm tightened around him. The hand on Bucky’s hip dropped to his cock, and Bucky
gasped, the noise almost lost in the humid room. Steve’s other hand came up from his chest to cover
his mouth, and Bucky’s eyelids fluttered closed. He was leaning in to the hand on his mouth and the
hand on his cock, feeling suspended.

Steve was working him, pumping him, and rubbing against him, and the slide of Steve’s cock against
his ass through the fabric of his trousers was—almost as good as—the hand on his cock, moving,
working him. He wouldn’t have lasted as long as he did if he hadn’t been so bone-tired, until finally
Steve hit the rhythm just right and then kept it. Bucky was putting his weight on the balls of his feet,
legs straining. He thrust a few more times into Steve’s grip before he was coming, coming against the
wall, shuddering, and then Steve behind him jerked, too, and he could feel Steve’s cock pulsing and
the come that would be ruining his wet slacks.

They stood for a moment longer like that, breathing deeply, Steve’s hand resting on his stomach just
above Bucky’s softening cock. Bucky had to gasp again as Steve pressed his hand into Bucky’s
skin. His cock gave a last twitch and another drop of come escaped.

Steve kissed Bucky’s neck again, then, and again, and then wrapped both his arms around Bucky’s
chest, sliding his hands over him, kissing him and kissing him and holding him there, not letting
Bucky move, not letting him turn, and Bucky didn’t try to, didn’t want to break the spell.

Something creaked, somewhere. Steve let go and stepped back, and Bucky couldn’t—couldn’t turn
around. Just stayed where he was, leaning against the wall, sagging, really, now. Steve stripped off
his clothes—Bucky could hear him—and the quick sputtering noise of water on fabric as he rinsed
the come out of his pants.

Steve stepped up next to Bucky, cranked the spigot. It made a rusty squeak as it came on, and Bucky
couldn’t turn his head to look at Steve naked next to him. Washing off the evidence, so that in a
matter of—of seconds, they were suddenly safe. No one had seen and now there was no evidence.
Bucky’s come was already washed off the wall, water sluicing down around his shoulders. The
whole thing had been—less than ten minutes, surely, start to finish.

Bucky tipped his head forward and let it rest against the tiles.

Steve showered quickly, efficiently. He was done in less than two minutes, turning the spigot back
off.

He touched Bucky’s shoulder, gently. One broad hand reaching out to rest over his bicep.

Finally, Bucky looked up. He knew—he knew if Steve was looking, if he could see past the water
from the shower and see through the darkness, there were tears on his face now.

Steve’s face was the same. It was—not the same. There was something in his face, something
arresting.

Bucky’s hands were still planted against the wall like they were the only thing holding him up.
Steve’s face was so close to his.

He shut his eyes and leaned in, and Steve must have leaned in, too, because their lips met. Steve’s
hand came up and tangled in his hair, pulling him in, and they kissed. Another risk.

When Steve pulled back, Bucky left his eyes closed. His hands still on the wall. Water was still hot,
starting to go down to just warm.

He listened to Steve’s feet, padding softly out of the shower room, the noise of a towel pulled off a hook, rustle of clothes.

He waited until Steve was out of the room before he finished showering, quick and sharp movements, and scrubbed himself dry briskly, like they taught them to do in Basic.

When he got in to the barracks, Steve was in his bed, curled up on his side. Facing toward Bucky’s bed.

Bucky slipped in between the sheets. Faced away.

In the mess the next morning, Bucky found Steve eating and sat down across from him.

“Buck,” said Steve. His face looked raw.

“I been thinking about the Italian base,” said Bucky. “Hear me out, I got an idea.”

Steve nodded, settling back in his chair. Bucky could see shutters coming down. Good. Good.

“It’s almost Bucky’s birthday,” Steve said to Peggy. “Can we manage something? A cake?”

Peggy looked at him with a soft, fond smile. “I think we can,” she said. “Let me see what I can rustle up.”

On Bucky’s birthday, there was a pound cake—actual pound cake, full of butter and eggs, nothing powdered about it. Bucky stared at it in blank shock, then said, “Holy shit, you better not be fucking me around, give me some.”

Peggy burst out laughing, a beautiful noise like bells, and said, “Wouldn’t dream of it, Sergeant. Monty?”

Monty handed over a knife to cut it. “I’m afraid we will be asking you to share, Sergeant.”

“I’ll share, I just want mine,” he said, hugging the plate close to his chest as Peggy passed it over.

Steve was watching him, a little smile on his mouth.

“Shall we sing?” asked Monty.

“God, no,” said Bucky through a mouthful of cake. “Too late anyway, I got my wish. I wished for cake. God, this is good. Who made it?”

“Not me, I’m afraid,” said Peggy, finishing up cutting and dishing herself up a slice. “I have a friend who cooks at a hotel.”

“Please tell them they’re a fucking genius,” Bucky said.

“I certainly will.” She smiled at him, and he smiled back. He looked so young for a minute. There
were crumbs of cake sticking to the stubble on his chin.

After dinner and the cake, when people had dispersed, Steve said, “Birthday drink at the pub?”

Bucky shrugged, but looked pleased. “Sure.”

They drank perched on barstools, mostly in silence, punctuated by brief discussions of strategy (“I’m saying, I think in Italy we’re going to have to worry more about the terrain, it’s not working for us like it did last time”) and the beer (“I’m pretty sure this is at least part glue”). Steve felt the warmth of the beer in his stomach, even if it wasn’t getting him drunk. Bucky didn’t look drunk, either, level and distant as he periodically glanced over the people in the pub.

On the way back, with the sky showing a few streaks of bright pink in the distance, the air raid siren started screaming. Steve sighed. “You want to just keep on back to HQ?”

“No,” said Bucky. Steve glanced over at him. Bucky’s eyes were fixed on an alley. Just like that, Steve’s heart sped up, started to pound, cock twitching.

Bucky ducked into the alley—no one else in it. Narrow, dark. Perfect. Steve followed, came up right next to him. Bucky’s voice had fallen to a whisper, barely audible over the sirens and the sudden deep pounding thud of a couple of bombs. Steve had to turn his head, put his ear next to Bucky’s mouth to catch what he said. He repeated himself: “Give it a minute. People need to get off the streets.”

Steve pulled back and looked at Bucky. Bucky’s face was transfigured, naked and alight, as he pulled off his hat and set it aside, and even though he’d been the one to say give it a minute, it was his hands scrabbling at Steve’s belt a second later.

Steve sank back against the wall, gasping. He could—they could be a little louder, this time. Christ, they were in uniform, they were both in uniform, nobody could mistake this for a sailor getting a quick one from a civvie, and it was—they shouldn’t—but Bucky bent his head and got his mouth around Steve’s cock. Steve just shuddered, letting his hands drift to rest on Bucky’s head. Bucky made a desperate soft noise. Another spray of bombs fell, the buildings trembling.

Steve held his hips still, didn’t thrust, didn’t last long. Bucky’s mouth was hot and wet and he was—was he touching himself? Was that—Steve grunted faintly in warning and came, knees threatening to buckle.

Bucky didn’t flinch, just swallowed, and then looked up as he let Steve’s cock slip out of his mouth. In the flickering dark, his face was a saint’s face, a portrait of ecstatic suffering. His hands moved over Steve’s softening cock, tucking him back in, buttoning his pants.

Steve dropped to a crouch, putting him eye-level with Bucky. He reached out—Bucky rocked back on his heels, putting his back against the wall, slacks already undone, and Steve got Bucky’s cock into his hand, and jerked him hard and fast, watching his face, listening to his breaths when there was a lull in the noise. Bucky’s eyes stayed open the whole time, boring into Steve’s, and his back arched up off the wall as he came, silently.

Steve kissed him as he panted, shaking, and got himself buttoned up. Bucky grabbed his hat off the ground and brushed the wet grit off it before putting it back on. They made the rest of walk back in silence.

It was a short raid, just a couple handfuls of bombs. “Their hearts haven’t been in it since the Blitz,”
said Monty, over breakfast the next day.

Steve nodded, sipping his coffee, bitter with chicory, only half-listening. The circles under Bucky’s eyes were lighter. Weren’t they?

Christmas 1943 was the best Christmas, Steve thought, if you’d asked him.

Anyone from London, or close enough, was offering to host American soldiers. With so many of the local boys overseas, it filled a gap at the table and made them feel like they were helping.

But a few of them—Monty, Bucky, Morita, Dernier, Steve—were sticking around the HQ. Dum Dum had met a very pretty girl who’d invited him, and he winked on his way out the door. Gabe was staying with a family he’d bumped into in an air raid shelter. Phillips had made some argument about Captain America visiting a British family for the good photo ops and publicity, and Steve had said, “I’ll have dinner with them, then, but not the morning. I wouldn’t want to intrude on private family time.”

Bucky said something to Phillips, a whisper too low for Steve to hear. Phillips nodded brusquely.

“That’ll be fine, son,” he said to Steve.

On her way out, Christmas Eve, Peggy had stopped by to see Steve, just for a minute. She’d slid him an envelope. “Merry Christmas, Captain,” she’d said, with a half-smile.

“Merry Christmas to you, too, Agent Carter,” he’d said, smiling back at her, knowing his face was too bright to hide anything. She looked radiant in a white coat over her uniform, hair pinned up, for a family dinner, maybe. Red lipstick made her skin look even paler and warmer, set off against the coat. He’d given her a present, too, a little bottle of perfume he’d managed to trade a soldier for when they were in France.

When he opened it—he wasn’t waiting—it was a small picture of her. Not a real photograph, something from a newspaper article, maybe, but close enough. He picked it up, considered its size, and flipped open his compass. It would fit perfectly. A pair of scissors, a little gentle surgery, and Peggy was looking back at him from over true North.

Ma would have been happy, he thought, about Peggy. Ma would have liked her, would have approved of a beautiful woman who could get a job done, who had seen something in Steve worth smiling about even before the experiment.

That night, the barracks were almost empty. Steve said, “I think I’ll take a walk. Get some fresh air.”

“Mmm,” said Morita from his bed, where he was sitting up, reading. “You’re nuts. Enjoy it.”

“Anybody want to go with?”

Bucky looked up from the gun he was cleaning. He glanced down at the gun, then back up. “Suppose I could use a walk,” he said. “I don’t get enough exercise here.”

“You could always spar with Gabe,” said Morita.

“I said I wanted exercise, not to get a lecture on form.”

“Fine. Enjoy freezing your ass off out there.”
“I will, just for you, sugarplum.”

Morita casually flipped him off as Bucky stood up, pulling his boots back on.

The streets were quiet. Christmas Eve. Dark, soft, just a faint trace of snow. Not a lot of other people out.

Steve had his hands shoved into his pockets like he’d always done when he was—when they were in Brooklyn. Bucky watched the little cloud of air like smoke in front of his face come and go.

“Buck,” said Steve.

Bucky gave it a minute to see if he was going to follow that up with anything. “Yeah?”

“You mad at me?”

“Christ.” Bucky sucked in a deep breath that stung his lungs a little. “Yeah, I’m still pretty ticked you volunteered for a medical experiment and then didn’t fucking tell me for months.” He’d aimed for light. It hadn’t come out that way.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Steve wasn’t looking at him. Steve took a breath like he was going to say something, let it out again. Tried again. “No. I, uh, deserve that. Not, uh, not about that.”

Bucky opened his mouth to say then what and then he knew, suddenly. “Oh. No. No. I’m not, I’m not mad at you, okay? Christ. Are we okay?”

Steve let out a breath. “Yeah. We’re okay. Thank God.”

Which was as close as they got to talking about it, that night. Although, on their way back, Steve did glance over at an alley, and even in the dark, Bucky would have bet money his cheeks went red.

But there were people on the streets, and no sirens this time, so they just walked in a loop back to the HQ and got back to the barracks. Bucky shook his hands out to warm them, even though they weren’t that cold, and Steve folded his uniform carefully before setting it on his trunk. Morita sighed, “Guess this means I should put the book down and get some shut-eye.”

“What’re you reading?” asked Bucky, squinting across at Morita’s cot. He had one of the US Armed Forces books, the little ones with the crappy paper that started falling apart almost instantly. Everybody loved them anyway. Lighter than other books, easier to carry around.

Morita held the book up so Bucky could see. “You might like it. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.*”

“Is it good?”

“It’s really good. I had to wait for it for ages. It’s about this girl growing up in Brooklyn in the 19-teens, and she’s Irish Catholic, and it’s all about her family and the things she experiences growing up poor.”

“Sounds about right,” said Steve. “Not a lot of rich Irish Catholics in Brooklyn. Not that I ever met, anyway.”

“And damn sure not thirty years back,” said Bucky.
“Got more rich people now. I think they like how cheap the property is.” Steve shook his head grimly. “They’re going to drive up the prices on everything.”

Morita raised his eyebrows, clearly unimpressed.

“Can I read it when you’re done?” asked Bucky.

“Yeah, sure. Treat it nice, though, it’s going back into circulation after that.”

Steve woke slowly, that Christmas morning, no rush of noise to let him know it was time. No hurry, that morning. He turned to check, but Bucky was already up and out of bed, the cot made tight enough to bounce a quarter off even though there weren’t going to be any inspections. Morita was snoring—chronic late riser when he thought he could get away with it.

He got up and made his way to the mess, really just a little cafeteria. The skeleton crew had powdered eggs. Bucky was finishing his up as Steve sat down across from him.

“You gotta eat more, Stevie,” said Bucky. He sounded half-asleep still. “No good acting like you’re on rations.”

Steve’s stomach rumbled, but he shook his head. “I’ve got that dinner coming up tonight. Want to be hungry for it, don’t I?”

“I suppose you do.” Bucky pushed the last crumbs of egg around on his plate for a minute. “I turned it down. Thought it might be a novelty to have a quiet Christmas.”

“We could go out for a drink when I get back?”

“You really think there’s going to be a place open?”

Steve shrugged. “Maybe we can find one. It’s an adventure.”

Bucky laughed. “Only you, Rogers. Only you come back from a goddamn mission to enemy territory talking about an adventure. Christ, it’s like you’re still listening to serials!”

“Is that a no?”

“Nah. I’ll go with you.” Bucky smiled at him, lopsidedly. “Hell, I think technically we have leave today.” Nobody checked, much, anymore, about their leaves. Steve was in charge of it for his unit and it wasn’t like he wasted much thought on it—a guy wanted time off, Steve would give it, unless it was straight-up countermanded. And Phillips didn’t seem to give a shit either.

“Sounds good.”

“Hey, merry Christmas.”

“Yeah, merry Christmas to you, too.”

“You didn’t get me anything, did you?”

“What? No.”

“Good. Me neither.”
The dinner was nice. The family was nice. The photographer hovering over them was less nice, but the daughters, who were maybe fourteen and seventeen, were pretty interested in getting their pictures taken, and also in Steve, so he made sure to sit by the grandmother whenever he could.

If Steve hurried back, afterwards, it was just because it was chilly.

Bucky was waiting for him, ready to go, jacket pulled tight over his uniform.

They did manage to find a pub that was open and serving meat pies, so Bucky didn’t starve. (Steve would have hated to admit that the Christmas dinner he’d been treated to was anything but magical, but he ate several pies, too.)

They stayed until it was getting late—really late. And then Bucky said, “Shit, you want to just stay here tonight? They have rooms, I saw the sign. We could sleep on decent beds.”

“Sure,” said Steve, “if they’ve got rooms.”

They did. They had two rooms, and for those nice American boys they were cheap, even. Bucky confided to the proprietress, in what would have been private if not for Steve’s hearing, “You know, it’s my friend’s first Christmas overseas, and his ma died a couple years back—it’s been hard on him, I think he likes this place, it reminds him of home,” and not only did they get the rooms for a song but Steve got a hug that left him adrift in a sea of staid British bosom.

Steve and Bucky nodded at each other in the hallway on their way in to their rooms. As Steve was shutting his door, he noticed, with a feeling like the top of his head was going to float away, that there were locks on the doors.

Steve’s room was the end of the row, just a window to the street, Bucky’s room next to his on the other side. No neighbors. The room across the hall was empty. He left his door unlocked.

It was around one in the morning when the door opened. He wouldn’t have noticed if he hadn’t still been awake, the sudden crack of light from the hall. It closed again soundlessly, the lock shot, and Bucky lowered himself onto the bed. It didn’t creak. Bucky gave an experimental bounce, and it still didn’t creak. Good workmanship.

Steve was sitting up immediately. Clothes all neatly hung or folded on the chair, he was naked, and he fumbled with Bucky’s undershirt, pulling it up and off. Bucky shifted on the bed, kneeling astride Steve, lifting one leg and then the other to drag off his shorts.

Then they were both naked and skin to skin, and Steve dragged Bucky down for kisses, open-mouthed and hungry. Bucky ground his cock into Steve’s hip and Steve’s cock slid up in the hot crack of Bucky’s thigh and Steve’s hips jerked up.

Then Bucky’s hand closed over Steve’s cock and there was—what was that? Something slippery—Steve couldn’t hold back the shivering gasp. It was—vaseline, probably, how had—he brought it with him—had he been planning—and Bucky was pumping him, fist slick with it, and then whispered, in his ear, “Fuck me.”

Steve’s fingers dug into Bucky’s hips so hard it must have been painful, and then he was nodding, nodding, desperately. “How do you w—” he barely had time to get out, before Bucky knelt up and then back down onto him.
It was slow. Had he done this—Steve didn’t think he had. Bucky was panting, very quietly, and
going so slowly, just a fraction of an inch at a time, and it was so good, so good. He wrapped his
hands around Bucky’s hips, trying to keep his grip light, as Bucky slid down, taking more and more
of his cock. He brushed his fingers over where his cock was going into Bucky, and his head dropped
back and he had to stifle a groan. Finally Bucky settled, all the way down onto him.

“Fuck,” Bucky whispered.

“Yeah,” Steve whispered back.

Bucky moved—just barely—and Steve gasped again, trying to keep his hips still. Bucky inhaled
raggedly and then did it again, a little bigger movement, and then again, and again, and again, and
after a couple of minutes had worked his way up to rising up a little bit onto his knees, and then
before Steve was really ready for it, he was working Steve, and Steve’s hips were moving whether
he wanted them to or not, and then Bucky shifted a little and went wild, just slamming himself down
over and over again, Steve’s hands fumbling on his hips. Bucky got out, through gritted teeth,
“Touch me, touch me,” and Steve scrambled for his cock and gave it a firm squeezing pull once,
twice, and Bucky started to come, clenching around Steve’s cock, shooting over Steve’s belly and
chest. Steve could feel the waves around him and he came, too, and it was everything he could do
not to shout, which he thought Bucky must know, because Bucky clapped a hand over his mouth
and then spasmed again, Steve’s orgasm wringing another series of pulses from his own cock.

They lay there in the dark, and Bucky slowly leaned forward and rested his forehead against Steve’s
as Steve’s cock softened. When it slipped out of him he made a soft complaining noise, and Steve
suddenly thought of the state of the sheets, laundry tomorrow, they’d see, and tensed, but Bucky
pulled his hand off Steve’s mouth and kissed him, and that was enough. That was good enough.

Steve ran his hands up over Bucky’s back, broad and sweaty, and pulled him in for another kiss.

They lay there like that for a few minutes—five? ten?—kissing intermittently, Bucky’s fingers
stroking down Steve’s sides, before Bucky took a deep, silent breath and levered himself up. He
tossed Steve something that was bright in the dark—a washcloth—and held up another one for
himself, and then gathered his shirt and shorts and he was gone, feet padding in the hallway down to
the water closet.

Steve stared up into the darkness. He could see in it, now, mostly. Even nights like this. He’d seen
Bucky’s face.

He wiped the come and vaseline off himself, stopped for a minute to dab his fingers in the come on
his chest and bring that hand to his face to smell it, heart thundering. He had to jerk off again after
that, tight and brutal.

In the morning they had breakfast with the smiling landlady and her husband, who was a short,
doughy man, and Steve ate the inexplicable slab of tomato next to the toast and eggs and thanked
them very much for their hospitality. He tried not to look too much like someone with something to
hide.

“Can’t do enough for our boys,” said the doughy proprietor. “I’m a damn sight too old and with this
bum leg there’s no chance I could make it over, but I can certainly put out a decent plate.”

“It’s delicious,” said Bucky, and rubbed the back of his neck like a schoolboy as he smiled his rich,
slow smile at the landlady, who actually blushed.
On their way back to HQ, they didn’t talk at all. They left space between them. But they walked in step, and when their eyes met, they smiled; once they glanced at each other at exactly the same time, and they burst into helpless, joyful laughter.

Bucky took a shower and changed his clothes right away, and found Peggy as soon as she got in that day. He was talking with her about her experiences in Italy and whether they had anybody they could bring as a translator if they went for the HYDRA base there. It was as good a distraction as any, maybe better. She looked good.

“Did you have a good day off?” he asked her, and she cocked her head and smiled.

“Yes, it was quite nice. And you?”

“I took some time. Actually got off base for once.”

“Sergeant,” she said, fond but chiding, “this is not a base, really. You’re only billeted here.”

“Close enough. It was good to get out into town.”

“I imagine,” she said, and her eyes softened a little with sympathy.

After they’d finished talking, he left her office. It was—once he was out again, thinking instead of talking, he could feel it, again. Little aches, twinges. The sensations were fading already—he thought maybe that wasn’t normal, maybe he should have been able to feel it for longer. He thought he might have liked to feel it for longer.

His dad would have whipped him and Father Dalton would have given him a thousand Hail Marys, and he might be a goddamn fairy now—for real, in a way he’d never really felt after the blowjobs and the alleys and the whores—but he’d never felt better.

Hell, if he’d known being a faggot was like this, could be like this, he would have started up a long time ago.

New Year’s came, without any more opportunities to get away, be alone. And it definitely wasn’t going to be that night. All of the Howling Commandos were back, and all of them but Steve and Bucky were drunk on brandy.

Which was funny, wasn’t it, because Steve could have sworn Bucky had been drinking. But his face didn’t have the easy looseness he remembered from sitting with Bucky in the summers when they’d been of age, or just shy of, in Brooklyn. He looked stoic. Back to being Sarge.

They weren’t getting fancy, just sitting around a store-room. Everybody sitting on boxes or on the floor, Dum Dum’s face flushed, Morita humming Auld Lang Syne to himself (couldn’t blame him for that one, it was everywhere), Gabe and Dernier talking quietly in French.

The door creaked open, and the men looked up as Peggy stepped in. Steve raised his eyebrows at her in a mute question.

“Sergeant Barnes,” she said, “might I ask you for a favor?”

Bucky blinked slowly in what looked like surprise. “Of course, Agent Carter. Say the word.”
Monty glanced from Peggy to Bucky and back and said, “Oh! I say. First footing?”

Peggy nodded.

“Capital,” said Monty.

“What?” asked Bucky, lost.

“It’s traditional,” said Peggy. “On New Year’s Day, the first visitor to the house should be a dark-haired man who comes with salt and coal and bread. It symbolizes—well. It symbolizes what there’ll be for the house in the year to come.”

Bucky raised his eyebrows. “And I fit the bill?”

“That you do, Sergeant.”

He pulled himself to his feet, setting down his beer. “Well, then, I’ll just toddle along with you. What threshold am I crossing?”

Peggy turned a little pink on the apples of her cheeks. “I thought—it might seem silly, but I thought it would be fitting to try to bring as much good luck to this old heap of stones as we can.”

Bucky smiled at her, wide and crooked, and said, “Makes sense to me. Lead on.”

Steve watched them walk out the door together. Morita nudged his arm and said, “Better keep an eye on him, Cap.”

Steve made a little disparaging noise. Morita laughed out loud.

“Don’t let him hear you talk that way. He wouldn’t like your attitude.”

“Nah, Buck’s a good friend,” said Steve. Thank God, Morita left it at that.

Bucky stood outside the HQ, holding a salt shaker, a lump of coal, and a slice of bread, stamping his feet to keep from getting too cold.

“Almost time?” he said.

Peggy was looking at her watch. “Nearly.”

A noise of bells started—somewhere, a clock chiming the hours. And when the last echo died away, Bucky smiled, cocked his head at her. When she stepped back and waved him in, he crossed the threshold.

“Thank you for playing along,” she said, and smiled warmly at him as she took the objects from his hand. “Don’t suppose you’d be willing to carry out a dustpan of ashes? Clear out the old?”

“Just hand ‘em to me and I will.”

She scrounged one up, and he ceremoniously tapped it out into the gutter outside before hurrying back in.

“Jesus, it’s cold!”
“I should hardly think it compares to your last mission,” she said, dryly.

“Cold’s still cold,” he said, and nearly stuck his tongue out at her, but stopped himself.

She laughed, a soft, rich sound, and of course he could see why Steve liked her; of course. She was a force of nature, beautiful and violent and still kind.

“Hope that does the trick, anyway,” he said, handing the dustpan back to her.

She sobered, mouth twisting. “Yes,” she said, and sighed. “You’d best be getting back before they accuse you of making an attempt on my virtue.”

Bucky laughed out loud, a snorting laugh that used muscles he hadn’t needed in a while.

“I’ve got a beer waiting,” he said, “and it might be missing me, you never know.”

She smiled again, and then turned, and he watched her walk away for a minute before heading back to the store-room. Monty was getting animated over a story about a New Year’s in the field that involved a goat, a pilot, and a stowaway priest.

He’d had worse holidays.

The mission in Belgium wasn’t exactly a cake-walk.

They left for it in the middle of night, as usual, and Stark was brightly telling them about something he’d developed that worked as better camouflage for their plane as they climbed aboard—the pilot was someone a little more expendable, but Stark had come to check the plane before they left—as Steve watched Bucky blink widely, getting the sleep out of his eyes.

The takeoff gave him a jolt in his stomach, like always, that made him want to laugh. Once they were in the air, the familiar hum lulled him. It was a little packed, with the Commandos and half a dozen additional men on board, so it wasn’t odd, at all, that Bucky was pressed against his side. Gabe was squeezed in against his other side. There was something luxurious about it, all this human contact. Gabe was snoring softly, head tipped back against the curving metal.

Bucky caught Steve’s eye and the two of them traded a quick, small smile. Bucky tipped his head back, too, but he didn’t sleep. Steve could feel it in the tension of his body.

When they got to their target, mercifully free of any anti-aircraft fire, the pilot brought the plane as low as he figured he could without the noise giving them away, and the men leapt out one at a time. Steve still wasn’t used to it. The way it jerked his body when the chute caught the air, the total lack of control as it drifted—and he hadn’t asked Bucky how it felt to him, whether it reminded him of the ride back home, or whether it was sickening to feel helpless.

They dropped to the ground, scattered across a huge stretch of farmers’ fields. No lights to give them away. They met up at the treeline where a small stretch of woods separated the town from the cancerous HYDRA base.

They were going in minimally equipped this time. There was no good way to get heavy arms this far into enemy territory, and Steve had a gut feeling they wouldn’t need it. HYDRA was going to be on alert, for now, expecting something, so that wasn’t good, but they did have a plan.

Steve took half the Commandos and the regular troops around to the north of the base, while Bucky
dropped south with the other half. A soft bird whistle split the night.

Ten seconds later, there was a massive explosion on Steve’s side of the building. Dernier was grinning like a maniac, clapping his hands once for joy, as the HYDRA soldiers began to boil out the building, flames licking at the walls. It was chaos.

Steve stepped over bodies. He hit and kept hitting; this was what he was good at, more than any of the shooting, just raw force behind punch after punch, flinging one soldier back into another so hard that bones broke. This was what he’d dreamed of as a kid, and the reality—well, it wasn’t what he’d thought it would be like, but he felt righteous, too, like a sword.

And then he heard the noise that meant Bucky’s team had succeeded. It was a roar, not the high bursting shriek of the other explosive. And the ground began to fall away, not far from their feet. A cache of energy weapons exploded that took out half the building at once.

They had cleaning up to do. Some of the HYDRA soldiers were beginning to run away, rather than toward. That was good. But not enough.

They kept fighting until Steve, covered in blood, some his own, mostly others’, stopped with his chest heaving and looked around, and there were no more men. They stood in the middle of a sea of fire and devastation, and the crumpled earth where the base had fallen in on itself, and no one else was coming.

“Rendez-vous,” he said, and they made it to the pick-up point miles away with no problem. They were back in England by lunch.

Bucky was quiet, still, on the plane home. One of the soldiers—Parks—had been killed. Three others were wounded. Steve had gathered them up, slung one over each shoulder, the third draped around his neck, and carried them back to the rendez-vous. There’d been a medic on the plane, thank God, and it looked like none of them were going to die.

Peggy was waiting for them. She was becoming their HQ liaison. She smiled as Steve emerged from the plane, blinking.

“Captain,” said Phillips, who still somehow managed to make it sound like an insult, “I believe your men are entitled to a few days off.”

“I’m sure they wouldn’t object.”

“Leave for all of them. Hell, make it three days.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, and saluted.

The men were pleased; Morita said, “Fuck if I know what I’m going to do with three days,” and Dum Dum said, “Fuck is right,” and they had a good laugh.

“I might get out, see some countryside,” said Bucky.

“Yeah?” asked Steve.

“Yeah, it seems like a shame. I been in England, but I ain’t seen more than a little bit of London.”
“You should get out to Wimbledon,” said Monty. “Nice breath of fresh air, but still some things to do. Theater. That sort of thing.”

“I might just,” said Bucky.

“The Tube goes straight there, you know. Or at least it did. I haven’t tried to make it out that way in some time.”

Steve sighed, leaning back. “I don’t know what to do with myself,” he said.

Bucky spread his hands. “You could crash my trip. Be more fun with a buddy.”

“I’ll think about it,” said Steve.

The other guys were talking in low voices about the best places to get shitfaced in London, and Monty was being equally helpful there.

A few hours later, Steve and Bucky were at the station trying to figure out how the hell to get out to the country.

“That line is suspended, sir,” said the operator.

Steve smiled at her, and said, a little desperately, “Do you have any suggestions for somewhere to go, then? Just for a couple of days’ leave, to see the country. I’ve never been before.”

Her face softened. “Of course, sir,” she said, and pulled out a map, and suggested someplace—he couldn’t find it in himself to care.

“That sounds great,” he said, and she smiled and blushed a little, and that was how they ended up on a train to a sleepy little town where they found a hotel, and the hotel, a stout old building with thick walls, had a room with two beds, would they mind sharing, no, they would not.

“We’ll go put our things away,” said Bucky, hefting the bag, “and then where would you suggest we go to see the sights?”

“Oh, sir!” The woman behind the counter tittered. “There’s not much in the way of sights to see, but you could go to the river, it’s just down the road—if you follow the road for about half an hour the bridge goes right over it, you can’t miss it.”

“Thank you,” said Bucky, flashing her a big smile.

They got into the room and Bucky closed the door behind them, locked it. He dropped his bag on the bed and before he’d even turned all the way around Steve was touching him, running his hands over the stiff fabric of the uniform. He turned into Steve’s arms and they traded messy, desperate kisses.

“Gotta go to the river,” panted Bucky, resting his forehead on the curve of Steve’s neck. His hips were hitching up against Steve’s.

“Fuck the river,” said Steve.

“No. C’mon. They’re going to expect to—to see us—stop it, Christ.”

“So we say we were tired and fell asleep. We could use a nap.”
“They’re gonna—come on, they’re gonna know.” Bucky pulled away, still resting his hands on Steve’s arms, flushed and breathing hard. “Can’t—we got this place with our real names, genius.”

“Okay, fine, we’ll go to the river,” said Steve, with very poorly concealed bad grace. Bucky laughed at him, but Bucky still looked shocked, dazed.

“You need to splash some water on your face,” said Steve. “You look like you’ve been running a race.”

Bucky pressed the back of his hand to his cheek. “Burning up,” he said. “Bet you are too.”

“Fine, we’ll both do it.”

They did, standing side by side in the washroom, door open to the hall, just freshening up, Bucky called to the matron when she came up a few minutes later with towels that she set on their beds. “Fucking told you,” he whispered to Steve after she’d descended again.

“So you were right,” Steve said, rolling his eyes. Bucky hissed out a laugh and poked him sharply in the side. They were giggling like kids when they made it down the stairs, Steve’s hair slicked back with water.

“Long train ride?” asked the matron sympathetically.

Steve put on his best aw-shucks face and said, “Oh, it wasn’t too bad. Nice to see the country go by. It’s so green!”

She smiled at them magnanimously. “Do be back in time for supper, boys, it’s at six,” and then she added, “You’ll hear the church bells for five, and you’ll have plenty of time to get back.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Bucky, giving her his brightest smile.

They made it out the door and started heading down the road. Something about the country—it was so still and quiet, and you could tell if there was someone headed your way for miles, through some parts of it. And then sometimes you’d find yourself walking through a stand of trees so thick the only sunlight came down straight through where the branches didn’t quite meet over the road. There were cottages lining the road, through sections, with gardens frothing with the bare skeletons of what would be lush, half-wild things in summer but in January were gray and brown.

A light drizzle started up about twenty minutes in, and Steve laughed a little, looking up at the sky. “Go figure,” he said, and looked over at Bucky. Bucky was smiling at him with such open affection that he had to look down, smile lingering on his own lips.

After that, they talked more; not much, nothing consequential. But like they used to, talking a little shit about the guys, about the brass, wondering out loud about the best place to target next. It was good.

“Three days,” said Bucky. “So that leaves us tonight, tomorrow night, and then we’ll have to leave early to get back to HQ.”

“And the main attraction out here is the river.”

“We could learn to fish.”

“Does this river even have fish?”
“We could ask.”

They did make it to the river, and the bridge arched over it, ancient brick and stone. Bucky walked out to the middle of it and rested his elbows on the stone, leaning forward to peer down into the water.

He glanced back up, smiling, and Steve wanted to kiss him so bad.

“Maybe we could get down, walk next to the water,” Steve said.

“Sure,” said Bucky, which was how Steve got him into a thick stand of trees and backed up against one, kissing him and running his hands over Bucky’s face, through his hair. Bucky was trying to stay quiet but couldn’t, quite, little needy noises escaping, and he was running his hands over Steve’s back.

“Can’t here,” he said, when he got his mouth free for a minute.

Steve said, “Can’t what?” and went back in to kiss the corner of Bucky’s mouth. Bucky squeezed Steve’s sides almost painfully through the fabric.

“This is, this isn’t a game,” he said. “Bad things happen if people—if anybody sees—”

“But if nobody does, very good things can happen,” said Steve, patiently, like a smartass, and he cupped Bucky’s cock through the front of his slacks. Bucky gasped and his head lolled back against the tree, mouth so shocked, hair stuck to his forehead from the rain.

Doing this in the dark had been great. Doing it in the daylight was something else again.

He peeled out of his jacket and dropped it on the ground under his knees, got Bucky’s belt undone, and his fly, and Steve got his mouth on Bucky’s cock.

It took a minute to figure it out—the angle was awkward—and he had to take a minute, let go, rest his head next to Bucky’s cock on his thigh, and just breathe, inhale the smell of him. Bucky was shaking.

“You don’t have to,” Bucky got out, sounding strangled.

Steve shot him a glare and, just for that, took it as deep as he could. Bucky gave an embarrassingly high-pitched squeal, and his fingers landed on Steve’s shoulders, digging in. He couldn’t stay like that, had to let some slide back out to breathe, but went back for it again and again.

It turned out it was easy as riding a bicycle, after all, as long as he listened to Bucky, as long as he kept his hands on Bucky’s thighs so he could feel the trembling that went with the hitching breaths when he did things Bucky liked. Bucky’s breath grew ragged and he hissed, “it’s, I’m,” and then he jerked suddenly, and Steve choked a little on his come, feeling the last few pulses on his tongue.

“Jesus Christ,” said Bucky, feelingly, after Steve stood back up. He shook his head a little. “Jesus Christ,” he said, again, softer.

Steve raised his eyebrows, smirking, and Bucky rolled his eyes and smacked his arm, grinning.

“You’re really something else, buddy,” Bucky said, and wobbled. “Whoa.”

Steve grabbed his arm to steady him.

In the distance, the church bells started pealing. Bucky flinched. “Fucking dinner,” he said, “fuck.”
He turned his gaze back to Steve and then said, consideringly, “Bet we have time.”

Steve opened his mouth to ask for what, but Bucky had his cock out and was sucking him before he could get the whole question out. Bucky was—it was good, wet, fast, tight, and he was coming before he really meant to, hitting him so his eyes slammed shut. He managed to come quietly, at least, and then Bucky straightened up and said, “Better wash up in the creek.”

Steve raised his hands to his face and could smell—yeah, okay. So they crouched awkwardly at the river’s edge, rinsed their mouths (“Christ, I hope this water’s okay, your fault if it’s not, Rogers”) and spat, rinsed their hands and scrubbed them on the grass at the water’s edge. Their eyes met and they broke out laughing, for all the world like kids caught making mud pies before dinner.

The rain picked up a little on the way back, so they were half-soaked by the time they got there.

It was boiled everything: boiled potatoes, boiled cabbage, a little bit of boiled meat. Bucky smiled and complimented the cook, who of course was also their hostess, and she smiled and preened herself.

After dinner, she offered them a snifter of brandy each, and it seemed ungentlemanly to refuse, so by the time they were ready to head upstairs they’d sat in the parlor for a couple of hours listening to the radio, catching up on the news. Other guests had filtered in, just a couple of them; a tall, thin man who looked like he was probably unfit for the military, an elderly woman and her younger companion. Bucky was paging through a book.

“Tomorrow,” she said, “you should see our church, it’s really quite nice.”

“I’d like to,” said Bucky, and got the directions from her. Apparently halfway to the river if they took a crossroads they’d see the spire in no time.

When they got to their room, they puttered around for a couple of minutes, getting ready for bed—brushing their teeth, hanging up their uniforms in the ancient wardrobe that reeked of mothballs.

When Bucky turned out the light, standing in the middle of the room and yanking on the chain, he hesitated for a minute.

Steve held out the blanket on his bed, wordlessly, and Bucky went to him.

He didn’t sleep well, after all, but it was worth it, waking up every time he went to roll over and couldn’t because Steve was there. It was worth it. The times Steve woke up, too, he’d touch Bucky on purpose even though they were already touching, bare skin to bare skin, kiss him, even.

In the morning Bucky got up early and climbed into his bed, making sure the sheets were twisted like he’d slept in it.

The church was nice, a white building with a trim steeple. They sat in a pew together, and Bucky whispered, “Reminds me of when we were kids.”

Steve nodded.
They went to a pub in the afternoon, sat with beers in hand and talked about work, the next mission, in hushed voices, until a local man planted himself on the other side of the table, bought them each another beer, and asked them loud and ridiculous questions about America.

“Brooklyn?” he boomed. “I say! Ellie, come hear this, these boys are Yanks from Brooklyn! Like the movies!”

Bucky was grinning at them, while Steve smiled awkwardly, ruefully. Bucky told them stories about Brooklyn that were wildly untrue, and a few that were bizarrely correct. It was like watching Bucky from five years ago, suddenly. His sweet smile and his outrageous winks. They loved it. Everyone always had.

“Last night here,” said Bucky softly, that night, sitting down on the edge of Steve’s bed. The man in the room next door had left that morning, they’d watched him go.

Steve nodded, tightly.

“You want to do me?” Bucky asked. His voice was so low, catching a little. Back to Steve, looking back just a little but not enough to actually meet his eyes.

“Yeah,” said Steve. “Yeah.”

Bucky bent down, grabbed his bag from under the edge of the bed and pulled it out, rooted in it until he found the little jar and a dirty undershirt to spread under them.

Steve grabbed his hand as he twisted it open. “Please,” said Steve, “let me. Can I?”

Bucky watched him thoughtfully as he handed over the jar, and then he nudged Steve out of the way so he could lie face-down on the bed.

Seeing him was—his back was pale in the darkness, and Steve had to run a hand over the long line of it. Bucky shuddered a little under the touch.

Steve knelt up over him, Bucky shifting his legs to spread them wider. He dipped his finger into the jar, then started to trace around Bucky’s hole with his finger. Bucky jerked a little—Steve said, “Okay?”

Bucky said, “Yeah, it’s good.” He sounded breathless already.

Steve took a deep breath, teased Bucky more; slipped the tip of his index finger in, gingerly. He could feel Bucky tense around him, then relax, in time with deep breaths. He started to go a little deeper, then deeper still, until he crooked his finger and Bucky gasped, hips jerking into the bed.

“Do it again,” Bucky hissed.

So Steve did, and Bucky’s ass pushed back into his hand, and Steve was so hard, it made him dizzy. A couple more of those, and he said, “Can I—now?”

“Yeah, do it.”

Steve set the jar down carefully, knelt up behind him. Bucky’s ass was up in the air, and somehow it was different than the first time, when Bucky’d been riding him and doing all the work, like a dream; somehow it felt more like they were really fucking, like he was doing this.
He took his cock in one hand, bracing Bucky’s hip with the other, and guided himself to the hole. He pressed, slowly, so slowly it made sweat break out on his forehead that had nothing to do with the work of his thighs. This was nothing, he was made to work now, built for it.

Finally, finally, he was easing into Bucky, and Bucky was panting, rasping little pants in the night. Quiet enough, probably, maybe.

He barely moved at first. He had to bite his lip hard, and it wasn’t until Bucky said, “What are you waiting for?” like he was annoyed (in a beautiful wrecked voice) that he started to thrust.

He knew right away he wasn’t going to last long. It was too good, much too good. Bucky was trying like hell to stay quiet but he couldn’t, quite, as Steve fucked into him, and Steve couldn’t fault him too much, either, because as hard as he was trying, too, it wasn’t like jerking off, it wasn’t like anything else. Steve tried to slow down for a minute, could feel it building, but Bucky pushed back into him and he fell forward, mouth wide open, coming so hard he could hear his heart pounding in his ears.

Bucky gasped, again, and then pushed back against him again, and again, and through the excruciating tenderness Steve realized he was still hard enough to give it a few more thrusts, so he did, because Bucky, Bucky liked it, this wasn’t, Bucky wasn’t letting him, Bucky was asking for it, Bucky was, Bucky was touching himself and coming, all over the shirt they’d put down, and Steve couldn’t keep in the faint whine he made.

Bucky’s knees just gave out after he came, and Steve tumbled down next to him, twisting so Bucky ended up on his side, wrapped in Steve’s arms.

Steve was nosing the side of Bucky’s neck, pressing kisses all over it, and he whispered, “So good, sorry, couldn’t wait.”

Bucky’s chest jerked in a silent laugh. “’S fine,” he said, “got mine.”

“Uh,” said Steve, “If you, uh, I could probably—five minutes?”

Bucky turned his head a little back toward Steve, raising his eyebrows. “That so?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re up for it, I’m there.”

They lay in silence for a while, Steve running his hands over Bucky, touching as much of him as he could reach. He could feel a jolt in his cock already—it wasn’t going to be five minutes.

That time, he pulled Bucky back against him, braced Buck’s leg up with one of his that would never get tired. Slid into his ass, still wet, and felt something white-hot at the thought that Bucky was wet from him, messy from him, feral and possessive. He sucked at Bucky’s neck, just a little, below where the collar would cover.

Bucky shoved back into him, greedy for it, and Steve whispered in his ear, “fuck, yeah,” kissing his neck again, tonguing the curve of his ear, and Bucky did it again, and Steve tightened his grip on Bucky’s hip and did him harder. Still slow, though; still luxuriously, achingly slow, on the slide out, faster back in, until Bucky was almost sobbing for it, and Steve’s cheeks were burning hot, a thousand degrees.

Then, finally, he started to speed up, hold Bucky’s hip tighter, hard, fast thrusts, and Bucky broke, whispering, “yes, yes, yes,” as he got his own hand on himself and started pumping, and as he
started to come Steve could feel him clenching and it knocked the wind right out of him, pushed him over into his own orgasm, milked by the tight heat.

“Jesus,” Bucky slurred into the pillow after a minute where they struggled to breathe.

“He’s not here,” said Steve, “it’s just me,” and Bucky yanked the pillow out from under his head and hit Steve with it, and they had to stifle their laughter in the still, quiet night.

They slept in the same bed again. Bucky had the presence of mind to ball up the wet shirt before anything soaked through and drop it on the floor, so nobody had to sleep on a wet spot.

They left before breakfast the next morning. Nothing in the woman’s face showed she’d heard anything, thought anything. Maybe she was just discreet. It didn’t matter. Please, God, let it not matter.

The train was mostly empty, so they sat across from each other and let their boots tangle between them. That was a level of friendly physical intimacy that might be acceptable.

Bucky stared out the window at the scenery passing by, trying to ignore the hard knot growing in his stomach as the buildings of the city started to flash by.

When they got off the train station, Steve watched Bucky put it back on again. The act had suffered some since the lab—hell, maybe before that, he didn’t know. But this was it again, no question: Bucky winked at a woman walking past who’d been looking them up and down with a little too much interest, and she blushed scarlet, glancing away quickly. He swaggered as he walked.

Steve rolled his shoulders, trying to get some of the tension out of them.

“Not a bad trip,” Bucky said, when they were getting back to the HQ.

“Best one I ever had,” said Steve, honestly, and Bucky’s eyes flickered over to him, startled. Something in Bucky’s face eased as he smiled, and for a minute he looked more like his old self.

The guys didn’t know the difference, did they? They didn’t know Bucky could be different. Bucky regaled them with stories of the girls they’d met in the country, hinting that they were all cockteases who didn’t care if the guys’ balls were going to fall off. Steve pretended to disapprove, letting his eyebrows draw together in a paternal frown. Copied straight from Father Magauran. They were both actors, weren’t they.

“That’s country girls for you,” said Dum Dum, “they know if they ditch chores for a tumble in the hay they’ll get a sermon for it on Sunday.”

Bucky raised his eyebrows and chuckled. “You met one or two, Dugan?”

“More than one or two in my time.”

“Yeah?”

That was an invitation, and Dugan took it and ran with it, and that took the heat off. Nobody cared too much that the town hadn’t had shit to do or look at. Nobody asked how they’d kept busy.

Steve knew better than to keep sneaking looks at Bucky. He did. So he kept his eyes on Dugan
while Dugan talked, and ignored the relentless urge to turn and put his hand on Bucky’s leg and lean into him, and he kept his mind clean and free, empty and white like the wide noon sky. Like scouring light.

It couldn’t go on like that, the trips back and forth to London. Phillips confirmed it at the next meeting.

They were going to go to the Continent, and stay there, this time, backed up by men in the field. They’d done well enough on the test runs. HQ didn’t need to be looking over their shoulder. It was a miserable, rotten winter, and the accommodations would suffer in comparison to the HQ, but they’d waste less time. They’d be in contact, be able to brief HQ about the missions. It was an opportunity. A hell of an opportunity.

There was going to be a major troop movement, an invasion of part of Italy they hadn’t been able to secure yet, and it was going to be Steve’s opportunity to take out the Italian base he’d been worrying about since November. “We’ll get you as close as we can,” said Phillips, “and then it will be up to you to get your men into that base and take it out.”

Steve nodded as they told him, and if his mind wandered in a flash down alleys they’d never explore, parks where there were bushes he knew they could have hidden in, the country, green and gray and brown, he said nothing about it.

“Major troop movements,” said Bucky. “They shouldn’t tell us that shit before we ship out.”

“We’re different, I guess,” said Steve.

“Fuck them,” said Morita. “If we get captured and give it up, it’s their look-out.”

“Buck,” said Steve, “remember your ideas? I think we’re going to need them.”

Bucky’s face was set, his mouth a flat line. He nodded. “Dernier, I hope you and Stark have been having some good chats.”

Dernier grinned. “Oui, Sarge. Tres bien.”

“Two days, gentlemen. Be ready.”

That night, Bucky said, “Can I run some thoughts about this mission past you?”

Steve nodded.

“In private.”

They borrowed Peggy’s office—she was already out for the night, they sweet-talked the secretary into letting them in. Bucky sat on the edge of her desk, bracing his feet against the floor. Steve was standing at loose attention.

“God, Steve, sit,” said Bucky, waving at the chair. Steve rolled his eyes, but sat.

“So what did you want to go over?”
“My guess is this is a water landing. You done one of those before?”

“No, you know that.”

“Didn’t figure, but wanted to make sure. You want to run through what that’s going to be like?”

“Yeah, that would be good.”

“The men’ve all done it, they know how it goes. Didn’t want them to know it’s your first one.”

Steve nodded slowly. “I appreciate that.”

Bucky ran through the stages; the packs—“some of the guys are afraid of the helmet straps, but they fixed the design flaw”; the nets to climb—“did you do that in basic? Okay, good”; the LSTs, landing ship, tank, and the others, landing ship, infantry, carrying men, carrying Higgins boats, with Navy coxswains running them (“if you hear ‘large stationary target’ don’t get on their case about it, they’re not wrong”), and the Higgins boats that were the last link in the chain. “If you hear somebody say ‘LCVP’ that’s what they mean, the Higgins boats, they’re godawful but they get us in close. Don’t be surprised but every last guy pukes. Just plan on it.” The problems with the beach: “You won’t be able to beat your way up it, they’ll have artillery. Just run and keep running. Keep the shield up. If they shoot at the shield because it’s a target they’ll just be screwing themselves, anyway.”

“Thanks,” said Steve, when Bucky finally seemed like he was running out of things to say.

“If they shoot the guy running the Higgins boat,” Bucky said, quietly, “just try to keep it going forward. Getting the ramp down isn’t that hard. If we have to we can go over the side without the ramp but we got to be in water that’s less than waist-deep or the guys are going to tip over from their pack weight and drown before we get up there.”

“You think we won’t be on the same one?”

“I don’t know, that’s why I’m talking you through all this shit.”

Steve glanced over at the door. Closed. It locked. Peggy had sensitive files. Secretary out front was gone for the night, her little lamp had clicked off twenty minutes ago. Bucky followed his gaze and his eyebrows jumped in shock.

“You can’t be serious,” said Bucky.

“I don’t know why I wouldn’t be.”

“It’s Peggy’s office. Peggy.” Bucky said it like a hard shove. “Your girl.”

“Not a discussion we’ve ever had.”

“Got her fucking picture in your fucking compass.”

“Trying to let me down easy, Barnes?” he said softly, and with utter conviction that it wasn’t true. His lips twisted on the end of it, a wry little smile.

Bucky yanked the chain for the light above them, just left the little desk lamp with its pooling glow on the wood. His face was half in shadow. “You know that ain’t it,” he said, voice low.

“Prove it.”

Bucky let out a deep, shaky breath and said, “You can be a real asshole sometimes,” but there was
no bite in it, and when Steve got up from the chair and went to touch his cheek, he turned his face into it blindly.

“We’re never going to fucking be alone in the field,” whispered Steve into Bucky’s ear. He mouthed Bucky’s earlobe and Bucky shivered. “It’s hard enough not to touch you now, how the fuck you think it’s going to be out there?”

“We’ll bunk together.”

“Won’t be able to touch you like this,” said Steve, and slid his hand up Bucky’s thigh to cup his cock. Bucky’s mouth opened wider, but he didn’t make a sound, just sucked in air.

“The guys are going to miss us,” Bucky whispered.

“We’ll grab a drink out of Peggy’s desk before we go back. That’s a fine excuse.”

Bucky finally turned to meet his mouth, kissing him desperately, and Steve ground his hand against Bucky’s cock harder, started in on his fly. “Christ,” Bucky whispered.

“Still just me,” said Steve, and Bucky swatted the back of his head.

“Smart mouth on you.”

“You know it.” Steve grinned at him and then dropped to his knees, and Bucky was already hard by the time he got his mouth on him. The way his thighs tensed and trembled under Steve’s hands was magic.

When he came, he had one hand on his own mouth, other hand white-knuckled around the edge of the desk, and he still made a keening sound—soft but Steve could hear it like it was music.

“Give me a sec,” Bucky whispered through shuddering breaths, “I’ll get you.”

Steve dropped back into the chair. Bucky was as good as his word. It was still as good as the first time, better than he’d ever thought, all those years he’d been jerking off and trying not to think about it, trying to be the kind of man who got into the Army. He wrapped his hands around the arms of the chair and managed not to break them.

When he came, Bucky swallowed, holding on with a gentle extra swirl of his tongue that left Steve bent forward gasping, forcing out another spurt. Bucky looked smug though he didn’t look up, pulling back to button Steve up, hands lingering on his fly.

“The things you do to me,” whispered Steve.

Bucky didn’t answer; he bent his head forward, instead, laying it on Steve’s thigh. Steve’s hand came up, hovered for a minute before he let it rest on Bucky’s hair, stroking the curve of his ear gently with his thumb.

They stayed like that for a couple of minutes before Bucky said into Steve’s leg, “So, about that liquor?” and Steve managed to dig the bottle out of Peggy’s drawer.

The guys didn’t seem to think it was suspicious when they came back to bed after lights-out, smelling a little like bad cognac.

The things you do to me.
Oh, Stevie.

*Not a discussion we’ve ever had*

A lie is a lie is a lie

Bucky looked like shit in the morning. They had things to take care of, preparation for the trip. The Commandos met up over breakfast. They were going to join troops in the southern peninsula where they’d actually taken good ground, exact location not to be revealed to them yet, and then they’d change tac and head north, the location of which had to be disclosed so the Commandos could plan their route. It was going to be just outside Genoa, Arenzano, where they were going to have some ugly mountain territory to cross but the landing itself should be a little less of a pain in the ass than if they tried to go straight into the harbor at Genoa. But no mistake, Genoa was the target. Steve and the Commandos were going to have to wrap around and cross foothills to get up toward Turin, in the direction of the base, and whether they were going to succeed at meeting up with the rebels was a matter of little to no certainty, so they’d be hauling godawful packs, loaded with ammunition and explosives in addition to the basics of food and tent and sleeping bag.

“We got a codename for this one yet?”

“Operation Charlemagne.”

“That’s kind of stupid,” said Morita. Dum Dum hummed in agreement.

“Well, it’s what we’ve got,” said Steve, “so we’ll work with it. The other options were worse.”

“Is there a codename for our sideline?” asked Monty.

“Operation Rooftop.”

“We’re fucking brilliant at naming things,” said Morita in disgust.

“Phillips named it, give him shit.”

“So what’s the deal?”

“Hug the coast to Savona, cut overland up to Polonghera.” Steve was sketching it out with his hands on an imaginary map. “Factory’s out in some farmland Mussolini gave Hitler.”

“And Hitler gave Schmidt?”

“Must have. It’ll take us a couple of days to get far enough inland.”

“Great,” said Gabe, “a couple of days marching with ammo and supplies and I get to listen to you assholes the whole time?”

Bucky snorted. “And consider yourself lucky for the privilege, soldier.”

Gabe rolled his eyes eloquently and raised his hands to the heavens.

“SSR figured we could get more out of factories than just blowing them up,” Steve added. “Focus on intel in addition to destruction. First one I got the other base locations, but the next one I ended up getting nothing. So we’re switching over to Dernier, since he’s sweeping the floors anyway.”
“Sounds good,” said Bucky.

The landing was the way Bucky had described it. Wet, cold, dark, and godawful. The good news was the enemy didn’t seem to cotton on that they were there until the first wave was already up the beach.

The bad news was the Commandos weren’t in the first wave.

The gunfire was like hail. Steve had been through a few rounds of it—it took him right back to basic training in his head, wriggling under wire with the live ammo going off overhead—but hearing it when you were in action, in motion, was one thing. Hearing it ping off the boats or piercing the sides or exploding in the sky was something else altogether. The noise alone was incredible. Would have given him a headache, back in the old days, but as it was, every concussion in the air just hit him and then his ears came back online within seconds.

The other guys looked worse. None of the Commandos were throwing up—not an insignificant moral victory in a Higgins boat—but they were all looking green around the gills, struggling to stay upright as the boat took a blast on one side or hit a bad wave, the deck slippery and getting worse every minute with spray and stray waves and the other soldiers’ upchuck.

When the ramp dropped, they were actually pretty close in to shore. Bucky threw the Navy guy a quick salute as they started to run. The hot second the last of them thundered down the ramp and splashed into the water, the ramp was hoisted back up and the craft was headed back to get another batch.

Steve concentrated on getting one foot in front of the other. Had to dodge the occasional dead body, their waterlogged uniforms close enough to black that they were almost invisible until you were bumping into them, losing time. The water was cold as hell, and under it the sand kept shifting, but eventually he made it up to the waterline. Some of the fire from dead ahead of them had stopped—maybe a machine gun nest taken out by the early birds. Bucky was a couple steps behind him and if you’d asked, Steve would have said he wasn’t hanging back on purpose so Bucky would stay near him, but maybe he was. It made sense, anyway. They needed to be able to find each other when they got to the treeline.

The sand wasn’t a whole lot easier to run across, but Steve made it to the treeline, and he could tell Bucky was still right behind him. He turned as they got there and the other men came, one at a time sliding and staggering through the sand.

Finally, all the Commandos were there. Steve blew out a breath in relief. The chatter of heavy-arms fire was still echoing over them, and occasionally a chunk of tree would blow apart into a thousand pieces of burning shrapnel, but they were all together and nobody was bleeding. Much. Dum Dum had a graze, but he waved Morita off when Morita reached for it.

“SEA WATER’S GOOD FOR IT,” he bellowed to be heard over the noise, and Morita just gave him the finger and fell back a step, waiting for orders.

“Let’s get moving,” yelled Steve, compass in hand. He could have read it in the dark, but he didn’t have to; the flares of light from the artillery made the night bright enough to read in.

Running behind Steve, watching his legs flashing through the water, while bullets zipped by them in
the dark, his stomach pure acid with fear for the both of them: Bucky thought, *I’m in hell. I’m in hell.*

But when they made it to the treeline and everyone was still alive, his heart starting to slow down a little, he thought, *At least it’s with him.*

The march was brutal, over rough terrain. But after marching through the night and into the day, when they bunked down, Steve had their tent up almost instantly, and Bucky finished shoveling in the remnants of his K ration and climbed into his sleeping bag.

The nice thing about soldiers who’d been in foxholes was that they all knew the drill. You got cold, you huddled.

“Little spoon or big spoon?” asked Steve, holding out his arms like he figured the answer would be little spoon—probably be warmer that way and Steve didn’t need the extra heat, not anymore.

But Bucky said, “Big spoon,” and Steve shrugged and rolled over, putting his back toward him.

Gathering Steve in—it wasn’t like it had been before, the rare, rare occasions it had happened at all, cold nights when they were just kids and Steve had been shivering. Or when Bucky had thrown his arm around Steve’s shoulders and dragged him in as they walked. But Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve and pretended, just for a minute, put his nose into Steve’s hair and breathed in, and he still *smelled* like Steve, even if he didn’t look, didn’t feel, quite the same. He could feel Steve’s breath catch and Steve’s little uncomfortable shift—maybe getting hard—but he just pressed a silent kiss into Steve’s hair, and then let his mind go blank. He was so tired.

The nightmares were swift but silent.

Waking up meant demolishing another round of K rations and then walking some more. A lot more. A *lot* more.

But Steve had held onto his compass, and they were able to glide through occupied land at night, ghosting past barns and alongside roads, and after about two days, they found themselves outside Polonghera and Morello.

Bucky and Steve were drawing maps in the dirt. “Look,” said Bucky, “I’m saying we need to think about circling around. We’re going to be running into fencing and we do not want to set off an alarm early.”

It took Steve and Monty about an hour to circle the factory. By the time they made it back, Dernier and Bucky had hashed out the pattern for explosives, assuming they could get in close enough. Monty made a soft bird call as they came back, and Bucky relaxed a little, hand coming up off his gun; he’d heard something in the distance. Before the others, he guessed, from the way Dum Dum’s eyes lifted from the gun to Bucky’s face.

“All right,” said Steve, dropping down. “Perimeter comes closest to the factory here,” and he marked it out in the dirt. “You’re right about circling back. Rear entrance has plenty of truck traffic, we may be able to get in with them.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” said Morita. “Sneaking in on a truck?”

“It gets us inside. Closer we get, the better.”
Dernier was nodding. “Plus, I can booby trap a few trucks,” he said. “Et voila! Boom. Even if we fail.”

“We’re not gonna fail,” said Bucky through his teeth. “But yeah. Trucks. How you want to play that one so it’s not suspicious? We can’t be the drivers.”

“No, but we run it like when I was getting into the first base,” said Steve, and laid it out for them: jumping in while the trucks were on the road, then coming out of the trucks guns blazing.

“Nous sommes morte,” said Dernier, and Gabe smacked his shoulder.

“Quit it, buddy,” he said.

They didn’t die, but man, it was close.

They made it through the neighboring farmland, HYDRA swarming after them but drastically reduced in number—but a couple hundred guys on your ass instead of a thousand wasn’t exactly what he would have called ideal.

Steve kept dropping back to kick the shit out of some more of them, lay a short false trail. By morning, they’d pretty well shaken the bulk of the guys.

They found a hollow in a riverbank, sheltered by weeds from above, Jim waving them down as they climbed into it, and slept there until it was dark.


“What’s the next objective?” Bucky said softly to Steve, tucked up so close everybody could feel everybody else breathe, the light dim enough that he could barely make out the other guys.

“Dernier, any luck on intel?” asked Steve.

Dernier nodded and started reciting data on the HYDRA weapons—he’d gotten into an office, apparently, had had instructions to get what he could while he was laying charges. No papers. “Don’t need them,” he said cuttingly, when Bucky asked. He tapped his head. “Tout en ici.”

“Good,” said Steve, “but lay it out for us so if you’re lost we have something to bring back.”

So Dernier went over some things: additional sites, mostly, a bunch to add to Peggy’s board and to their objectives list. Some were nearby, with others scattered up into Finland, or halfway into Russian territory. But most were clustered in Germany proper.

“Great,” said Bucky, “more targets. Just what I was hoping for.”

Dernier huffed in exasperation and said, “Aussi, there were details on weapons productions capacity. They are much slower on manufacturing than the Allies. Fewer factories, but more important, they have highly complex designs to tap the energy source, so they will not be able to do rapid build-up. Especially since we take out three factories, now.”

“That’s a relief,” said Gabe. “The fewer of those crazy things they can turn out, the better.”
“We need to get in touch with SSR, relay that,” said Steve. “There should be partisans we can get in touch with not far from here. I have contact info for a cell. Monty, how’s your Italian?”

“Flawless.”

“Good. I need you to go to a bar in Ivrea when we get there and ask for a contact. We can’t afford for anybody to make you as a Brit.”

“I assure you, I can be Italian enough if I want to.”

“Okay. Once we get the info to SSR, we can check in about what our next priority is. Get some rest if you can.”

The night watched them make their way slowly and painfully up, curving along the foothills until they reached their contact. Monty did an amazing job, the next morning, of strolling into a pub and asking for Giovanni Beccaria, a fake as hell name that got a knowing nod from the bartender and an introduction to a resistance cell with a damn fine radio.

“Gift from Stark,” said Giovanni, grinning. “Met up with your Agent Carter a few months ago and she said it was free of charge, but they’d need the airwaves at some point. It’s good—the Germans haven’t been able to track us through it yet, and that’s really something.”

Morita got on it and fiddled with it until he could get a relay in place, and then he was talking a mile a minute, waving Dernier on, and Bucky sat in a corner of the half-rubble house, tipping his head back against the wall.

The sun was shining, weak and thready but still there, glowing in the sky. He shut his eyes against it.

Steve was supervising the radio transmission. Nobody noticed if Bucky dropped off for a minute.

The partisans gave them terrible cognac, which was nice, and fresh eggs, which was great. Bucky had gotten too used to the ration boxes in the trenches; he’d avoided them successfully for the most part in Britain, but back on the Continent, there they were again, the repetitive grind and the canned spam.

Once they’d gotten settled in, SSR returned the call, and it turned out they had about three smaller targets they could pick off on their way back to loop down to Genoa to assist the invasion force—it hadn’t gone well, but they were getting some fortifications in, “And once you’re down there,” Morita mimicked, “you can re-arm and get some reinforcements for the next objective.”

Giovanni grinned lopsidedly, patting the gun in his belt. “I cannot imagine why your people might think you will need additional supplies,” he said, wryly. Bucky laughed shortly, like he’d been stung.

The additional targets were easy. After a HYDRA base, anything where they were restricted to regular ammo and sane numbers of enemies was a goddamn blessing.

Bucky took a bullet graze at the first target (sleepy, damn it) and a clean through-and-through in the third, which Steve insisted on having checked out when they got back to Allied lines. But by the time the doctor had cut the sleeve off, the wound looked like it had been days already instead of twelve hours, and they just cleaned it out and bandaged it up.
“‘S fine,” said Bucky shortly, when he found Steve sitting in a foxhole eating dinner, “not as bad as it looked.”

Steve frowned at him at that—Steve had seen it, after all, it had gone right through a muscle—but he didn’t push it.

(And a few days later, it was like it had never been there. No pain, not even the kind of residual tingling like a foot falling asleep that Bucky might have expected. Just his arm, whole and fine.

He kept the bandage on for a while longer.)

That night they slept in foxholes, dug in and draped with canvas, and Bucky couldn’t believe his luck when he and Steve were in the same one, alone, both of them filthy and reeking but alive, and they traded the fastest, hardest blowjobs he’d ever gotten or given. Steve kept touching him after, running his hands over Bucky’s dirt and soot-covered face and whispered, “Worried about you today.”

“You, too, you little punk,” Bucky whispered back, and kissed him, hard, until Steve cupped his head and kissed him back. One of his teeth had gotten knocked a little loose and there was a taste of blood in his mouth. Occasional bursts of gunfire cut the night up into pieces.

That was the last good night for a while, but it counted for something.

The next couple of months were pretty much all on the same track. Never enough sleep, but Steve never looked that tired, never got bags under his eyes, never got jumpy. Bucky felt jumpy all the time, but his hands had gotten steadier, and whenever they had the smaller targets instead of a full base, it was easier, easier to sleep, easier to take deep breaths.

“Christ,” he said once, when they were miles behind enemy lines, on watch in a hayloft next to an abandoned house where the Commandos were sleeping (there were real beds left but the guys were lined up on the floor in their bags). “I don’t even remember what life was like before the war.”

“You were nervy about it,” said Steve. “For years before it happened.”

Bucky snorted softly, staring out the crack he’d selected in the wall, watching down the road for lanterns, listening for the sound of boots. They weren’t going to fuck around. They were on watch, and they’d never talked about it but not on watch was one of the rules. “I was nervy about a lot of things.”

“Didn’t show it much.”

“Tried not to.”

“I’m just glad I’m out here.”

“Jesus fucking Christ. Of course you are, buddy. Of course you are.”

He could feel Steve watching him, but he didn’t look away from the road.

“What are you even going to fucking do if you live through this?” asked Bucky, because he was looking away, because the road was still dark.
Steve took a deep breath, let it out, took another. “I’m not sure,” he said. “Maybe go career. We’ll see what it looks like.”

“Go career,” muttered Bucky. “Christ.” He rested his forehead against the wall.

“I’ll worry about it when I get there.”

“Well, I’m going the fuck back to Brooklyn,” Bucky said, very quietly.

Silence fell over them. Steve didn’t say anything. Of course he didn’t.

Bucky thought, wonder if I’d stay if he stayed, and hated the thought, and couldn’t get rid of it.

Bucky looked like hell most days—beat up constantly from the missions, fingers blistering, always at various stages of the fruitless war against stubble.

He always looked good. He always looked so damn good, Steve could have worried he’d screw up a mission over it. Except that on missions, his head would fill with a wordless howling, like wind, like wind roaring through him. It was the same way he used to feel before a fistfight but better, and he went into battle feeling the palms of his hands tingling with a wonderful light rage.

The trip to a fucking castle in Nazi-occupied Denmark could have gone better.

“We think this is one of Zola’s main labs for what he’s calling exoskeletons. No human experimentation, as far as we can tell,” said Peggy over the radio.

April was cold, soft, shivering, and the air over the water was like walking into a bank of solid mist. The rocky island rose up out of the water at them faster than they’d expected. Steve hunched down in the boat, and eased them up against the shore. The objective was to find the exoskeleton, and bring it back if they could. If they couldn’t, blow the whole thing sky-high. Dernier was crouched in the boat with them, just him and Steve and Bucky.

They stole ashore one at a time, trying not to rock the boat. All the noises seemed magnified. The little splashes of waves against the boat’s sides were like crashing thunder.

Steve met Bucky’s eyes and they traded raised eyebrows, a conversation without words: Do you trust this? No. Me neither.

Dernier was so light on his feet it was like watching a silent movie. They crept around the outcropping of stone, and the castle loomed above them. Steve gestured—Dernier with Steve; Bucky to a higher vantage point. He nodded and climbed, gun slung over his back.

He watched as Steve and Dernier vanished into the tunnel, and felt like he couldn’t breathe.

Their watches had been synchronized. Twenty minutes later, he lifted the gun, ready—and yes, there they came, like bats out of Hell. He started picking off the HYDRA goons behind them, pop pop pop from the gun in the dim gray light.

The guys were almost at the shore when the castle erupted in a massive roar of flames, chunks of stone shooting out. One cracked the rock Bucky was mostly sheltering behind.

That was his cue. As the boat started to power by him, he jumped off the ledge. Steve had to pull
him out of the water, dripping and shivering, but they were ahead of HYDRA and Stark’s motor was sleek and almost silent. “Took out their boats,” said Steve. “They’re stuck with the wreck.”

“G-g-good,” said Bucky through chattering teeth.

“He’s too cold,” said Dernier tersely. “He will die.”

“I’m on it.” Steve stripped Bucky out of the wet clothes.

“B-buy a fella a drink first,” Bucky got out.

“Shut up, you jerk,” said Steve in an easy, conversational way as he dragged Bucky back against his chest. He was so warm.

“Christ,” said Bucky, “why are my hands so cold?”

Without a word Steve folded them up in his.

When they got back to the rendez-vous, it was well past dark. Morita took one look at Bucky and had him bundled up in about sixteen wool blankets. “I’m fine,” he tried to say, but ruined it by shivering violently.

“You will be,” said Morita, and made him drink a whole cup of hot tea that tasted like ash.

That night they bundled a couple of sleeping bags together and slept skin to skin, medic’s orders. Too cold to enjoy it.

Bucky woke up around two, by his sense of time. Steve’s mouth was hanging open as he snored softly.

“Steve,” said Bucky, shaking him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Hm?” Steve blinked at him, groggy.

“Do you still get older?”

“Oh.” Steve scrubbed at his face with one hand. “Maybe? I don’t really know yet. Erskine probably knew, but.”

“Do you think Schmidt ages?”

“I can’t tell. That face.”

“Okay,” said Bucky, and fell back asleep. When he woke up again Steve was gone but he was still warm.

Steve got advance word of D-Day, but not by much. They were already in France, at that point, and the SSR’s instructions were pretty straightforward—blow the shit out of everything they could reach that would slow down Nazi response, once they figured out where it was going to land. The SOE had agents in the area, so they could coordinate. There were bombing runs happening already, and it was good to have the confirmation that this was the run-up to the real thing.

Bucky grinned at him, easily, hefting the light weapon he’d lifted from the last base. “Now that’s an order we can do something about,” he said, and Dernier looked up from where he was tinkering with
a detonator.

“Chance to try this?” he said, gesturing down at the little pile of metal on the safehouse’s kitchen table.

Steve raised his eyebrows, nodded. “Yeah. We’ve got six targets within two hours of here, we get to decide what order to hit them in. I’m thinking if we go straightforward east to west they’ll be waiting for us at the last one, if we go in random order it’ll mess with them. We clear it with the Resistance, they can hit somewhere else simultaneously and create more confusion.”

“Sounds good. Any clear priorities?”

“This site,” he said, digging out a pencil and starting to sketch the terrain, “has a concentration of Panzers with their techs. I think we blow them first.”

“Makes sense.”

“Next up, these guys. Ammunition store.”

The planning felt easy, by now, watching Bucky out of the corner of his eye for approval.

They blew everything to hell, and watching the ammunition depot go up in flames was one of Bucky’s favorites.

The war after that felt different. It was neater, cleaner, a push with a real goal. Kids were dying all over the place—replacement troops rolling in constantly, and those kids dying, too, and even the officers dying and getting replaced with confused guys so green they smelled like pine trees—but there was progress, real progress, happening. The front down in Italy had stalled out hard, and watching the territory start creeping south towards it was deeply satisfying.

In August, Paris was liberated.

It had been coming for a while, but it was still satisfying as hell to hear about it. The Free French they’d been holed up with whooped with joy.

In September, they got orders over the radio to take two days of leave in Paris. The Howling Commandos loved that. Dum Dum stared Jones right in the eye as he made an unwise bet about how many women he could pull; Jones replied obscenely, and the bet was on.

Bucky grinned lopsidedly. “Hey, Cap,” he said, “you can finally see the Louvre.”

Steve shook his head. “It’s not open. They moved the art out ahead of the Nazis.”

“Well, shit. They didn’t move the Eiffel Tower, did they?”

“Non,” said Dernier, “mais les bâtards Nazis cut the cables. Can’t climb it.”

“That’s fine,” said Bucky. “I just want to look at it. Have a story to tell my mom.”

“There’s still women, ain’t there?” said Dum Dum.

“Enough for both of you,” said Monty dryly. “And a bit extra, I dare say.”
Leave meant you had to find a hotel room. Paris right about then was chock-full of GIs, so finding a room was tough, especially when they rolled in around dinner time. “Better double up,” said Bucky, smiling at the girl working the desk.

“Oui,” she said, and gave them the key to a room that had just the one bed. Wire frame. Weak. Creaky. Bucky sat on the edge and bounced, and it squeaked like it was about to fall apart. He raised his eyebrows at Steve, and Steve just shook his head at the bed, frowning.

They met up with the Commandos for drinks as soon as they had the rooms straightened out. There was a pianist at this joint, too, so it felt a little like London, right down to the shitty cognac. The songs weren’t so familiar. But when another GI asked for Rip-Tide, the pianist smiled and swirled his fingers over the keys, and the long-faced soldier sang along very softly: ...a new love beckoned me, wrecking the ship of my dreams...

Gabe and Dum Dum, true to their idiot selves, drifted off to try to chat up women; Morita and Monty got to arguing about whether England or the States had better literature. Dernier was staring off into space, looking pensive.

Bucky nudged Dernier’s elbow. “Hey,” he said, “you okay?”

“Mmm,” said Dernier. “Oui, pour quoi pas? Paris is free, but France has burned. I suppose I wonder what is left of my home.”

They gave that a few moments of silence.

When it got late enough, Steve yawned. “Think I’ll hit the sack,” he said. “You guys have fun.”

Bucky stayed out for a while longer, until Monty had also decided to go to bed. He walked Monty back upstairs, talking a little shit about the RAF, until Monty flipped him the V-sign—palm in, and then, to rub it in, palm out. He cocked an eyebrow at Bucky and went into the room down the hall he’d be sharing with Dum Dum, if Dugan ever came back.

Bucky turned the knob, slipped in to the darkened room.

Steve was awake; naked, sitting up and swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. Bucky grinned, going to kneel in front of him, but Steve’s hand on his shoulder stopped him. Steve nodded down at the bed. “Noise,” he breathed just loud enough for Bucky to hear him.

Bucky nodded, one corner of his mouth turning down. He looked around the room—oh. Oh. He pulled out a chair that had been tucked up against a wall and sat down in it heavily. Not a sound.

He stood up, smiling again, starting to pull off his clothes. Steve was on him, helping—well, trying to help. They kept getting tangled up in each other, stopping to kiss, and Bucky kept getting distracted. Putting his hands on Steve’s face or chest or sliding them around his back, pulling him up flush, hip to hip. Steve inhaled hard through his nose, pushing into his thigh. But they managed it in the end.

“How do you want it?” whispered Steve.

“You sit down,” Bucky whispered back, throwing his undershirt down onto the chair. Steve did, legs spread obscenely, already hard, and Bucky dug the tin of vaseline (by now replaced, twice) out of the pocket of his pants where they’d fallen.
He got Steve slicked up and then he sat on Steve’s lap, easing himself down onto Steve’s cock. This was still the tough part—he bit his lip as he went—but once he made it down the first time, he could push up a little, and this was good; this was sending sparks up his spine every time he moved.

Steve’s head tipped forward, mouthing wetly at Bucky’s shoulder, nipping at his neck. Bucky tried not to groan as he pushed back.

Steve’s hands found his hips, gripped tightly, and started to move him. Oh. That was better. Less work for him, and Steve was—Steve was just fine with setting the pace, getting faster, thrusting up into him. Every time he did Bucky could feel the pleasure reverberating through his cock. He heard himself whining with need and Steve said, “Shhh, shhh,” but he was panting, too.

Steve was sucking a hickey into the back of his neck. The little dazzle of pain from it was perfect. He pushed down into Steve’s hands and Steve made a soft broken sound.

“Oh,” Bucky found himself whispering, “baby, baby,” and Steve’s hands tightened punishingly on his hips, cock driving into him harder, faster. He wrapped his hand around his own cock and started pumping into his fist with every one of Steve’s strokes, until he tipped his head back against Steve’s and came over his own chest and belly. Steve made a punched-out sound under him, explosive gust of air against Bucky’s neck, and came inside him. He rode out the orgasm as long as he could, until finally they were both leaning into each other, sweaty and hot and tired.

Bucky pulled himself to his feet slowly, grabbing Steve’s undershirt to clean himself up. He caught a glimpse of Steve’s face—a little stormy. “What is it?” he whispered.

Steve shook his head sharply. “Nothing.”

Had he not liked—? Well, if Steve wasn’t going to tell him, not much use guessing.

They slept tangled up that night, Steve pulling Bucky back against him. He was way too hot, but Bucky put up with it, because it was perfect.

They did make it to see the Eiffel Tower, and even though it was closed, they went to look at the Louvre. Steve bought Bucky crepes from a little restaurant with a striped red and white awning. Bucky looked at Steve in the bright shade, Steve’s relaxed, open face, how easily Steve could breathe while he talked about the French artists whose work he’d seen in New York, and thought he’d maybe never been that happy in his life.

The second night in Paris Steve whispered, “Let’s do it slow,” which turned out to mean doing Bucky face-down on the floor, agonizingly slowly, until Bucky was almost crying with it.

Steve still seemed surprised, every time, that Bucky let him do it; that Bucky liked it. A real man—but who could give a shit about being a real man if you got to feel like this?

Going back to the foxholes after that was a crying shame. But it made Steve stand up straighter, the glitter in his eyes before action. Steve was born to lead.

That winter, there was a blizzard. It trapped a lot of guys, cut off up across the lake outside Novgorod. The snow closed it off, and the only thing waiting across the narrow stretch of land was
Nazis.

Peggy was staring grimly at the map, drumming her fingers on the table, sitting in a camp tent in the middle of the Lille headquarters.

Steve said, sketching the route out with his fingers on the map, “I’m thinking we come up on their flank and hit them hard. No pincer movement. We want to force them away from the troops, not toward them. Our guys have to be running out of ammunition.”

“They did have supply wagons with them. Quite a bit of ammunition. That’s the only reason we can come up with for why the enemy haven’t already wiped them out,” she said. “We’re looking at a thousand troops, Captain. Pinned on a peninsula the size of a postage stamp.”

Steve leaned back, shaking his head. “Got to get them out,” he said. “Think they’ll be able to make it back to the front?”

“I do. They’ve only been holed up there for two days. Frostbite is likely to be the biggest problem at this stage.”

“We can work with that. Can anybody fly us in or are we going to have to hike it?”

She smiled grimly; it didn’t reach her eyes. “I’m afraid it’s going to be the latter, Captain.”

He rolled his shoulders. “I’ve been meaning to figure out snowshoes,” he said, and gave her a grin that got an answering smile back out of her.

“Well, you’re in luck; we have some Finnish troops who have volunteered to show you and the men.”

“Snowshoes,” muttered Bucky, who still kept forgetting how to drag his foot up into each step and coming down too hard. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“No other options?”

“If there were, would we be wearing these?” Steve’s foot caught a little and he muttered, “Damn.”

“I like to think not,” Bucky said, “but who knows? Did you piss off Peggy lately?”

“I think you complained less about getting shot.”

“I’m a city boy, we don’t end up in snowshoes in the backass of nowhere. This is bullshit.”

They had white coats—courtesy of the Soviets—lined with fur, warm against the bitter chill that started to freeze them every time they paused. The Commandos behind them were trading stories of the best hot cocoa they’d ever had, or in Monty’s case, hot toddy. The support troops behind them were just shivering and trying to keep up.

Bucky’s face, cheeks pink and chapped in the wind, stood out against the rim of white fur. There were snowflakes in his eyelashes.

He saw Steve looking at him and said, “What? I got something on my face?” He reached up to swipe at his forehead, knocking some snow out of his eyebrows.
“Yeah, you got it,” said Steve, but he couldn’t help smiling at Bucky. It felt too big, too warm. Bucky’s eyes widened a little bit.

He smiled back, though.

It was a hard day. The mobile explosives (which boiled down to men on skis lobbing bombs) worked surprisingly well to draw fire and leave them room for the operation.

When Morita’s whistle pierced the air to signal that they were ready to withdraw, the snow had started picking up, soft and fluffy, hiding everything, muting the deep rumbling booms of Denier’s devices. Steve grabbed Bucky’s arm and said, “That’s our cue.”

They were almost over the low hill, in full retreat from the badly depleted German forces, when Steve choked on a gasp.

Bucky turned. The world was slowing down like molasses; Steve was falling into a crouch, holding his leg, blood seeping out between his fingers.

“You’re hurt,” said Bucky through numb lips that had nothing to do with the cold.

Steve grimaced, shaking his head. “Just a graze,” he said.

“What did they get?” Bucky was kneeling next to him, fitting his hand over Steve’s calf. “If it was nothing you’d be walking again. Let me see.”

It was his damn hamstring. He wouldn’t be able to walk out on his own.

“Come on,” he said shortly. He saw Steve’s eyebrows drawing together in concern, like he was going to say some damn fool thing like leave me, but he hauled Steve up like Steve was still a hundred pounds soaking wet. He pulled Steve’s arm across his shoulder.

“I got you,” he said into Steve’s silence.

He did. He brought Steve back across the open ground, until they were back with the main forces, until they could finally, finally rest. Steve’s leg was fine the next morning.

“We need you to bring Zola in,” said Phillips, and nothing tipped Steve off that this was going to be different. Nothing went wrong in planning, or the run-up. Nothing had ever gone really wrong, with the Howling Commandos.

They were all gathered, standing on a snowy outcrop. Morita and Jones were hunched over listening to a HYDRA radio. There wasn’t much snow in the air, even though it was all over the ground, the clouds turning the valley to a soft gray crater.

Bucky was standing next to Steve, staring out over it all. “Remember when I made you ride the C-cyclone at Coney Island?”

“Yeah, and I threw up?” Steve’s lip curled at the memory.

Bucky tipped his chin up, looking back up at the cable stretched above them. There was a hint of a smile on his face. “This isn’t payback for that, is it?”
Steve craned his neck to follow Bucky’s gaze. “Now why would I do that?”

“We were right,” said Jones, looking up from the radio. Steve and Bucky turned to him. “Dr. Zola’s on the train. HYDRA dispatcher gave them permission to open up the throttle. Wherever he’s going, they must need him bad.” Morita nodded a little.

Bucky’s eyes met Steve’s, and Steve slipped on the helmet. The men grabbed their gear for the zipline.

Monty peered out at the train with his binoculars and lowered them, a grim set to his mouth. “Let’s get going, because they’re moving like the devil.”

“We’re only got about a ten-second window.” Steve clipped his equipment onto the cable. “You miss that window, we’re bugs on a windshield.”

Dugan boomed out a laugh. “Better get moving, bugs.”

“Maintenant!” shouted Dernier, and Steve took off. The air rushed past his face, so cold, the snowflakes stinging. He felt the line dip as Bucky followed him, and then Gabe.

Steve dropped at the perfect moment, and heard the thuds behind him as Bucky and Gabe fell into a crouch. They ran across the top of the train on light feet until Steve spotted the ladder down the side he needed. Bucky perched at top to keep watch while Steve climbed down, and then followed him, swinging in through the open doors just seconds after him. Bucky slid the door shut with a bang. The sound of the wind cut out, and there was just the noise of the train on the tracks, rattling, muffled screeching.

Bucky had his gun ready immediately, but the car looked empty except for metal crates of materiel. They split to case each side of the storage racks running the length of the car. When they reached the end, Steve paused in confusion, turning to glance back, grip loosening on his gun. Bucky kept his up.

Still no sign of hostiles. Steve cautiously stepped through the open doorway, and then through the space into the next train car.

There were a few seconds of stillness. Just long enough for Steve to get ahead of the door and for Bucky to be behind it, when there was a faint noise—Steve whipped around as both compartment doors slammed shut between them. Cutting them off from each other. He threw himself against the window. Bucky’s face, full of pure, wild terror, showed for a second in the window of the other door before Bucky turned around and started firing at something down the car from him.

A high-pitched whine behind Steve got his attention—it was a HYDRA goon in one of Zola’s exoskeletons. They hadn’t gotten them all, then, or there had been another copy somewhere. The light weapons were charging. Steve started firing his handgun, one-two-three.

It didn’t do much good. He had to duck for cover, then come back up while the weapons were recharging; he took out the goon with a kick to the chest, then a hard hit from the shield. He was down long enough for Steve to grab the arm with the energy weapon and blast that fucking door back open. He went tearing back, after Bucky.

Bucky was—out of ammo, sliding down against the wall. Steve dodged out of the goon’s view and hit the button for the door with his elbow. As it hissed open, Bucky looked up at him with naked hope on his face, and Steve threw Bucky another gun. As soon as Bucky had a good grip, Steve charged in with his shield up, drawing fire. He shoved one of the long metal crates toward the last
attacker. The guy dodged it—but that left him right in Bucky’s line of sight. He went down clean.

“I had him on the ropes,” said Bucky, hollowly, and it was a joke, wasn’t it, but it sounded all wrong.

“I know you did,” said Steve. But then that noise, the weapon, powering up again behind them—he shoved Bucky out of the way while he lifted the shield up. “Get down!”

The first blast knocked Steve down and back, and the shield went flying out of his hand. Half the car’s wall made a sick groaning sound as it peeled open, and now there was wind rushing by them.

As Steve pulled himself up onto his elbows, he saw Bucky grab the shield. Advancing toward the goon in the exoskeleton. Firing. One shot. Two.

The goon got another shot off.

It caught the shield, but it knocked Bucky backwards, out of the compartment.

Steve sprinted forward to get the shield and sent it flying, knocking the goon off his feet. He tore the helmet off as he lunged for the hole in the compartment wall. Bucky was clinging to a railing near the end of the dangling hunk of metal. Steve started to inch out along the railing, closer to him.

“Bucky!” he yelled, frantic, adrenaline pounding in his veins. “Hang on!” The whole thing gave an awful heave and creaked. “Grab my hand!”

He was too far away. The railing gave. Bucky shouted as he fell.

The wind drowned out the sound of his voice almost immediately. Steve stared after him blankly.

He thought, no no no no no

He started to cry, resting his forehead against the rail, in something like shock.

The train shuddered to a halt. That would be Gabe, up front. Too late. Too late.

Double yourself and receive me darkness,

Receive me and my lover too, he will not let me go without him.

The fall was short. All his thoughts were clipped. When it happened, his brain seemed to be too concerned with the physical sensation, adrenaline ratcheted up so high there wasn’t a coherent thought about it, just the awareness of wind buffeting him from side to side. He couldn’t have articulated the thought I’m going to die but it was there, wordless and huge, filling his brain. There was no emotion with it, no time to have an emotion. It was just a fact.

Hitting the ground happened in stages: first the snow, which shook away from him, and a thousand pine needles. He plunged through it in an instant, hit a thick gnarled tree limb, cracked that with his body. He felt something catch and start to tear, and as he kept falling, a wrench and a crack, and then another branch, as his arm started to hurt. The hurt built; he kept falling. Another branch slashed him across the face, another, another. He hit the ground and rolled downhill. Every time his body rotated, the pain welled up and dazzled him. It was a brief bright roar that drowned out everything else, over and over again.
He came to rest, and his arm was—something had happened, but he couldn’t open his eyes. Warmth was soaking his left side. Blood.

This was it, then. But he was too woozy to think through it. It was easier to let go. His mind rolled, brain told him he was still turning in circles even though he could feel the snow under his back.

He felt consciousness slip away. That was supposed to be the last time. That was supposed to be it. Steve was on the train, though; Steve hadn’t fallen; that was all right. This was all right.

He didn’t know how long it was before there was noise. There was a crunch of boots in the snow. The sound hurt. The jostling motion hurt.

“As he said,” a voice drifted over him. German. “You have the litter?”

“Da,” somebody said, voice dropping at the end, Russian? why

“Good. Strap him in.”

He felt the weight wrong. Something missing. His arm. His arm.

Getting Zola bundled off into Phillips’ custody was hard enough. Without the Commandos, Steve wouldn’t have been able to do it.

When they’d figured it out—when they took in Steve’s face and Bucky’s absence—Morita had been the first to drag Steve into a tight, fierce hug. The others had, too, after that, one at a time.

Steve had been alone for hours in the bombed-out bar before Peggy found him. It was dark outside, mist hanging in the air. Late evening.

He heard her coming, and glanced up and back. Wiped at his nose, and for a second that reminded him of wiping another woman’s spit and lipstick off his mouth. But this time there was no anger in her eyes, just weariness, sadness. This wasn’t her first loss. It wasn’t hitting her like it did him. Christ, nobody in the world was going to miss Bucky like this.

“Dr. Erskine said the serum wouldn’t just affect my muscles, it would affect my cells. It created a protective system of regeneration and healing,” those familiar words, run through in circles in his head dozens of times over the months, “which means, um, I can’t get drunk. Did you know that?”

“Your metabolism burns four times faster than the average person.” Her voice was matter-of-fact as she pulled up a chair from under the bar. “He thought it could be one of the side effects.” He wouldn’t meet her eyes. “It wasn’t your fault.”

He choked on that. “You read the report?”

“Yes.”

“Then you know that’s not true.” If he’d killed them, made sure they were dead, when he picked up that ham-hand of the goon in the mechanical suit and used his weapon to fire without taking the weapon off him, it would have all been different. All of it.

“You did everything you could.” She was still watching him, intently, as he shook that off. “Did you believe in your friend? Did you respect him?”

That was a low blow, wasn’t it. He wouldn’t have thought Peggy had it in her to be this cruel. For a
second he hated her. *Respect*, sure, but it wasn’t *respect* that held his head up when he got so drunk he—that had sat up all night with him when he couldn’t stop coughing—that had found him dates and then watched him with the girls with burning, hunted eyes—it wasn’t *respect*, it was *everything*. And it was gone.

She waited a few beats. “Then stop blaming yourself.” He swallowed hard and looked down. “Allow Barnes the dignity of his choice. He damn well must have thought you were worth it.”

*He thought a lot of things. He doesn’t get to think them anymore. He deserved a captain who knew what the fuck they were doing.*

But there was still something left, wasn’t there, something to do. “I’m going after Schmidt. I’m not going to stop until all of HYDRA is dead or captured.”

“You won’t be alone.”

He nodded, eyes still wet.

“The men will be having the wake tonight,” she said, softly. “You should join them.”

It hit him hard, like a blow to the chest. The idea of looking at the men and, what, *toasting* Bucky, like this was anything other than—they’d lost men on missions before. None of the Commandos, but the soldiers who had gone with them. He’d lost men he was responsible for. But he’d lost them cleanly, in ways he’d thought about for hours and days until he was sure he couldn’t have saved them with anything easy.

This was different. This was a stupid loss, to a stupid error, a mistake, leaving any of those bastards alive. This was *Bucky*.

“I’ll think about it,” he said.

Peggy shook her head. “Don’t think too much. Just go.”

“They’ll be drinking. I can’t get drunk.”

“So it will hurt now. It will hurt them later, too.”

And she had that one right, didn’t she. Grief wasn’t something to do anything with. Just survive. Until the mission was finished.

*Will you age?* He had a different answer now. *I don’t know. I don’t much care whether I find out.*

When she got up to leave, she tugged on his arm, gently. He let her pull him up, and he followed her back, and he sat with the men while they got shiny-eyed drunk and made increasingly revealing toasts to the Sarge, “Who was a paranoid motherfucker who never let shit happen to any of us,” said Morita, and from Dum Dum, “We’re all probably going to get trench foot now because we don’t have that glorious asshole yelling at us about it.”

He didn’t sleep.

He had to write the letter to Buck’s mother, for God’s sake.
He was so cold, so cold, he couldn’t catch his breath, his chest stuttering with it.

There were words rattling around him, it took a minute to pin them down, angry and guttural, why couldn’t he understand it? It wasn’t—wasn’t German. Russian?

“Spasibo,” somebody growled. Yeah. Russian. He gasped, shaking. Tried to move his arms to rub them, couldn’t move his right, and his left, his left wasn’t his mind blanked the thought before he could finish it. He was—upright, but restrained. Cuffs were—no, straps—shit, where was Steve, where was Steve, where was Steve, this panic rushing up and bubbling through him, he hadn’t felt it since the lab, he hadn’t, and this was, he was so afraid

“Proklyat'ye, on prosypayetsya,” somebody said sharply, and then he felt something searing through him, unbearable, in the seconds before consciousness dropped away.

“Schmidt’s working powers with beyond our capabilities,” said Stark at the briefing. “He gets across the Atlantic, he will wipe out the entire Eastern Seaboard in an hour.”

“How much time we got?” asked Gabe in the tense silence.

“According to my new best friend, under 24 hours,” Phillips answered.

Dernier frowned. “Where is he now?”

“HYDRA’s last base is here, in the Alps.” Phillips held up a photo. “Five hundred feet below the surface.”

“So what are we supposed to do?” asked Morita. “It’s not like we can just knock on the front door.”

“Why not?” Steve asked. He could feel their eyes going to him; he’d been sitting in glacial silence, radiating frosty anger. He sat up straighter. “That’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

The next time they woke him up, they made a real effort at torturing him. His dog tags were gone.

“Sergeant James Barnes,” he said, “3-5-”

They were more physical than Zola had been. They stuck with good old-fashioned beatings, a belt, a club. They shouted at him in broken English and at each other in Russian, which was something, wasn’t it, but he caught a glimpse of a tattoo on one of them that was familiar: HYDRA. So HYDRA had its tentacles in the Soviets as well as the Germans.

That explained how they’d found him after he fell off the train.

Somebody hit him, hard. The thought rattled in his brain for a minute but fell out.

“Steve,” said Peggy, “are you quite sure you’re going to be ready for this mission?”

He smiled at her. He could feel that it was awful, like a skull, but it was the only smile he had.

“I better be,” he said.
“Don’t do anything foolish.” Her voice was quiet. Gentle.

Like she knew he would, anyway; like maybe she knew—she didn’t know. She didn’t know that what he needed to do now was run until he fell.

Getting into the base was as easy as he’d expected (the screams from the men he left burning to death in his wake just made him grip the motorcycle’s handlebars harder), and Schmidt just as talkative.

“Arrogance may not be a uniquely American trait, but I must say, you do it better than anyone. But, there are limits to what even you can do, Captain. Or did Erskine tell you otherwise?”

“He told me you were insane.”

“Ah. He resented my genius and tried to deny me what was rightfully mine. But he gave you everything. So. What made you so special?”

He choked on a laugh. “Nothin’,” he said, dropping the g so hard he could feel Gertie wincing in his head. “I’m just a kid from Brooklyn.”

Anything that made me special is dead.

Turned out getting headbutted still stung like a bitch, especially a skull as hard as Schmidt’s. He went to his knees, panting. “I can do this all day.”

“Oh, of course you can, of course. But unfortunately, I am a tight schedule.”

“So am I,” he said, and the cavalry arrived right on cue. He went after Schmidt and ran into Peggy and Colonel Phillips, and they got him right up on the ass of Schmidt’s damn jet.

The kiss from Peggy was—well, in an exceedingly fast-moving vehicle, for one thing. A surprise. Maybe under other circumstances. Maybe if he hadn’t lost everything, everything—

He jumped onto the jet and gave beating the holy hell out of everything he ran into his very best try.

But when he made it to Schmidt, and Schmidt taunted him, he threw the shield so hard it sent Schmidt flying back into the thing at the center of the bridge. There was a sharp crack; strange, crackling noises started. “What have you done?” shouted Schmidt as he snatched up the thing that had tumbled free, a glowing cube. It started to change, flashing, pulsing. Something opened. Steve could see stars through it.

Schmidt started to unravel like yarn, screaming, as the cube in his hand pulled him into a stream of light.

The portal shut, and the cube dropped, burning through the floor and falling out over the ocean. Good riddance. Steve pulled off his helmet as he went to sit in the chair. The dial—shit, he was too close to New York, too close.

He raised Peggy on the radio, and he said, through eyes starting to blur with tears, “If I wait any longer, a lot of people are going to die. Peggy, this is my choice.” If it was good enough to be his—it’s good enough to be mine—

He set his compass on the dash in front of him, breathing hard. Cranked the yoke down.

“Peggy.”

“I’m here.”
“I’m going to need a rain check on that dance,” he said, for lack of anything better to say.

“All right. A week next Saturday, at the Stork Club.”

“You got it.”

“Eight o’clock on the dot, don’t you dare be late. Got it?”

“You know, I still don’t know how to dance.” Just a few steps, Julia’s mouth thin with concentration in that shabby kitchen. Memories were crowding his head, faster and faster.

“I’ll show you how. Just be there.”

“We’ll have the band play something slow. I’d hate to step on your—”

The impact was sharp, brief, knocked his head forward and then slammed back, and as the water started to pour in under the crackling flames, icy and unendurable, he felt everything start to slip away and go black.

Recorders ages hence,

Come, I will take you down underneath this impassive exterior, I will tell you what to say of me,

Publish my name and hang up my picture as that of the tenderest lover,

The friend the lover's portrait, of whom his friend his lover was fondest,

Who was not proud of his songs, but of the measureless ocean of love within him, and freely pour’d it forth,

Who often walk’d lonesome walks thinking of his dear friends, his lovers,

Who pensive away from one he lov’d often lay sleepless and dissatisfied at night,

Who knew too well the sick, sick dread lest the one he lov’d might secretly be indifferent to him,

Whose happiest days were far away through fields, in woods, on hills, he and another wandering hand in hand, they twain apart from other men,

Who oft as he saunter’d the streets curv’d with his arm the shoulder of his friend, while the arm of his friend rested upon him also.

The next time he woke up, he came awake sharply and suddenly. His eyes weren’t tracking properly, he had to blink, and he knew that feeling; he was blinking frost out of his lashes.

It might have been possible to believe that he was camped on a mountain with the Commandos, but he knew better.

And when he got his eyes to focus, they welled up with tears all on their own, because there, looking down at him, was the face of a nightmare.

“Ah, Sergeant Barnes,” said Zola. “I have been waiting for some time for you, although I suppose it
is also true that you have been waiting to see me.”

They showed him the newspaper with Steve dead and it explained why he wasn’t there, didn’t it.

“It’s been three years,” said a surly Soviet technician who spoke good English. He showed Bucky another paper with the date. “You have been unconscious. Waiting for Dr. Zola.”

Bucky couldn’t manage a smile but did get out, “Sergeant James Barnes. 3-” before there was a crisp hit to the side of his head.

“You see,” said the technician, “with the serum, we no longer need to worry about damaging you.”

Bucky turned his head, gasping.

“For some reason it took on you,” said the tech, scathing, full of seething hatred, “and not on any good candidates. So. We make good candidate out of you.”

“Zola’s a fucking Nazi,” Bucky said, breaking his silence, breath heaving painfully. “You think for a hot second he’s going to let you do anything that’ll help Mother Russia?”

The tech hit him again. “I think we have what we need in you.”

There were blood draws, and tests, and more blood draws. Hits and kicks, and he was strapped in whenever he was awake. He could feel the catheter running into his dick, and he knew his job here was to be a body. Warm or cold.

Once, after he’d polished off a bottle and a half of cheap cognac in about ten minutes and was feeling drunk for the first time in a long time, he’d said to Steve, *We can grow old together or we can grow cold together,* and he’d laughed, but Steve hadn’t laughed; and now neither of those things was going to happen.

Thinking about Steve was not okay. It was not something he could do.

When he first woke up with the arm, he tried to kill them. It didn’t work. Restraints and drugs. *The procedure has already begun.*

After a while, they pulled the catheter out and unstrapped him. He tried to kill the first man who undid a strap, arm shooting out to clamp around his neck, but they got him with a needle and he found himself woozy, dizzy, hardly able to move.

They manhandled him under a shower, blasting chilly water, and then dried him and got him into clothes. They dragged him down a hallway to another room and sat him at a table.

He was sitting there, trying to figure out how to move his legs, his arm, anything, when a woman walked in. She was older. Forty, fifty, maybe. Brown hair gone gray, laugh lines grooved in around her mouth, deltas around her eyes.

“Sergeant Barnes,” she said. Her voice was friendly. Warm. “My name is Albina Ulyanova Pavlenko. I am here to teach you to speak Russian.”
He tried to say something, but he couldn’t quite get it out.

“I understand you are indisposed,” she said. She was smiling, a polite, kind little smile, overlooking his indisposition. “That is quite all right. I will begin the lesson, and when you are able to follow along, please do.”

Were they betting he wouldn’t kill her? Why? Because she was a woman, because she seemed nonthreatening? Were they watching and ready to dose him again?

“We will start with the alphabet. I believe you do not know the Cyrillic? Good, we will work on that today. Some of the letters are the same, and some are different but look like letters you know, and some are strange to you.”

Behind her there was a blackboard. She picked up a piece of chalk and started to write out the letters he’d seen on Russian documents and signs before:

Ëë

“This is pronounced like yonder,” she said. “Yuh. You would call it an ‘e’ with an umlaut.”

The backwards, curved E was eh like red. A B was a V. Something that looked like a 6 was B. C was s like send. The lesson went on; he could feel it sinking in, whether he wanted it to or not. And he did, a little, want it to. It was—well, it was better than the table, and it was something new, something that didn’t hurt. And if he could understand them, he’d be in a better position to do something.

He didn’t try to kill Albina.

3 was Z. Ф was a soft f, like photo.

She started asking him to read the vowels for her, say them out loud. He tried his tongue: it worked.


She smiled at him.

“Very good, Sergeant Barnes,” she said.

When the lesson was done for the day, they came in. He started to fight, pulling himself up out of the chair; they dosed him again. He didn’t even see the needle, that time.

One of them grumbled something to another. If you keep me alive long enough I’ll learn your fucking language and I’ll tell you why I’m killing you in it, he thought. A little promise, dark and ugly, to hold on to.

They didn’t hit him that evening, though, which was nice.

The next day they took him back to the classroom. He still tried to fight them on the way there, but they were faster this time, dosed him before getting close enough.

“Do you remember your letters?” asked Albina. They went over them. He slurred them, at first.
She taught him *Pozhaluista.* Please. *Spasibo.* Thank you. He’d known that one. “Spasibo, Sergeant Barnes,” she said.

The backwards R for “ya” kept fucking him up, but he was getting better at remembering it. *I.* I am. *Ya—*“May I use your first name, Sergeant Barnes? Ya James.”

“Ya James,” he said back.

“Ya Albina, a eto James,” she said, and smiled. “This is not how we would introduce ourselves, really, but it is a start.” She smiled so much. She never looked afraid. Sometimes he felt like the room was reeling around him, but she always stood solidly planted. The enemy, but she didn’t look like it, didn’t act like it.

The backwards N for i. H for n. P for r.

*Ya zdes’. I am here.*

Life settled into something of a bizarre routine, after that, for a while. They were leaving off torturing him; he was strapped to the table at night, but spent most of the day with Albina, learning Russian. It came slowly at first, then faster and faster, until he could ask her how her day was (always “good, it has been a fine day, and how are you, James?”) and about weather he couldn’t see (“the snow has started falling again”) and then she started to teach him words that were—worse. They were scattered in, at first, but after a while they were most of what he was learning. Words. Phrases.

*Tell me the truth.*

*You are in my power.*

*I will hurt you.*

Sometimes he’d start sweating through those lessons. He got showered off periodically—always groggy, always drugged—and he’d started getting actual bathroom privileges, at least during Russian lessons. There was a bathroom with no door. They watched him.

*I am going to make you tell me what I want to know.*

*I have a knife.*

*I have a gun.*

*Where are the others?*

Any time he tried to move in a way they didn’t like (and they didn’t like pretty much anything) he got dosed. He thought they must be getting better at calibrating the dose. He’d get foggy, couldn’t think how to hurt them, but he could still move a little, so they didn’t have to drag him from place to place. It was making him docile. It was a problem. If they could make him docile, they could keep him like this forever. Why they would—that was a tougher problem. He couldn’t think straight long enough to focus on it.

The first time they set him in front of the toilet and stepped back, he tried to kill himself—slammed his head into the wall as hard as he could.
It wasn’t hard enough. They dosed him before he could make a second try.

The next time they dosed him before they set him on the toilet. He couldn’t get the energy or the concentration together enough to headbutt the wall. He closed his eyes.

*The Americans cannot be trusted.*

*How was your day, Albina?*

*It was good. I saw in the newspapers that our leader has broken Berlin.*

He wasn’t sure who was in charge. HYDRA, at least to some extent. The Russians, apparently.

*Albina, he said, why are you teaching me Russian?*

She smiled at him. It was fond. *Because if you are going to be Russian, you must speak Russian,* she said.

*I’m not—he started, but then stopped. Because if he was here—was that the plan? Make him Russian? Turn him?*

He waited until she turned her back to him and then broke the chair leg off and stabbed himself with it.

He should have known they’d be ready to take him to medical. The doctors were furious. He got strapped down again, no anesthetic, as they pulled splinter after splinter out of him. With his little smattering of Russian now he could catch occasional words, nothing coherent. *Infection,* he thought. *Medication.* These were among the words he’d learned.

The next day (it was hard to tell, with no windows, but he thought it was the next day) Zola came to see him.

*“Sergeant Barnes,”* he said. Bucky tried to ignore him. There was a thin fever running through him, thready, making his thoughts blur and coalesce. It wasn’t all that different from being dosed, except that the pain in his gut was endless and came in waves.

*“Sergeant Barnes,”* Zola said again, more insistently, shining a penlight into his eyes. “I am told you attempted to end your life yesterday. This is unwise. Your life does not belong to you. It belongs to HYDRA.”

Bucky summoned the presence of mind to spit, aiming for Zola’s face. He missed; Zola drew back, frowning, looking mildly disappointed.

*“It is a shame you are the only one we have who was a success,”* he said, in his soft, halting English. “You were strong enough for the serum but you are still so angry. We may have to proceed with alternative strategies.”

Zola’s accent in English was almost French, almost German. There were so few articles in Russian. *The, a, an,* missing in all kinds of places. Zola couldn’t speak it for shit.

*“Go to Hell,”* he said in Russian, and spit again.
It was not that long before the fever broke. His stomach had healed shockingly well. Even the scars were staring to smooth out.

“At least the serum worked,” said one tech to another.

“Hey,” said Bucky, “fuck you,” in Russian, and the techs glanced at each other, startled.

“I guess the lessons are working, too,” one of them said, finally.

“I’m surprised she taught him that.”

“Don’t be. You know what he’s for. He’s going to be one scary bastard by the end.”

“For what? The end of what?” he demanded. But the techs ignored him, and one did something to the tube running into his arm, and he dropped back into sleep.

He didn’t get another lesson with Albina until he was healed up enough that they felt safe dosing him. This time he got shackles on his wrists for the lesson.

Albina didn’t even glance at them.

He could feel his hair was growing longer. It was starting to get in his eyes, brush over his cheeks. It was covering the back of his neck. “How do you say ‘I want a haircut’?” he asked her, and she smiled like she was forgiving him as she told him.

He didn’t get a haircut for months after that. Probably months.

He did, however, get the first taste of the machine.

She said to him nasha krov’. Our blood. It’s what you will be, she said, still smiling, always smiling.

He came to in a lab that felt familiar. Zola’s lab. Not the same as the one in Germany, but—similar. Similar enough. The same hand organizing everything.

“Sergeant! You join us.” Zola sounded so calm, so happy.

Bucky rolled his upper lip in a snarl.

“Please note that this is an experimental machine. We have tested as best as possible, but there may be errors. If so, I apologize. They are likely to kill you.”

“What the hell are you—” said Bucky, and then the juice kicked on.

His teeth were chattering when they turned it back off.

“It is a bit crude, I’m afraid,” said Zola. “In five years, ten, I think we will be able to do this much more easily. But at the moment, we must balance it rather carefully.”

The power went on. The power went off.
“I believe a few treatments will suffice for today. It is based on work from your country, as it happens. Electrical current is the language of the brain, and I wish to rewrite certain passages in yours.”

The power went on. The power went off.

“Please tell me your name, rank, and serial number.”

That, at least, he was allowed to say. “James Barnes,” he said, “Sergeant, 32557038.”

“Hm.” Zola hit the switch again. Power on. Longer this time. Power off. “Please tell me your name, rank, and serial number.”

His mouth felt cottony, and there was blood in it from biting his tongue. He opened his mouth, said “James Barnes,” and managed to add “Sergeant,” but then—stopped. The string of numbers was too far away. Too complicated.

“Excellent,” said Zola, sounding genuinely pleased. “Oh, most excellent. Return him to his quarters.”

_Quarters_ must have been Zola’s little joke. Aside from supervised _tualyet_ time and language lessons, he was strapped in.

That time, though, he found he didn’t have it in him to fight them when they strapped him in. It was too much. The other kinds of pain had all been outside him, somehow, not part of him, even when they’d been unbearably loud, even when he’d cried or screamed. The medications had made him blurry and slow, but they hadn’t _changed_ him.

This was inside his brain. It was making—it was making it hard to remember. Hard to think. Chains of thought fell apart as soon as he started putting them together.

After a while it was easier to let go of them and sleep. He couldn’t always remember things. He couldn’t always remember why he was—why he was so fucking miserable, all of the time. What he’d lost.

The next day he went back to Albina.

“Tell me,” she said to him, “how do you feel?”

He stared at her blankly for a minute before he could say, “Tired.”

“Not well?”

“No, not well.”

“What is your name?”

“James.”

“Would you like a new name?”

“No.”
The week after that, he went back into the lab for more time with the machine. They spaced out the treatments—he wondered vaguely if they were worried about frying his brain past where it could recover—but it felt the same after every time. He’d be in a fog, a fugue, for hours, a day or two, after each time. And when he came back to himself, he’d feel... less. Less anger, less pain, less rage, less like a person.

And he had more and more trouble remembering. Not everything. He was still picking up Russian, getting better with it. The conversations were starting to feel more like conversations and less like stilted playground chatter.

Someone came to cut his hair. He didn’t have to sleep strapped in anymore. They still dosed him sometimes, but he could make it to and from Russian lessons without much help.

He dragged himself into the chair Zola was waving him into. “Have a seat,” said Zola, and then, “Open your mouth,” and he did, and the black rubber bite block slipped in.

He didn’t think about dying anymore. He didn’t have it in him.

Albina said, “Talk to me about how you would interrogate this prisoner,” and he did, easily. The lessons weren’t Russian. Much. Anymore. They were something else.

“We need more detail on this,” said a tech to Zola, sounding frustrated. “We lose too much.”

“Well, if Pavlovich ever decides to relent and let us have the materials we need, we will be able to be more detailed. In the meantime, we must be creative with what we have.” Zola’s Russian wasn’t good. Wasn’t as good as his.

He was permitted to begin exercising in his cell between lessons. The rhythm of it was soothing: he would do push-ups, chin-ups, sit-ups, until his muscles ached, and then more, until he couldn’t do them. Then he would stop.

He slept better. He did not dream much.

“What is your name?” asked Albina.

He didn’t know. It had been a long time since anyone had said it. Zola had stopped asking. Zola had asked, before. Hadn’t he?

“I don’t know.”
“Would you like a new name?”

“Yes.”

“You are Soldier,” she said to him.

“All right.”

“Winter Soldier.” Zimniy Soldat.

“All right.”

“Winter Soldier. Would you like to train again?”

He glanced up at Albina. “What do you mean?”

“Would you like to fight?”

He stared off over her shoulder. The wall was old brick. Grayish. Everything in the rooms where he had been for—in the rooms was like that, grayish, old.

“Do you think I should?” he asked.

“I do.”

“Then I will.”

The sparring was good. It made him feel something; not just empty.

They started him out on hand-to-hand. He killed a man not long into it.

“Damn it,” said a cold-faced man, staring grimly at him. “Zola told us this might happen, that little asshole. We need you in better condition than this.”

“I’m in excellent condition,” he retorted.

“To hell with this. I’m authorizing a budget to refine the machine.”

And the man was as good as his word, because the machine changed, bits at a time. Now—it was still like it had been, before, with the pain, but it felt different, too; it felt like tendrils. Things would flash into his mind before they were gone, colors, tones.

Zola said to a tech he couldn’t see, “I believe light, sporadic shocks to the hippocampus, unilateral only at each time, will be more useful than whole-hemisphere shocks.”

The tech said, “Hippocampus? What about frontal lobes? His personality—”

“Hippocampus is vital. Frontal lobes we will do in stages. Again, unilateral only. We want no more memory loss than is convenient. Prepare auxiliary medications.”
He started sparring again. They started teaching him knives.

At some point, guns.

“Winter Soldier,” said Albina.

“Yes.”

“Mission report.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Not yet. But you will. When I say mission report, your job is to tell me what I need to know. All right?”

“All right.”

She pressed his hand gently with hers. “You will have training missions first. When you are ready, real missions.”

“All right.”

The training mission was to kill a man. He did it, methodically, long bone of his forearm crushing the larynx; it felt like he had always known how to do this. Maybe he had.

The missions slid into being real at some point. He could not have identified when. Time was slippery.

When he saw the cryochamber again he dimly remembered that it had hurt. Hurt terribly.

“I am afraid it will hurt again, yes,” said Zola.

It did.

Thawing hurt, too.

“Soldier, hold,” snapped out a voice he didn’t recognize. He held still. “Tell me your name.”

He couldn’t. It was lost. Too cold, too far away.

“Tell me your name.” This time accompanied with a face, getting into his face—he struck out impulsively and something cracked.

“Shit,” said another voice, and there was a needle in his arm. This, at least, was familiar.

The next time:
“You are Winter Soldier,” said a voice, soft and penetrating.

“I am Winter Soldier,” he repeated back.

There was a sigh, like relief, as he struggled to make his eyes focus, blink away the frost.

“Told you gentler touch would be better,” somebody muttered.

“Don’t get too excited until nobody dies this time.”

He waited until somebody told him what to do. It was easy, as it turned out. Walk here, walk there. Shower. They handed him clothes; he put them on.

There was someone standing near the back of the room. His eyes picked her out.

“Albina,” he said. There was something. She looked—older.

She smiled. There were tears in her eyes. “Winter Soldier,” she said.

She briefed him on his mission. She gave him a gun. She told him who to report to.

“Kill her,” said the man he had just been told to report to. He pulled the trigger; there was a bang, but it was a blank, he could tell at once. Insufficient. He snapped her neck.

“Jesus Christ,” said someone else. “He really did it.”

“I assured you he would,” said the man he reported to now.

Subcommittee Defense Program #3-255-7 Budgetary and Equipment Update 1950-3-18

Developments in science around individual differences strongly suggest genetic component to suitability for program. Testing is not currently possible with limited understanding of role of DNA in genetic transmission. Mendelian inheritance is unhelpful as detailed family pedigree of subject is lacking.

“Mission report.”

“Target killed. No other damage.”

Subcommittee Defense Program #3-255-7 Strategic Update 1950-10-10

Subject was deployed to Hancha with limited success. Highly visible and immediately suspect as Russian, inappropriate to current circumstances. Improve ability to deploy without notice. Target removed as ordered. Consider cryofreeze until strategic training developed.

“Mission report.”

“Target killed. Seven passengers also killed. Property damage to vehicle.”
Subcommittee Defense Program #3-255-7 Strategic Update 1953-3-15

Subject deployed for internal reasons. Successful. Consider for deployment to East Germany in event situation deteriorates. ECT must be administered within a relatively narrow timeframe to ensure successful suppression of memory formation.

Waved into the chair. Handed the bite block.

He wanted to ask why do you still do this when but didn’t.

Subcommittee Defense Program #3-255-7 Budgetary and Equipment Update 1953-3-18

New indication that DNA structure is double helix may be useful in determining suitability of original subject and future potential subjects for the project. Unclear as of yet whether modification of DNA will be possible. Unclear whether aging will progress normally.

“Mission report.”

“Targets killed. Property damage extensive. Multiple civilian casualties.”

Subcommittee Defense Program #3-255-7 Strategic Update 1956-11-11

Successful deployment to Budapest.

Subcommittee Defense Program #3-255-7 Strategic Update 1956-11-14

Successful deployment to Egyptian area of concern with support team. Consider extended cryofreeze as asset maintenance requires significant budgetary commitment.

Subcommittee Defense Program #3-255-7 Strategic Update 1968-8-22

Successful deployment to Czechoslovakia. Extensive support team highly useful. Recommend strongly for future deployments.

Subcommittee Defense Program #3-255-7 Budgetary and Equipment Update 1971-5-28

Work with restriction enzymes may be promising for modification of DNA. Experimental subjects should be recruited as soon as possible for testing of possible compounds.
Ability to sequence DNA should be applied to subject without delay. Previous incomplete studies have not captured this data, which is essential to replicating desired effects. Duration of time for which tests are available fail to clarify whether subject is aging normally, at reduced pace, or at all.

They let him go for a long time, once, without wiping him. They froze him, periodically. But they didn’t wipe him.

He saw Cuba, Berlin. Algeria. Czechoslovakia. He had a feeling he had never expected to see these places. He did not dwell on why that was. The wipes made feeling things untrustworthy; feelings shimmered, wavered, like mirages on desert air.

But the more things he saw, the longer he went without a wipe, the more feelings there were. Climbing into him, choking him. He dreamed in Russian but why was it so easy, so much easier to speak English than it was to speak German? Why did they keep wiping him? Why did the faces of the men he worked with change, growing older in sudden leaps?

He spent more time in Afghanistan than he had in most places. It was unpleasant and, in the end, unproductive.

He went rogue in New York. He was hardly aware of doing it. It just seemed—it seemed like the thing to do, at the time, and he could not have explained it. He used his flawless English and he found himself living on the street, in and out of homeless shelters. There were words he’d—forgotten, he thought, he thought he must have known them at some point. Brooklyn. Red Hook. There was a place that sold pickles, out of huge barrels, a sign that said Hand-crafted and the smell jolted into him, like a physical blow. He couldn’t bring himself to go in.

When they came to get him, he fought them, but not as hard as he could have. He knew it. He didn’t know if they knew it.

The wipe took it all. He didn’t know.

He knew.

He didn’t.

The man driving the car was almost too easy: a quick sight, a bullet, and the car went off the road in a crash that shouldn’t have gone up in flames, but did. He didn’t even need the team.

Successful deployment to New York. Subject showed no recognition. Improved memory modification procedures are evidently sufficient to prevent undesirable consequences as occurred on former New York deployment. Possibility of using subject for training of additional corps. Test in small groups.
There was a room full of children, watching him with quiet, flat eyes. It was unnatural. He wasn’t in body armor, just a shirt, pants. Hair pulled back. Like he was just a guy. A man. Muzhchina. Not guy. Guy was. English. Gde slova?

“Show them,” said his handler, pleasantly. He started to demonstrate the weakest points. The kids, children, devotchki, ne mal’chiki, couldn’t be more than seven. They held too still.

Scientific Defense Progress Committee #3-255-7 Update 1994-7-7

New imaging using recently developed MRI BOLD technique suggests widespread hippocampal, uncal, amgydalar, and neocortical damage consistent with blunt electroablation techniques used in early days of project. Administration is aware of these isolated deficits and they do not impact subject performance in field. Amygdalar ablation is likely a net benefit for subject. Reduced fear response to stimuli in field yields improvement in kill rate. Additional study of amygdalar ablation in further subjects recommended, with caution; history of persons who have naturalistic amygdalar ablation suggests possible issues with this methodology.

Scientific Defense Progress Committee #3-255-7 Update 1999-4-8

Updated genomic analysis techniques have not rendered any useful loci to pursue for further genetic analysis. Suggest recruitment of control condition and more thorough analysis with extended loci.

Scientific Defense Progress Committee #3-255-7 Update 2003-7-12

Completion of total human genomic analysis by external scientists suggests importance of completing whole-genome sequencing of subject. Recent findings from Western scientists suggest that antidepressant administration may speed regrowth of targeted hippocampal neurons. Recommend consideration of joint treatment with ECT to decrease skill loss.

Scientific Defense Progress Committee #3-255-7 Update 2005-4-24

More complete fMRI study indicates that subject’s hippocampal neurons regrow at rates far exceeding unenhanced human baseline, increased further by even brief antidepressant administration. Repeated electrical stimulation appears to be the only way to suppress long-term memory formation. Unclear whether long-term memories prior to early ECT could be recovered in extended absence of ECT. Early therapy was more comprehensive than later work. Considerable hippocampal and frontal neuroablation was documented.

Scientific Defense Progress Committee #3-255-7 Update 2009-5-22

Continued failure to identify genes of interest. Unclear what factors contributed to initial subject’s responsiveness to treatment. No subsequent subject has demonstrated equivalent effect. Closest responder is only at 15% of levels. Only three responders have been identified out of more than two
thousand total experimental candidates. Current genomic science is inadequate. Possible avenue of future research: epigenetic conditioning.

There was a woman, once, who seemed—familiar, somehow. Her hair blazed red in the sunlight; a weakness, a vanity that left her more visible than anyone who might end up on the other end of a sight should be. But the thought left, he let it go, as he sighted, and exhaled, and pulled the trigger.

They wiped him before they sent him out. He knew that. And they wiped him when he came back in. He knew that, too. He was starting to know that there was a pattern to the wipes, starting to feel it, as if somewhere his memories were crowding against a glass.

Scientific Defense Progress Committee #3-255-7 Update 2009-7-15

Successful deployment to Odessa. Target removed. Collateral damage minimal. Subject damaged in process. Recommend significant cryofreeze interval followed by brief but intense physical therapy regimen prior to next deployment. Showed intermittent recognition of trainee from subject loan to training department.

Steve’s mouth tasted fuzzy, fabric, cotton. There wasn’t supposed to—where—what happened? He remembered—what did he—oh, god. Putting the plane down. He shouldn’t. Where. He let his eyes drift open, blinking slowly, the sound of a radio penetrating.

It was—familiar. Oh, God. Oh, God.

White curtains, with a New York view out the window, soft light coming in, white radiators. Green and white walls. There was the radio, sputtering softly the wrong words, the wrong words.

A woman dressed as a nurse walked in. Tense, broadcasting it. Didn’t want to hurt her, didn’t want to—what was she even wearing? He’d never seen a bra like that before, visible through the thin fabric of her shirt. Christ.

“Where am I?” he asked, because it sounded like the kind of thing somebody should ask in this situation, because he wanted to know if she was going to lie.

She tried out a tentative smile. “You’re in a recovery room in New York City.”

He looked behind him, towards the window. It was obvious he was supposed to think that, but no.

“Where am I really?”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“The game. It’s from May, 1941. I know because I was there. So I’m going to ask you again. Where am I?”

“Captain Rogers.”

“Who are you?”

“Captain Rogers, wait! All agents, code 13! I repeat, all agents, code 13!”
He took off running, so focused on watching where he was going, keeping track of his feet, starting to feel a thrill of pure terror as the cars, the cars were different, what was this, that he almost didn’t recognize where he was when he plowed into Times Square.

Even through the fog and the rain, he knew it. Even looking—completely different.

A voice boomed out behind him, full of command: “At ease, soldier.” When he twisted around, he could see that it was a tall black man, bald, eyepatch. What the hell. None of the other countries involved had black men in command, what was happening? (He had a suspicion. It fit. It explained—it explained enough.)

“Look,” said the man with the eyepatch, “I’m sorry about that little show back there. We thought it best to break it to you slowly.”

“Break what?”

“You’ve been asleep, Cap. For almost seventy years.”

He started to ask, didn’t. Couldn’t.

“You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, just. I had a date.”

“Look,” said Fury, “we’ve got a cabin you can stay at.”

Steve ran a hand over his face. “Yeah? Until when?”

“Until you’ve had some time to get used to the idea of the brave new world.”

He stared blankly at Fury, and Fury sighed. “Sorry. Thought that reference would make sense.”

“It did. Tell me it’s figurative.”

“Well, we’re not selectively breeding anybody these days.”

“Good.”

“Probably the biggest change you’re going to see is something called the Internet. But to explain the Internet you’re going to need to know about computers. I would put you with Tony Stark to learn, but I have a feeling you’d want to set him on fire.”

“Stark?”

“Howard’s kid.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. Did you have any experience with something called a Turing machine, or a Bronze Goddess, back in the war?”

“Yeah. SSR had some equipment like that.”

“Great. Now imagine that dialed up to eleven. Then multiply that by several million times. That’s
what we’ve got now. Everybody’s got one. Most of us carry one around in our pocket that also works as a phone.”

Steve just stared. The Bronze Goddess had been for code-breaking. “What do you use it for?”

“That’s where the Internet comes in. It lets all our machines talk to each other. So I can look up any information I want. I can send messages to anyone. I figure you’ll need to know about this before you get to the cabin, because it’s wired for the Internet, so if you want to—and only if you want to—you can spend some time reading up on what’s happened.”

“Show me.”

Fury pulled a rectangular object out of his pocket—Steve had seen people holding those on the street, talking into them.

He slid it across the table to Steve. “Button on the side. Push it.”

Steve did, and the front lit up. He almost dropped it.

“Put your index finger over the button at the bottom.”

Steve did, and the screen pleasantly faded away from its first picture into a second picture. There were little pictures all over it, actually, like little tiles.

“Those are called ‘apps’ for ‘applications,’” said Fury. “They control what it does for you. The pictures are called ‘icons.’ Touch the second one from the left.”

It brought a new picture on, and Fury said, “See the space in the middle? Touch it, you’ll see something start blinking. That’s called a cursor. Once your cursor is in the space for text, you can type in whatever you want to know about and press ‘search.’”

Steve stared at it. “I don’t know where to start.”

“Try ‘news.’”

Steve did. Immediately the picture changed, and the small text that kept trailing off told him about a bewildering array of events.

“Those words, especially the ones that are underlined, are called ‘links’ because you can click on them—touch them, with screens like this—to read the article. You can go back to the page you were on before.”

Steve touched one, almost at random, and an article popped up. At least news still existed. It talked about somebody, a politician by context, doing something that sounded bad but involved a bunch of words he didn’t know.

“I want to show you how to go back to the search page,” said Fury, and he explained that, and made Steve search for a couple more things, and then said, “That’s actually your phone. We had them get one ready for you when we realized you were alive.”

Steve stared at it blankly.

“That’s why it’s keyed to your fingerprint. You can set a code so it doesn’t have to be you, but you will not use it for any non-secure communications. My phone number is in the address book.” Fury showed him which icon that was, that would let him dial or call. “Give it a try.”
Steve did, and Fury’s pocket rang, muffled. Fury tapped it and it stopped.

“Good. You call me if you have questions.”

“I’ve got a big one. What am I supposed to do now?”

“Take time to think about that.”

The jet touched down on a patch of grass the size of a handkerchief.

“Home away from home,” said Fury, tilting his head back to stare at the cabin.

It looked so small, and so calm, logs stacked neatly like something out of a storybook. Steve followed him up to it, in through the door.

The inside was quaint, too. Wooden beams on the ceiling, a kitchen tucked up against one wall. Armchairs with lamps beside them. It had a smell to it, must have been the old wood.

“There’s an invisible fence on the property,” said Fury. “Don’t want you to feel caged in. You want out, let me know.”

Steve nodded.

“Computer is over here. You can use this like we went over with your phone. Bigger, so it’s easier to read. Keyboard on this is just like the keyboard on your phone only easier.”

“Okay.”

“Should be enough food for a while in the fridge and cupboards. Let me know if you run low. We can send somebody in with supplies or they can take you shopping.”

“Shopping,” he said.

“Clothes are stocked for you in the closet. Figured you wouldn’t be up to going to a clothing store just yet.”

“You measure me in my sleep?”

Fury’s lip quirked in recognition. “Not personally, but our doctors track every damn thing.”

Steve’s face eased a little.

“Anyway, I’ll get out of here. Let you get settled in.”

It was funny. Brooklyn was never quiet, when he was growing up, and then Europe had been such a crap-shoot during the war. Sometimes it was dead silent, not even birds, and sometimes it was a booming hellhole when all you wanted was to grab a couple of minutes of shut-eye.

The cabin was quiet. Really quiet. Deep, still silence, like a pool, surrounding him.

He sat in one of the armchairs—it was godawful on his back—and tried to read one of the paperbacks littered around the cabin, but gave up around midnight and sat down in front of the
FDR hadn’t lived to see the end of the war, had barely outlasted Steve. It seemed incredibly unfair.

Eisenhower had been elected President after the war, that was something. He’d been a good general.

He was finally ready to sleep when it got to be light out. It had still been the war, when he left. He’d been sleeping on the ground for months. They figured it was seventy years ago but to him it was—it was the day before yesterday.

There was a ratty knitted blanket draped over one of the couches. He spread it out on the floor, curled up on it, pulled it over himself.

He fell asleep pretty easily, all things considered.

The next couple of weeks felt pretty much the same. He got used to the quiet, after a while, even though it felt like it was going to drive him nuts.

He chopped wood for the fire, even though it wasn’t really cold enough for it. Something to do.

He didn’t go swimming. No urge to.

Read a lot. Spent whole days reading on the Internet, reading about all the things that had happened, had changed. Stared in mute horror at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The arc of Sputnik’s launch across the sky. He realized his face was wet when he got to the part where Martin Luther King, Jr., was murdered. Humans walked on the moon. And killed each other, in huge and horrifying ways. H-bomb tests, because the shadows of humans burned into wrecked buildings wasn’t enough. Drones. Women were in all the fields now, Peggy would have loved that, would have loved to see a woman running for President. Maybe she had. There were some things he wasn’t looking up just yet. He’d tried looking up Gertie, figuring that couldn’t hurt too much, but he found her obituary right off the bat and he had to shut the computer down before he broke it.

He looked up the top movies from each decade and watched them. He had to turn off White Christmas partway through and go do enough calisthenics to sweat like a horse before he could stand to finish it. The Sound of Music was baffling, saccharine. How could they look back at the war like this, all soft focus and gentle colors? Every time a branch snapped outside he was ready to kill. Star Wars wasn’t bad, even if it was kind of silly. He had no idea how they did half the things they managed with it. There was more than one Star Wars movie. It looked like they were all pretty popular, from the seventies through the nineties, so he just went ahead and watched them all in release order. He could have done without the prequels. Titanic was ridiculous but he found his heart pounding when Jack died anyway. Avatar was pretty (but made no sense).

Sometimes he’d text Fury. Groceries running low. Send some in. Once, when he couldn’t sleep, What the hell was Vietnam?

Fury replied Hell if I know, soldier.

He jerked upright in the middle of the night, once, more than once, clawing ice that wasn’t there away from his mouth, his eyes.

It had been—had it been in his lungs?
He watched news footage of other heroes. And similar things. A man in a metal suit; it reminded him of Zola’s exoskeleton experiments. The man inside had Howard Stark’s eyes, though he was older than Steve had lived to see Howard get.

Howard was dead. Steve knew that. It was. It settled uneasily.

Howard hadn’t been happy, it didn’t look like. Which was not how Steve would have guessed things would go. Howard had been so young, a lech, a ridiculous man, and here was his son, a grimly facetious man in his—forties?

Steve thought, *If I’d had a child,* and left it at that.

There were memories, vague and faint, buzzing around him, voices buzzing around him, *He’s alive,* and he tried to scrub them away in the shower. Water cranked up so hot it turned his skin red, and he got out looking like a boiled lobster.

Howard’s bright, friendly eyes. Howard had liked everyone (just a couple—just a couple of weeks ago), even if they gave him reasons not to. Howard was like a puppy, and by the end of his life, that wasn’t what he looked like, anymore.

He steeled himself for it and made himself look up the Commandos, one by one, except for Bucky—he knew how that ended. By the time he was finished with that he had to go outside and split wood. Had to swing the axe over and over again until his skin finally blistered.

*(Wert capable of war, its tug and trials? be capable of peace, its trials,

*For the tug and mortal strain of nations come at last in prosperous peace, not war;)*

“We’ve got an apartment for you for the month,” said Fury. “You don’t have to stick with it if it doesn’t work for you.”

Steve couldn’t think of a good reason to suggest anywhere else to live, so he didn’t. He just went with it.

It was practically a hotel room, not really a place to live in long-term. He had money, Fury had told him, *Not your full back pay, soldier.*

He texted Fury *this place looks like the hotels in the movies from the 80s*

Fury replied *finding yourself a place might do you good*

He wasn’t wrong, so Steve picked up a newspaper the next time he managed to make it out for a walk, and he started browsing the want ads. This was probably on the Internet, too. But at least there were still some ads in print.

He kept his dress uniform in the corner. Ready. For what, he didn’t know. Most days, it felt like it was watching him, judging him.

He bought a box of books at a flea market. He had to leave, almost immediately, because it was too much; too many people, the light was too bright. But he got the box of books.

When he got it back to the apartment he checked the spines, but none of them were familiar.
He said the Lord’s Prayer before bed each night, like he hadn’t since his mother had been alive. He managed not to say, or even think very loudly, *What did I ever do to You?*

Fury called him as he got to his front door, just to say, “Had some people of mine drop off a package for you. On your kitchen table.”

He looked down. It was on his table, right—like a soft threat, *you aren’t safe here.* He picked it up, carried it inside. When he opened it, it felt like a slap to the face.

Nothing but the files of his friends. Team. Peggy, God, Peggy. And Howard’s son. Steve felt old, felt so old to the core of his bones. His hand twitched, nervously, he had to run it across his mouth; for a second he’d felt a shuddering lurch of nausea.

“We’ve got free wireless,” she said.

“Radio?” he said, and it took a second for his brain to catch up. Right. Internet. *Wireless* meant something else now, always would. She was smiling, not understanding, walking away.

Radio wasn’t the same, anyway. He’d listened to some of it out at the cabin, over the Internet, and none of it was like it should be. Nothing was funny. It was either men so angry they were screaming or people talking in soft, too-serious voices about things that had to do with political issues he mostly didn’t understand.

What he wouldn’t give for one good radio station.

He hadn’t realized, quite, that this was Iron Man’s building. But maybe he had.

“Ask for her number, ya moron,” grumbled an old man sitting next to him. Between that and the waitress, that was just about enough of other people for the day.

“We’re concerned about your repeated exposure to concussive blasts,” said the pleasant young woman doctor.

Fury had roped him into a physical. *Just to check you out. See how you’re thawing.*

“Okay,” he said, cautiously.

“IED—I’m sorry, that’s improvised explosive devices—are one of the biggest sources of health problems for veterans coming back from the Middle East at this point. If people are exposed to repeated explosions, it can be like getting concussions. If you get a lot of them, especially in a short time period, it can do permanent damage.”

He nodded along. They wanted to do something called an MRI, look at his brain.

“Sure,” he said. “Why not.”
When he got the results back, they were surprised: he’d told them straight out that he’d been around explosives regularly since he’d started command. He should have had the brain damage they were talking about. Instead, his brain was “pristine,” said the doctor, sounding a little like she was talking about a—a temple, maybe, or a lake. “Your brain looks so good we could put a picture of it in a textbook.”

He smiled lopsidedly at her. “I’d rather you didn’t,” he said, “I’m already in more textbooks than I think I’m strictly speaking comfortable with.”

“Oh!” Her hand flew to her mouth. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“You didn’t. It’s just, I’m ready to be out of spotlight for a while.”

She nodded, but he could see she didn’t really understand.

He kept working on catching up on history, which was how he was studying President Reagan (that was ridiculous, he’d seen Ronald Reagan in This Is the Army, and he was just fine as an actor but a President?), which was how he hit the AIDS crisis at two in the morning on a Saturday night.

_The condition was identified in 1981, the novel retrovirus in 1983. Reagan’s failure to respond during the AIDS crisis was seen by gay Americans as a fundamental betrayal._

And gay Americans—he’d heard the word in the war, who hadn’t—but mostly it was still _fairies_ and _queers_, nancies and sissies, faggots. But here were _gay Americans_, asking for something, _demanding_ something, and he clicked through to images that made his breath catch in his throat, _Silence = Death_. The back of a jacket that said _If I die – forget burial – just drop my body on the steps of the F.D.A._

_The artist, David Wojnarowicz, became involved in AIDS-related activism after the death of his lover, photographer Peter Hujar._

He found that he was crying, without meaning to or noticing.

There were too many bodies, emaciated, like other bodies he’d seen before; like other victims of neglect and injustice he’d seen before.

The articles on the gay rights movement were full of pictures, people wearing rainbows, carrying signs and flags. They looked fierce. They looked angry.

_After World War II, homophile, or homosexual rights, organizations became increasingly visible—and vocal._

Why after? Why?

_When transgender women, lesbians, drag queens, and gay male patrons, including such notable activists of color as Marsha P. Johnson, resisted police at Stonewall Inn, they launched a series of confrontations with authority that is often taken to define the beginning of the modern gay rights movement._

And there were other things, other—

_Bisexuals were often associated with HIV as “carriers,” transmitting the disease from the homosexual to the heterosexual population. A stigma related to perceived promiscuity and_
untruthfulness developed around bisexuality.

He didn’t make it to bed until six in the morning, and even then, he didn’t really sleep. His head was churning with new words and old pictures.

Wikipedia had an entire page on the history of the gay rights movement in New York alone. There was basically nothing between 1923 (law prohibiting “loitering for sodomy” within city limits) and 1942 (lobotomization of a man convicted of sodomy). There should have been more—there had been the drag balls, hadn’t there? Even the Times had covered those. And—but there was so much more to read.

*The Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act, first introduced in 1971, was ultimately passed by the Assembly in 2002, granting gay New Yorkers protection from harassment discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.*

*The Marriage Equality Act, which legalized same-sex marriage in the state of New York, was passed on June 15, 2011.*

He went running for hours. Almost the whole day. When he came back, soaked in sweat, he stood in the shower and rested his head against the glass.

2011, he thought. *I thought. I didn’t think it would ever be.*

And the flamers, the real limp-wristed pansies, in the pictures they were there with the butch men and the dykes and feminine women you’d never clock as lesbians, and they were holding the signs, and they looked so strong: however thin, slight, small, they looked like giants.

He watched a clip from an interview with some gay people in the 1970s—a white interviewer sitting next to a black man, a white man, a white woman. “We talk about coming out as though it was—for some reason I think of the Bionic Man, the six-million dollar man, you know, I’m going to go through this operation and change completely, but in fact it’s a process of tearing down a lot of things, a lot of things that have been built up, what Donald’s talking about, the lies, the sort of jeopardized relationships, the sense of strain, and if you can get through, I would imagine, the moment, and keep the family together, it turns out, basically, that the people don’t change, that you’ve got the same person.”

The woman broke in on the interviewer. “These three words, I am gay, turns most families into such bedlam. They just go—Most parents feel guilty. What did I do? What did I do wrong? And they shouldn’t feel that way, because there are no guilt feelings—there shouldn’t be, anyway.”

The interview nodded wisely. “From generation to generation, according to Kinsey, it’s a very consistent figure. And it’s not hereditary, it’s not—but it’s just that about ten percent of the population has a homosexual experience and stays with it. It’s just there. It seems to be a question of society’s recognition.”

He went to the Met just to have something to do. There was an exhibit called *Breaking the Color Barrier in Major League Baseball.*

A black man named Jackie Robinson—he’d run across the name when he was reading about the Civil Rights movement. It had been the Dodgers, even, who signed him on first. That was a source of some pride. He could remember the blazing sun and stifling air on game days; the rattling of the
bleachers under their feet, the crisp crack of a ball off the bat. Watching Davis wind up, leaning forward with anticipation. ’40 had been a good year. Robinson had been signed in ’47. He’d been close to seeing that, at least.

But was it better to see it now, from this angle? To look back and know that at least in sports, blacks were finally welcome? Whatever else was still wrong, whatever else was still fundamentally unjust—however incomplete the work—there were black athletes on the television, whenever he tuned it to the sports channels. On the news black men were being shot by police but nobody said the word lynching.

He browsed the brilliantly-colored playing cards, and thought that at least it was something, to see this.

The oldest national bisexuality organization in the United States, BiNet, was founded in 1990.

In 2005, bisexual activists and advocates met with the editor of the science section of the New York Times over a controversial report on a study by J. Michael Bailey, claiming to demonstrate that male bisexuality was not real. Later work showed serious methodological flaws; ultimately, that study was rejected by the scientific community.

He paid more attention when he was out on errands. Now that he was looking for it, it was easier to see: people holding hands who wouldn’t have, before he went under. Men holding hands, women holding hands. Mixed-race couples. The Times had a wedding announcement section and there was a profile on an Indian-American woman and her Jewish bride. He left that one open on his table all day, kept coming back to it. They beamed out from the pictures, wearing their happiness clearer than beauty.

It was hard to tell with men on the street. Sometimes they looked like the sissies he remembered, hips swaying as they walked, but sometimes the ones he would have pegged as sissies were holding hands with women.

Whole new century. New everything. New ways to be a man, he supposed.

He went to the war memorial in Battery Park. There weren’t going to be any familiar names. That was all right. Maybe that was why he went there.

Of him I love day and night I dream’d I heard he was dead,
And I dream’d I went where they had buried him I love, but he was not in that place,
And I dream’d I wander’d searching among burial-places to find him,
And I found that every place was a burial-place;
The houses full of life were equally full of death, (this house is now)
Steve was beating the hell out of a punching bag. He had another batch of bags all lined up, ready for him. He’d learned that lesson.

Every time he pulled a fist back there was another picture, another little piece of something, his brain snagging on it like fabric on a nail.

Peggy’s face. The sound of her fist in Hodge’s face the sound of his fist connecting with the bag. Bucky’s finger resting loosely next to the trigger. He still couldn’t, didn’t want to think about things, put them together in sequence, Bucky’s finger resting by the trigger. Bucky’s forearm lightly tanned, Bucky’s shoulders shaking with cold or fatigue or laughter, Bucky’s face—he hit the bag again and again, harder and harder.

“Oh my God, this guy’s still alive!” He hadn’t remembered that when he first woke up in the fake recovery room, and still couldn’t be sure if it was real of not. Maybe his brain had made it up to fill in the blank space. Or maybe that was really how they’d sounded. Shocked. Of course they were shocked. He was supposed to be dead. He was supposed to be dead.

The bag ripped. Well, exploded. He went to hang up another one, started to lay into that one, too. It wasn’t, wasn’t adrenaline he was feeling, just something ugly and vast.

Bucky had told him it’s hell and he figured he’d never properly appreciated that. There’d been things to do. Nazis to stop. A plane to catch. He should have been dead.

The voice boomed from behind him, but he didn’t jump. “Trouble sleeping?”

“Slept for seventy years, sir. Think I had my fill.” A few more punches.

“Then you should be out. Celebrating. Seeing the world.” Fury was walking steadily towards him. He looked up, finally.

“I went under.” He turned away, started to untape his hands. “The world was at war. I wake up, they say we won. They didn’t say what we lost.” He grabbed his gym bag carelessly, opening it.

“We’ve made some mistakes along the way.” Fury was talking directly to him, voice weighty, measured. Rehearsed. “Some very recently.”

Ah. Mistakes. “You here with a mission, sir?”

“I am.”

“Trying to get me back in the world?”

“Trying to save it,” Fury said crisply. He held out a file. Steve took it, left off his bag, sat down. It was filled with pictures of the Tesseract.

And wasn’t that something. After spending all that time at the cabin and then in his lifeless apartment wondering what he was going to do with the war being over, the war wasn’t, really, over.

“HYDRA’s secret weapon.”

“Howard Stark fished that out of the ocean when he was looking for you. He thought what we think: the Tesseract could be the key to unlimited sustainable energy. That’s something the world sorely needs.”

He glanced up with hostile eyes. “Who took it from you?”
“He’s called Loki. He’s... not from around here. There’s a lot we’ll have to bring you up to speed on, if you’re in. The world has gotten even stranger than you already know.”

He looked away, standing up. “At this point I doubt anything would surprise me.”

“Ten bucks says you’re wrong.” Punching bag hoisted over his shoulder and gym bag in hand, he started to leave. Fury said, “There’s a debriefing package waiting for you back at your apartment.” He waited for a beat before adding, “Is there anything you can tell us about the Tesseract we ought to know now?”

“You should have left it in the ocean.”

He was walking away when Fury spoiled his exit by talking again. “Car for you, tomorrow morning at 0600.”

Steve nodded tightly.
The briefing packet was on his table, just where the files on his dead friends had been.

That night he didn’t sleep much. He made himself a pot of oatmeal and watched the news. Once he’d used the Internet to help him figure out how to set up the TV, he’d turned it on sometimes. It was loud, and bright, and not funny, either, no substitute for the radio. But it had the news, and he could catch up a little.

There was nothing on the news that suggested why Fury was bringing him in. They were talking about the Great Recession again, which pissed him off ever since he’d looked it up. He could understand it, and it was fucking stupid and irresponsible, is what it was. Talking about bad apples in a barrel—it was just assholes with money, like it always had been.

He was waiting on the curb at 0600 exactly. It was brisk—not bad, the spring air just a little wet, penetrating. The car that rolled up was sleek, black, driven by someone in a black suit.

“Sir,” said the driver, holding the door for him. His lips twitched in a spasm of amused disgust, and he climbed in, scooting over the soft give of the black leather, buckling in. Fury insisted on the seatbelt; Steve was getting used to it.

The ride in to the helipad was silent.

“Hello, Captain,” said a thin man with thinning hair, holding out his hand when Steve got out of the car. “I’m Agent Coulson. I’ll be escorting you.”

“Thank you,” said Steve, shaking the offered hand gingerly. Coulson was practically vibrating with tension, but it didn’t look like the kind of tension he’d need to worry about. It just looked like—a fan, like the ones that used to touch his hand or hair or sleeve on the street. He was briefly, uncomfortably aware of his hair slicked back, like nobody he walked by seemed to wear it now, his brown leather jacket baggy where it wasn’t tight on his shoulders. He didn’t have the energy to put into looking like a hero. Not that day. Marlene would have said Get a grip, sugar, you’re going to let the good people down and Steve would have said What good people? and she would have laughed: You can be a mean bitch, sweetie.

Steve settled in for the trip, and Coulson handed him a tablet. (He was learning all the new words, fast, for lack of anything better to do.) “Fury would like you to review some footage on the way in,” said Coulson, looking serious.

Steve nodded. Some of it he’d seen before—the Hulk—but some of it was new, and he watched it all carefully. You didn’t formulate strategies by skimming. The Hulk tore through buildings like they were paper, left bleeding civilians in its wake. One woman’s arm came off like—he’d seen something like that, in Italy—it was like heavy artillery damage. News reports tended not to include the footage of the dying. Fury had left it in. Fury liked to make a point. The point was made.

They’d left land behind and been over water for a few minutes when he heard, “Forty minutes out.” Coulson got up and walked over, stepping carefully as the jet twitched and bucked.

Steve was leaning back, uncomfortable; the quinjet bench wasn’t like the ones on his planes a couple of weeks (decades) ago. “So this Dr. Banner was trying to replicate the serum they used on me?”
“A lot of people were. You were the world’s first superhero. Banner thought gamma radiation might hold the key to unlocking Erskine’s original formula.”

Steve’s gaze dropped back to the video of the Hulk. “Didn’t really go his way, did it?”

“Not so much. When he’s not that thing, though, guy’s like a Stephen Hawking.” Steve glanced up, and Coulson visibly winced a little as he realized Steve hadn’t understood him. “...he’s like a really smart person. I gotta say, it’s an honor to meet you. Officially. I sort of met you, I mean, I watched you while you were sleeping.”

Sleeping. Steve had to stand up at that; it itched under his skin. He walked past Coulson, who half-followed to lean against the bulkhead, babbling nervously.

“I mean, I was, I was present while you were unconscious. From the ice. You know, it’s really, it’s just a huge honor to have you on board, is...”

Steve peered out over the water. Rippling, silver-gray, beautiful in a way he hadn’t seen in daylight in—months? Ever? Flights over the Channel had been mostly strategic. There’d been the first flight out with the girls, to Italy, but that felt so far away. “Well, I hope I’m the man for the job.”

“Oh, you are. Absolutely.” Coulson was nodding too intensely. “Uh. We’ve made some modifications to the uniform. I had a little—design input.” He looked self-conscious but a little pleased.

“The uniform?” Steve had to frown through the sudden memory hitting him like a sucker punch, you’re keeping the uniform, though, right? “Aren’t the stars and stripes a little... old-fashioned?”

“Everything that’s happening, the things that are about to come to light? People might just need a little old-fashioned.”

Steve hummed thoughtfully, said nothing. After a minute he went back to sit down, and this time Coulson didn’t follow. He closed his eyes like he was going to sleep. He didn’t, quite, but it was nice to let it fuzz out a little.

“We’re arriving, Captain,” said Coulson, and Steve nodded and got ready.

The jet touched down on the carrier’s deck, a familiar shudder, soft brief groan of metal. It made him—nostalgic, if nostalgia was the right word for something that happened a couple of months/decades/months ago.

Coulson introduced him to a woman who walked up, red hair shining in the sun. Her mouth was set, firm but mocking. “Agent Romanoff. Captain Rogers.”

“Ma’am.” It occurred to him a split second too late that he didn’t know if that was the appropriate greeting anymore, or for her. She wasn’t anything like Peggy. She looked like she was laughing at them, no military stiffness to her.

“Hi.” She looked at Coulson and jerked her head toward the body of the ship. “They need you on the bridge. They’re starting the face trace.”

“See you there.” Coulson hurried off.

“It was quite the buzz around here, finding you in the ice. I thought Coulson was going to swoon.”
She walked confidently, passing under the cooler shade of a jet wing. Steve could feel a little smile on his mouth; Coulson’s adoration had been something he could have done without. “Did he ask you to sign his Captain America trading cards yet?”

“They’re vintage.” She stressed it, still looking amused. “He’s very proud.”

He spotted a face familiar from the footage and raised his voice just enough to carry over the wind. “Dr. Banner.”

Banner was standing near another jet, looking confused, stepping back. Steve reached for Banner’s hand and shook it. Warm and a little sweaty.

“Ahh, hi.” Banner looked Steve up and down. “They told me you’d be coming.”

“Oh, is that the only word on me?” Banner drawled, a little bitterly.

“The only word I care about.”

Banner’s lips tightened. “This must be strange for you, all of this.”

Steve looked back, out over the crew marching, the rattling of ropes and chains and the smell of salt water, the uniforms not what he remembered but not so far off. “Well, actually, this is kind of familiar.”

On their way in, the noise from the turbines was kicking up, but Steve managed to say, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Banner.”

Banner laughed again. “Hold on to that thought.”

Steve followed Agent Romanoff onto the bridge. Banner was on his left, quiet but surely dangerous, visibly nervous. Steve looked around; he was surrounded by technology everywhere, some of it that made sense, some that didn’t, people chattering into headsets. He tilted his head back to look up at the ceiling. So far up, glass set into metal. He could feel himself almost smiling at it. Such a pristine space. Like a cathedral in the sky.

“We’re at level, sir.”

“Good,” said Fury. “Let’s vanish.”

The woman said something about engaging the panels, and the ship rippled, and Steve watched as every visible part of it disappeared from the sky. When Fury walked by him, Steve passed him ten bucks, still staring around him.

Fury was checking in with Dr. Banner. Coulson, catching the conversation, said, “We’re sweeping every wirelessly accessible camera on the planet. Cellphones, laptops. If it’s connected to a satellite, it’s eyes and ears for us.”

Every camera with an internet connection. Every one of them. Good Lord. Fury might have been wrong about it not being Brave New World yet.
They were talking a little more, Banner making suggestions, Steve still just looking around. Nothing for him to do yet, no one to hit. Banner took off his jacket like a man getting ready to settle in.

“Agent Romanoff, show Dr. Banner to his laboratory, please.”

“You’re gonna love it, Doc. We’ve got all the toys.”

After they left, Steve just—stuck around. Watching the people work. There wasn’t anywhere else for him to be, really, and he had plenty of practice in waiting around. 

_Hurry up and wait._ Bucky would say, rolling his eyes when they had hauled ass to get somewhere only to find that transport wasn’t ready yet, or they needed to wait for a different time of day. His brain scattered a handful of images for him, things they used to do while they were waiting, _drinking eating playing cards reading sketching talking_, and if none of the others were there, if they were, _there was time for_ and he cut that train of thought off ruthlessly. He took of his jacket, hung it on the back of an unused chair.

Coulson came up to stand beside him. Steve felt himself tensing up, folded his arms over his chest to try to hide it. Coulson, maybe copying him intentionally, or maybe just catching the mood, crossed his arms and said, “Captain. What do you think of the helicarrier?”

“It’s really something.”

“When we first got the specs for her, we thought it was going to be—insane. Maybe impossible. But we made her work, and the engineers celebrated afterwards like there was no tomorrow.”

Steve felt his face crack into a little bit of a smile despite himself. He could imagine it, after all: the engineers staring in amazement as this thing they made came up out of the water and flew, like a miracle.

Coulson saw the smile, out of the corner of his eye, and his face lit up. Steve immediately wished he could take it back.

“I was wondering,” began Coulson, “if you might have a chance—if there’s time—to—I’ve got some Captain America trading cards. I know it might seem silly, but I’d be very grateful if you could sign them.”

“Of course,” said Steve.

“I mean, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“No, no. It’s fine.”

Coulson was looking at him, turning just slightly. Still nervous, but excited, clearly. “It’s a vintage set. Took me a couple of years to collect them all. Near mint!” Steve glanced over, reluctantly making eye contact. _Didn’t raise my boy to be rude_, his ma’s voice in the back of his mind. “Slight foxing around the edges, but—”

Somebody rescued him by saying loudly, “Got a hit! Sixty-seven percent match. Wait, cross match. Seventy-nine percent.”

It was definitely Loki, crazed glint in his eye and all. The location was in Stuttgart.

Fury looked to him with his good eye. “Captain. You’re up.”

Coulson said, “Your gear is this way, Captain.” All business, now, briskly shepherding Steve down a hallway to a room with what looked like storage lockers. Coulson gestured at one, and when he
touched the door, it beamed a green light over his fingertips and then opened for him. The suit was hanging there, not quite the way he remembered. Waiting for him.

He grabbed the gear out of the locker, bundling it gracelessly into his arms, and got ready to change on the way. He didn’t miss the way Coulson’s eyes lit up.

On the jet, he stripped and climbed into the suit. The pilot was focused out the front; Agent Romanoff kept her eyes forward until he had pulled on the lower half and was dealing with the top. She turned around and smirked.

“Call me Natasha,” she said, “since we’re sharing this moment of intimacy.”

He laughed out loud, surprising himself, as he fitted the cowl over his head, tugging it to get it into position. “Call me Steve if you want to.”

“The new uniform is more weapons-resistant than you’re used to. Weight a little heavier.”

“Thanks for the scoop.”

She smirked again, but didn’t say anything.

He dropped out of the quinjet lightly, not far from the site. Natasha had brought him in so low he could just jump and land on the roof of a building, and he made his way across the rooftops until he had a good view down at Loki, taunting the civilians.

“There are always men like you,” said the old man. Loki raised his scepter, getting ready to fire it. It was some kind of energy weapon, then.

As Loki fired Steve dropped the ground between them, the light bouncing back off the shield.

“You know,” said Steve, voice booming, project, enunciate, “the last time I was in Germany and saw a man standing above everybody else, we ended up disagreeing.”

Loki had a thin, pretty face; his armor and finery kept wavering in and out of being around him, wavering. “The soldier. The man out of time.”

“I’m not the one who’s out of time.”

The quinjet loomed over them. Natasha had the guns out, ready to fire, “Loki, drop the weapon and stand down.”

It wasn’t that easy, of course. Loki fought dirty.

There was a flash of light like a comet, arcing across the sky, and before Steve could really register it, it resolved into a suit of red and gold armor. Stark came in hard with a punch that sent Loki flying, and then, as weapons bristled all over his suit, said, “Make a move, Reindeer Games.”

Loki glanced at the equipment and, somehow managing to look faintly bored, put up his hands.

“Good move.”

“Mr. Stark,” said Steve, panting as he stood next to him.

“Captain.” They glanced at each other sidelong.
Steve was getting irritated with Stark. Almost immediately. It was unfortunate, but he was trying to tell Stark why this was a bad sign—and Stark wasn’t *listening*, not really—

“Still,” said Stark in his fast mumble, “you are pretty spry for an older fellow. What’s your thing? Pilates?”

Steve said, “*What*?”

“It’s like calisthenics. You might have missed a couple things, you know, doing time as a Capsicle.”

This was, somehow, *worse than dealing with Coulson*. Steve’s mouth tightened. “Fury didn’t tell me he was calling you in.”

“Yeah. There’s a lot of things Fury doesn’t tell you.”

Lightning started to crash around the quinjet, which set an ominous mood. The blond giant who came in, punched Stark, grabbed Loki, and left was new.

“Stark!” Steve yelled. “We need a plan of attack!”

“I have a plan. Attack.” And with that, Stark just—didn’t even jump, *accelerated* out of the back. Show-off asshole in a tin can. Steve gritted his teeth and grabbed a chute.

Natasha yelled back over her shoulder, “I’d sit this one out, Cap! These guys come from legend. They’re basically gods.”

“There’s only one God, ma’am.” (*Forgive me Father for I have scent of incense the swinging censer be with us sinners now and*) “And I’m pretty sure he doesn’t dress like that.” He grabbed his shield and jumped.

It took him a couple of minutes to follow and find them—the extra time in the air meant he fell forward of their position—but the noise of fighting was pretty much unmistakable. Grown men acting like children.

“Hey!” He flung the shield, watched it rebound off their fists. “That’s enough!” Steve yelled, and slid his shield back onto his arm. “Now, I don’t know what you plan on doing here.”

Fighting, evidently. Steve lifted his shield to block him, feeling, for a brief second, at peace.

The energy blast that followed was enough to knock them all off their feet and flatten trees around them.

“Are we done here?” asked Steve.

They were.

“That’s enough? Are we done here?” muttered Stark when they were back in the jet, headed to the helicarrier. “You sound like a dad. Not *my* dad, specifically, just a dad, an archetype of dad-ness. I understand you knew mine. Please note that I have no particular desire to talk about him.”

“Noted,” said Steve, leaning back against the wall.

If only that had been enough to shut Stark up.
Back on the helicarrier, listening to Fury talk to Loki, Steve thought that if he could still get headaches, this would do it. He leaned on the table, watching Loki through the screen. Gauntlets still on; a little heavier, like Romanoff had said.

Banner had a pinched look to his mouth. “He really grows on you, doesn’t he?”

“Loki’s going to drag this out,” said Steve. “So. Thor. What’s his play?”

“He has an army,” said Thor, and Steve could feel his shoulders tightening, “called the Chitauri. They are not of Asgard nor any world known. He means to lead them against your people. They will win him the Earth. In return, I suspect, for the Tesseract.”

“An army. From outer space.”

If that didn’t fucking beat all. The others were talking softly about Loki’s plans, power, someone named Selvig. Steve broke in.

“I want to know why Loki let us take him. He’s not leading an army from here,” he said, twisting to glance back at Banner.

Banner was shaking his head. “I don’t think we should be focusing on Loki. That guy’s brain is a bag full of cats. You can smell crazy on him.”

Thor took exception, of course, but Banner kept following the thought.

“I think it’s about the mechanics. Iridium. What do they need the iridium for?”

“It’s a stabilizing agent.” Stark’s voice boomed out as he rolled in. Great. Murmuring a soft aside to Coulson about a vacation. (Were they—no. Pepper Potts. Peggy. No.) He started in about what the iridium was for, rambling.

Steve could catch enough to know what the next obvious question would be: a target. “Does Loki need any particular kind of power source?”

Banner’s voice came from behind him. “He’d have to heat the cube to 120 million Kelvin just to break through the cooling barrier.”

“Unless Selvig has figured out how to stabilize the quantum tunneling effect.”

“Well,” drawled Banner, “if he could do that, he could achieve heavy ion fusion at any reactor on the planet.”

“Finally, someone who speaks English.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Is that what just happened?”

“It’s good to meet you, Dr. Banner. Your work on electron collisions is unparalleled. And I’m a huge fan of the way you lose control and turn into an enormous green rage-monster.” It was nice, in a way, to know that Stark was as big an asshole to other people as he was to Steve.

“...Thanks.”

Fury strode up to them. “Dr. Banner is only here to track the cube. I was hoping you might join him.”

Steve said, “Start with that stick of his. It may be magical, but it works an awful lot like a HYDRA
“weapon.”

“I don’t know about that. But it is powered by the cube. And I’d like to know how Loki used it to turn two of the sharpest men I know into his own personal flying monkeys.”

“Monkeys?” asked Thor, frowning. “I do not understand.”

“I do!” Steve had pointed his finger. There was a second of heavy silence as he couldn’t keep the little smirk off his lips. “I—I understood that reference.” He glanced back toward Stark and Banner, brain suddenly playing *ding dong the witch is dead* for him. Stark looked skeptical and unamused. Like he wasn’t the one going on absurd diatribes.

“Shall we play, Doctor?” asked Stark.

“This way, sir.”

“...I promise a stress-free environment,” Stark was saying as Steve got to the lab. “No tension. No surprises.” Stark jabbed a little wand into Banner's side.

“Ow!”

“Hey!” Steve said sharply as he headed for them.

“Nothing?” asked Stark, raising his eyebrows inquisitively. Banner was half-smiling as he turned away, shaking his head.

Steve said, “Are you nuts?”

“Jury’s out.” Stark ignored him, leaning into Banner’s space. “You really have got a lid on it, haven’t you? What’s your secret? Mellow jazz? Bongo drums? Huge bag of weed?”

“Is everything a joke to you?” asked Steve.

Stark kept sassing him until he finally got to the point, and then took the point farther. “...once my decryption program finishes breaking in to all of SHIELD’s secure files.”

Steve said, voice going up in hard angry shock, “I’m sorry, did you say—”

“Jarvis has been running it since I hit the bridge. In a few hours I’ll know every dirty secret SHIELD has ever tried to hide. Blueberry?” He thrust the bag at Steve. Steve ignored it.

“Yet you’re confused about why they didn’t want you around.”

“An intelligence agency that fears intelligence?” Steve looked away in annoyance, shoulders rolling back, but Stark continued blithely, “Historically, not awesome.”

Steve said, “I think Loki’s trying to wind us up. This is a man who means to start a war, and if we don’t stay focused, he’ll succeed.” He looked back and forth between them. “We have orders. We should follow them.”

“Following's not really my style,” said Stark, palming a handful of blueberries into his mouth.

An irritated sigh slipped out from Steve. “And you’re all about style, aren’t you.”
“Steve.” Banner sounded infuriatingly calm and reasonable, placating. “Tell me none of this smells a little funky to you.”

*Of course it does.* “Just find the cube.” When Steve got the door, he glanced up and down the corridor.

Behind him, through the door, he heard Stark mutter, “That’s the guy my dad never shut up about? I’m wondering if they shouldn’t have kept him on ice.”

Steve had to put his full weight into it to open the door to the secure storage area. He could have used Dernier then; wire it up a little, blow it—but then, maybe locks were different now, too. Everything with a damn computer in it. Even the doors.

The room was full of metal crates. *Packed* full. And the crates looked familiar, didn’t they, materiel he’d seen during the war. If they were just ordinary supplies, Steve would leave. He’d do what Fury had asked, threatened, and goaded them into.

He got one of the crates free and lifted a lid. The first thing he fucking saw was a HYDRA mask, like a sucker punch. Go figure. *Go fucking figure.*

“What *is* Phase 2?” Stark was saying as Steve came into the lab behind them, soundlessly.

Steve slammed a gun down on the table, lip curling in disgust. “Phase 2 is SHIELD uses the cube to make weapons. Sorry. The computer was moving a little slow for me.”

Fury started in immediately. “Rogers, we gathered everything related to the Tesseract. This does not mean that we made—”

Stark cut Fury off, spinning a glass screen around with diagrams of weapons. “I’m sorry, Nick, what were you lying?”

“I was wrong, Director,” Steve bit out. “The world hasn’t changed a bit.”

“Did you know about this?” Banner said to Romanoff as she and Thor walked in.

They fought, bitterly. Banner sounded cold, distant. Every word landed like a rock. “I’d like to know why SHIELD is using the Tesseract to build *weapons of mass destruction.*”

Fury blamed it all on Thor. “And you’re not the only threat. The world’s filling up with people who can’t be matched. Who can’t be controlled.”

“Like you controlled the Cube?” asked Steve sharply.

There was an angry hubbub of voices, growing, until Banner’s voice rang out over the rest of them.

“It’s his M.O., isn’t it? I mean, what are we, a team? No, no, no. We’re a chemical mixture that makes chaos. We’re—we’re a time bomb.”

“You need to step away,” says Fury.

“Why shouldn’t the guy let off a little steam?” said Stark, flailing out an arm, clapping Steve on the shoulder.
Steve shook off the hand. “You know damn well why! Back off!”

“Oh, I’m starting to want you to make me.”

“Big man in a suit of armor. Take that off, what are you?”

“Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.”

“I know guys with none of that worth ten of you.” (Don’t think about who.) “I’ve seen the footage. The only thing you really fight for is yourself. You’re not the guy to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you.”

“I think I would just cut the wire.”

Steve looked over to Banner, eyebrows raised, smiling bitterly. Can you believe this guy? “Always a way out. You know, you may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero.”

“A hero? Like you? You’re a laboratory experiment, Rogers. Everything special about you came out of a bottle.”

“Put on the suit. Let’s go a few rounds.”

Thor started laughing. “You people are so petty. And tiny.”

“Agent Romanoff, would you escort Dr. Banner back to—”

Banner didn’t like that. Didn’t like it one bit.

“Dr. Banner,” said Steve, quietly but in the voice he’d always used with his troops, watching Banner’s left hand as Fury took the safety off his gun. He waited until Banner looked at him, met his eyes. “Put down the scepter.”

The monitor started going off, a trilling burst that got their attention. “Got it,” said Fury.

“I can get there fastest!” said Stark.

“You’re not going alone!” Steve grabbed Stark’s arm.

“You going to stop me?”

“Put on the suit, let’s find out.”

Stark sneered. “I’m not afraid of you, old man.”

“Put on the suit,” Steve said through gritted teeth.

“Oh my God,” said Banner to the screen, just before an explosion hit them. There were chunks of debris flying and Steve went down with the shock wave—for a second it was France again—sulphurous orange light flickering where things were starting to burn.

Steve turned to Stark, who was pulling himself up to sit, his eyes wide. “Put on the suit!”

“Yep!”

Stark pulled himself to his feet. Steve put his hands on Stark’s back to steady him as they ran into the hallway, almost crashing.
“We’re destabilized. Feels like they took out an engine,” said Stark. “You feel where that came from?”

Steve nodded jerkily. “I’ll find it.”

“Comms on.”

“Don’t have one.”

“You do now,” said Stark, fishing something out of his pocket while they dodged through the smoky corridors. He shoved it into Steve’s hand. “My design, better than theirs. In your ear, just like a baby with a bean.”

Steve rolled his eyes, but put it in. Immediately there was sound—Hill and Fury talking.

“Somebody’s got to get outside and patch that engine!”

“Stark, you copy that?”

“I’m on it,” said Stark beside him. “Engine 3. I’ll meet you there,” he added, pointing in the direction of the blast.

The halls were full of confusion, like an anthill, people trying to drag the casualties to safety or get to their posts or find their weapons. Steve looped through the corridors—had to stop sometimes, backtrack, when something was too damaged; made it through one corridor by jumping over a ten-foot pit. Finally he got the area of maximal damage where he could hear someone banging on a door. He wrenched it open—there, there was the impact. Two men in gas masks came in past him, supporting a third.

“Stark!” he shouted over the ragged edge of the wreckage. _Don’t look down_, he thought, his heart suddenly pounding, triple-time, as he looked down anyway, _this isn’t a train, this isn’t the Alps, don’t look down_. “Stark, I’m here!”

“Good!” Stark came in loud and clear over the comm, braking in front of the damage. “See what we got. Got to get the superconducting coolant system back online before we can access the rotors, work on dislodging the debris.” Stark was shoving some of the metal aside, staring at it. “I need you to get to that engine control panel and tell me which relays are in overload position.”

Steve nodded, like Stark would see it, then planned his route; a vault up, grabbing a bar, and flipping over it—he was there, opening the panel up and dragging it out into the light. It was glowing orange, full of flashing red lights.

“What does it look like in there?”

Steve shook his head, smiling a little. “It seems to run on some form of _electricity_,” he said wryly, waving one hand in annoyance.

“Well, you’re not wrong.”

“You know I was never the wiring guy.”

“I’m figuring that out. Okay, flashy red things? See those?”

“Yep.”
“How many?”

So Stark started to talk him through it. The components were sharp under his fingers, but the gauntlets didn’t rip.

“Okay, the relays are intact,” he said a couple of minutes later. “What’s our next move?”

“Even if I clear the rotors, this thing won’t re-engage without a jump. I’m going to have to get in there and push.”

“Well, if that thing gets up to speed, you’ll get shredded!”

“The standard control unit can reverse the polarity long enough to disengage, maglev and—”

“Speak English,” yelled Steve.

“See that red lever?” said Stark. Steve could hear the sigh. “It’ll slow the rotors down long enough for me to get out. Stand by it, wait for my word.”

It took a short, but nasty jump to get there. “I’m in position,” he said. Stark grunted something positive from the other end.

He was waiting by the lever when he saw a couple of guys in S.H.I.E.L.D gear slinking up—he had a feeling, right away, that they weren’t friendlies, but he waited until he saw the dark point of the grenade, heard the ping of the pin coming out, to swing out and knock it away. Some things hadn’t changed beyond recognition.

When he came down and landed in front of them the fighting started, and it felt—oh, it felt so good, familiar and right, like coming home. His fists connected solidly, and he just threw one of the guys off the side of the ship, and he didn’t think about it, didn’t have to think at all.

The other one managed to get back to their gun. Steve threw a piece of debris after them that hit an electrical panel, sizzling and sparking, and they ducked back around the doorframe, but came out again firing a second later. Too late; Steve had vaulted back up and got his hands on a gun, and drove them back again. But they managed to force him back until something gave under his foot and he went off, over the side.

The cable he was clinging to flailed in the wind for a thousand years. It was the Alps a train winter snow time to get back up. He could hear the rotors moving, that was Stark.

Stark came over his com. “Cap, hit the lever.”

“I need a minute here!” There were bullets whizzing around him as he crawled, dragging himself up.

“Lever. Now!”

He made it back up to the level. Still down, he could grab for it and hit the lever. As he pulled himself to his knees, the person firing at him started up again. No way out—but Stark came hurtling in to hit them like a ton of bricks, then collapsed with a grunt. Steve gave himself the luxury of a few seconds of panting, then got up painfully.

“Stark,” he said, then “Stark,” more urgently.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” said Stark. The hostile next to him groaned. “You want to come punch this guy? Like, twenty, thirty more times?”
Steve laughed, which hurt, and Stark was pulling himself upright, just standing when Fury’s voice came over the comms.

“Agent Coulson is down.”

Steve watched as Stark stiffened, still breathing raggedly through the pain.

There was another voice. “A medical team is on its way to your location.”

“They’re here.” There was a long pause. Steve and Stark just stood in the wreckage, still for a moment, silent. “They called it.”

Stark scrubbed at his face with one hand. “Christ,” he said after a minute. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

“I’m sorry,” said Steve.

Stark said, louder, “Are there any more bad guys around we need to take care of?”

“Negative,” said Hill, “security is under control. Regroup on the bridge.”

They walked to the bridge together, in silence. Sometimes Steve thought about saying something. He didn’t.

There were fewer people than he would have expected. Actually, it was just Stark and Steve and Hill, Hill pacing in front of them while they sat at the table. Steve’s hands clasped in his lap, elbows propped on the arms of the chair; feet apart and flat on the floor under the table. Back straight, shoulders back.

“Thor is down,” said Hill, who was leading the briefing while Fury took care of—dealt with the casualties. There was a scrape on her cheek, red and occasionally oozing blood. “Status unknown. Hulk is down. Status also unknown. We need to get our satellite connections back in play and repair damaged systems before we’ll be able to track either of them effectively.”

“There is some good news,” said Fury, behind them. Steve twisted to see him. “Barton is back. Agent Romanoff gave him some head trauma that it seemed he needed to shake himself loose. She’s with him now.”

“Up one, down two,” said Steve.

“Barton’s an excellent shot, we’ll need him. Agent Hill, give us a minute.”

Hill nodded shortly and moved off, back into the guts of the bridge. Stark had twisted away from Fury, away from his uncompromising stare.

“Well, this was in Phil Coulson’s jacket,” said Fury. “Guess he never did get you to sign them.” He threw down cards.

Steve leaned over, mouth tight, and picked up a blood-splattered card. His eyebrows drew together. Stark still couldn’t stand to look at them.

“We’re dead in the air up here. Our communications, location of the cube. Banner. Thor. Lost my one good eye. Maybe I had that coming.” Fury’s voice went soft on that last bit. Steve set down the card. “Yes, we were going to build an arsenal with the Tesseract. I never put all my chips on that number, though, because I was playing something even riskier. There was an idea—Stark knows this
—called the Avengers Initiative. The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people,”
Steve looked up at him where he was standing behind a chair between them; Stark’s chest was
heaving, out of the corner of his eye, hands clenching. “And see if they could become something
more. See if they could work together when we needed them to, to fight the battles that we never
could. Phil Coulson died still believing in that idea. In heroes.”

Stark stood suddenly, almost vibrating with tension for a moment, and then walked off without
looking at either of them.

“Well, it’s an old-fashioned venture.” Fury let his head fall forward.

Steve let the silence drag on for a couple of minutes, and then sighed. “Are you trying to convince
me? You can leave off the propaganda. We knew how it worked back then, too.” He nodded over at
the cards.

“I believe that if the Avengers are going to come together, they need a leader. I believe that that
leader is you.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

“Then I’m wrong. It’s happened before. But not often.” Fury raised an eyebrow at him.

Steve sighed again, shoulders still stiff in the chair, like he was waiting for someone to yell atten-
HUT and snap him out of it.

“So what do you want me to do now?” he asked Fury, resigned.

“Tony needs to talk.”

“I’m not sure I’m the right person for that.”

“You’ve lost men. He hasn’t. Not like this.”

“Still not sure.”

“Give it a shot. And for God’s sake, start calling him Tony. You sound like you’re seeing ghosts
when you say Stark and he can hear it.”

“The world’s full of ghosts for me, Director.”

“Just give it a shot. You fail, you fail. We’ve failed at worse today.”

Steve put his hands on the table’s edge, lightly gripping it, staring at them.

“What the hell,” he said. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Thank you,” said Fury, and it sounded sarcastic but genuine for all that.

He found Stark staring out over a railing, next to where Coulson had died. He didn’t try to get in his
space, just stepped up onto a platform where they could see each other, hear each other. He leaned
back against a pillar and folded his arms.

“Was he married?” asked Steve. That had always mattered to his men when they’d lost a buddy. His
wife, his kids, the hole left behind.
“No.” Stark wouldn’t look at him. “There was a, uh, cellist. I think.”

Steve lowered his head, acknowledging it. (It didn’t sound like a lie. People didn’t need to lie. These days.) A cellist—someone to notify, maybe, Hill and Fury would know. “I’m sorry. He seemed like a good man.”

Stark’s head jerked around, throat bobbing as he swallowed hard. “He was an idiot.”

“Why?” Steve pushed himself off the pillar, arms still folded. “For believing?”

“For taking on Loki alone.”

“He was doing his job.”

Steve started to walk towards Stark just as Stark started to move.

“He was out of his league. He should have waited. He should have—”

“Sometimes there isn’t a way out, Tony.”

“Right! Never heard that one before.” Stark kept walking past him, turning at the last minute almost against his will as Steve said,

“Is this the first time you’ve lost a soldier?”

“We are not soldiers!” Steve tilted his head, assessing, and Tony looked ashamed for a second, jaw working. “I’m not marching to Fury’s fife,” he muttered.

“Neither am I.” Steve tried to put it into the words, the anger and the disappointment. “He’s got the same blood on his hands that Loki does. But right now we’ve got to put that behind us and get this done. Now, Loki needs a power source.” Tony’s eyes were dropping to the bloodstain from Coulson’s wound. “If we can put together a list—”

“He made it personal,” said Tony, eyes coming up to meet Steve’s.

“That’s not the point.”

“That is the point.” Tony’s voice had changed, moved away from grief and rage and into work, science, problem. “That’s Loki’s point. He hit us all right where we live. Why?”

“To tear us apart.”

“Yeah, divide and conquer is great, but he knows he has to take us out to win, right?” Tony squinted as he thought out loud. “That’s what he wants. He wants to beat us, he wants to be seen doing it. He wants an audience.” He started pacing.

“Right. I caught his act in Stuttgart.”

“Right!” Tony clapped, gesturing with excitement. “That’s just previews. This is opening night, and Loki, he’s a full-tilt diva. He wants flowers, he wants parades. He wants a monument built to the skies with his name plastered on—son of a bitch.”

Steve raised his eyebrows, and he felt the corner of his mouth move against his will as he tried not to smile.

“We’ve got to get back there,” said Tony. “We need Nat. Can you get her on board?”
“Agent Romanoff? I’ll try.”

“And if Barton’s up to it, him too. Clint’s good, he’s a good guy. You’ll like him, he’s got a skull almost as thick as yours.”

“Right.”

“You know where they’re at?”

“No, you got a location for them?”

“Probably medbay.” Tony sketched out the map for him in the air, and Steve nodded. “I’m going to freshen the suit up a little before we head out, I’ll meet you there.”

Natasha was looking at him as the doors slid open. He said, “Time to go.”

“Go where?”

“I’ll tell you on the way. Can you fly one of those jets?”

Somebody, must be Barton, came in from the bathroom, a tightly-muscled man with sandy blond hair, wiping his hands. “I can.”

Steve glanced at Natasha. She nodded slightly.

He looked back to Barton. “Got a suit?”

Barton nodded.

“Then suit up.”

They made it through the hangar without getting stopped. Steve didn’t get the feeling they would be. Fury wouldn’t have left orders he meant to countermand.

The ride out was longer than Steve would have liked. They could see the army start to pour through the portal, black flecks in the sky at that distance. Finally, they got in range, and Natasha said over the comms, “Stark, we’re on your 3, headed northeast.” She was working the guns like a pro while Barton steered; Steve felt twitchy and helpless, useless in these new machines.

When they got in visual range of the tower, Barton said, “Nat?”

“See ‘em,” she said.

Steve followed her gaze to Thor and Loki fighting on a ledge. Barton pulled the jet up and around as Natasha aimed and start firing, but Loki took out an engine with a blast of blue light, just like the HYDRA tanks. The jet jerked hard and started spinning as it fell, Steve grabbing a couple of struts on the ceiling to hang on to as it plummeted.

It clipped buildings, spinning out of control, but Barton kept a death-grip on the throttle and managed to put it down in a relatively unoccupied area. Hitting the ground threw Steve back up into the ceiling, then down to the floor, but he was back up in seconds. They bailed out the rear hatch and ran into the street.
As they looped around some abandoned cars Steve yelled, “We’ve gotta get back up there!”

But then there was a noise, like groaning metal, but louder. A thousand times louder, a million. From directly overhead. They stopped, almost in unison, and looked up at the wormhole.

Something was coming through it. Something much, much bigger than the uglies on the flying motorbikes. It was huge and covered in spines. It looked like a dinosaur; it looked like a battleship; it was obviously a monster. It passed overhead nearly close enough to touch as it swam through the air. Steve’s mouth was hanging open, he distantly realized.

He followed the Chitauri with his eyes as they poured out, and then tracked the dinosaur thing down the block with his head.

“Stark,” he said, “are you seeing this?”

“Seeing, still working on believing. Where’s Banner, has he shown up yet?”

“Banner?” Steve asked, skeptical and confused.

“Just keep me posted.”

Steve caught up with Natasha and Barton crouched behind some overturned cars. “We’ve got civilians trapped in those buildings,” said Barton.

He made sure Natasha and Barton were okay, and then Steve took off running.

The fighting went on and on—every time one alien went down, there was another to take its place. He leapt down into the middle of a fray with Natasha and Barton, and they were working together when lightning struck, literally, a handful of aliens around them seizing and falling. Thor fell after it, pulling himself to his feet with a twist to his mouth. Injured.

Steve asked, “What’s the story upstairs?”

“The power surrounding the Cube is impenetrable.”

Tony’s voice came over the comms; Steve’s head went up like he expected to see him. “Thor’s right. We’ve gotta deal with these guys.”

“How do we do this?” asked Natasha.

Steve said, “As a team.”

Thor said grimly, “I have unfinished business with Loki.”

“Yeah? Get in line.” Barton was fiddling with his arrows ominously.

Steve said, “Save it. Loki’s going to keep the fight focused on us, and that’s what we need. Without him, these things could run wild. We’ve got Stark up top,” he said, starting to gesture with where he’d put them. “He’s going to need us to—”

There was a swelling noise coming up from behind that drowned him out, a motor—it was Banner on a motorcycle, right on time. The chit-chat could have been less pleasant, at any rate, before they needed some action.
“Dr. Banner,” said Steve, “now might be a really good time for you to get angry.”

“That’s my secret, Captain,” said Banner, walking away, looking back over his shoulder. He was almost smiling. “I’m always angry.”

Watching the transformation in person was deeply unsettling. Luckily, Steve was too busy to do it for long. The exploding monster fell over their heads in chunks of burning meat as he crouched with the shield up over himself and Natasha.

And it was funny, wasn’t it, that Fury had been right, that they turned to him for orders. He sent Natasha up to fight an alien on its own bike; Tony took on a batch of aliens; the Hulk went after a monster. There was going to be a lot to clean up if they made it that far.

After he cleared the bank, he stood for a minute, thinking—knowing—what he would do, if he thought fighting wasn’t an option anymore. If he was one of the people making decisions far away. It was like he’d been waiting for this since he first saw the footage, back in the cabin, of the very worst that humans could do to each other now.

Wondering when they were going to work up the nerve to use nuclear force.

He shook it off and went back to fighting, because that was what he was there to do.

Steve took a nasty gut shot, fighting in the street. Thor grasped his wrist and pulled him up.

Natasha’s voice came on the comms. “I can close it. Can anybody copy? I can shut the portal down.”

Steve shouted, “Do it!”

“No! Wait!” That was Tony—why—

“Stark,” Steve yelled, “these things are still coming!”

“I got a nuke coming in. It’s going to blow in less than a minute. And I know just where to put it.”

Steve said, slowly, “Stark. You know that’s a one-way trip.” But nuking Manhattan wasn’t an option, now that they could close the portal, was it. Wasn’t acceptable.

Tony didn’t answer him.

Steve watched him, the white trail unfurling as he shot into the portal. A few seconds later, the aliens all just went down like puppets with their strings cut.

There was a wall of white light blooming, beyond, in the portal. Steve said, “Close it,” and looked away.

Thor made a noise beside him—Steve looked back up, and murmured wonderingly, “Son of a gun.” Tony was falling from the sky, the red dot almost invisible at that distance.

As they watched, Steve felt worry cutting in his stomach just as Thor boomed, “He’s not slowing down!” and started to spin up the hammer for a jump. The Hulk beat him to it, leaping in to grab Tony, slowing his fall and setting him down, almost gently.

They ran over to Tony’s body on the ground. Thor rolled him over, yanking off the faceplate, while Steve listened for breathing and put his hand over Tony’s chest—couldn’t feel anything through the
damn suit, couldn’t hear him breathing. It was—it didn’t look good and they were a long way from medics.

Steve settled back on his heels.

The Hulk wasn’t going to take it easily, he could tell, please God don’t let it go on a rampage, and it wound up and let out a roar that shook Steve’s teeth.

And like some kind of Sleeping Beauty, Tony jolted and yelled in shock.

“What the hell?” said Tony. “What just happened? Please tell me nobody kissed me.”

Steve nodded, mouth still hanging open in exhaustion as he panted for breath, looking around. “We won.”

Tony sighed, letting his eyes flutter shut and his head fall back. “All right. Yaaay! All right! Good job, guys! Let’s not come in tomorrow. Let’s just—take a day. You ever tried shawarma?” Steve was openly smiling at Tony, who was still talking, couldn’t help it. “There’s a shawarma joint about two blocks away from here. I don’t know what it is but I wanna try it.”

Like a little black raincloud, Thor said, “We are not finished yet.”

“And then shawarma after,” said Tony, with a sigh.

It took them a while to all get to the top of the Tower, and Tony needed some help—still gray-faced and sweating from pain, parts of his armor half-fused together—but they made it, and in time for Steve to be staring at Loki when that pain in the ass finally woke up.

“If it’s all the same to you,” Loki droned, “I’ll have that drink now.”

“Tab ran out,” said Tony sharply. “Thor, what’s the long-term plan for this guy?”

“Return to Asgard. He must face justice there.”

“And the cube, who’s got dibs on it? I have to say I don’t think it should be humans. I am just not feeling it. Not with all that bullshit Nick was trying to pull.”

“Agreed,” said Steve. “HYDRA weapons aren’t something I want around.”

“I will return it to Asgard and pledge its safe-keeping, if that is desirable to you,” said Thor.

“Yeah, I’m on board,” said Tony.

“Do it fast,” said Natasha. “We don’t want him to have time to try anything else.”

“I had an idea about that,” said Tony, and smiled an unpleasant little smile.

Loki didn’t care for the muzzle. Or the manacles. But Stark had them ready to go in about two hours, which was a perfectly reasonable length of time for the Avengers to watch Loki like a hawk. And gave them time to get shawarma.

After that, they were comfortable taking it in shifts to guard Loki, so people could do important things like shower and get changed, in Tony’s case into an overly-tailored ridiculous suit that made him look like a—well. Steve wasn’t used to it, yet, how men wore things that were flashy now, like it
was nothing, like it meant nothing. But Tony did look—expensive in it. Thor did whatever mystical communication he needed to, to get the way home set up, and then it was time.

They took Loki to a park. Everybody brought themselves; Thor showed up with Loki, and the rest of them came in cars (Natasha and Barton, who had started asking Steve to call him “Clint” because “Barton sounds weird from you, you’re not my boss, are you? Oh, crap, are you kind of my boss? Well, you’re not my regular boss,” with Banner), Tony in a sleek and undoubtedly very very expensive car, and Steve on his motorcycle.

He could feel his jaw working as they got ready to transport the Tesseract back with Thor—Banner handling the tongs to put it into the containment vessel, Selvig holding it, two men who knew what it cost.

Natasha whispered something to Clint, making him smile.

The Avengers stood in a circle around the two men as they crackled into blue lightning and were gone.

“Well, that was a hell of a week,” said Tony. “Who wants to get a drink? Anybody? Or, or, and this is a good idea, come play in the lab? It’s like ninety percent debris right now but between the robots and me, mostly the robots, we can get it back in working order in no time.”

Banner laughed, reluctantly. “That’s not very subtle.”

“Who cares about subtle? Look, it’s not every day I get a chance to work with somebody who would probably take good care of my lab. Hell, I don’t even take good care of my lab. It’ll be fun, I won’t poke you with sticks. Probably. Mostly.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll take a look. But I’ll be heading back to India after that.”

“If you can ever tear yourself away, you’re welcome to.”

Steve watched them, smiling a little, and when they went to leave, he shook Tony’s hand before Tony and Banner got into the car.

“It’s been something resembling a pleasure, Captain,” said Tony. “I’d like to note that if we ever need to fight aliens again, I would be very glad to have you on my side.”

“I think it’s my side and you just happen to be on it,” said Steve.

Tony glowered, but couldn’t help smirking, too, as he climbed into the car.

On the way back to his apartment, Steve found himself smiling a little.

When he got back, he was forcibly reminded that he’d never gotten around to renting somewhere else. He needed to fix that. Immediately. The apartment was depressing, no two ways about it.

So he went back to the paper he’d left on his table, but then had to set it down when he realized that some of those apartments might not exist anymore.

He gave it until the next day, when he got up early for his run, and got new papers on the way back into his building. The vendor looked shell-shocked, but he was still out there, still selling his papers and magazines, and Steve smiled at him when he didn’t seem to recognize Steve at all. The cowl was good for something, anyway.
The Times headline was *Battle of N.Y.*, and his resurrection was on page 3. That was fine.

He started going through the classifieds, marking up any apartments that were in his old neighborhood. There was still a *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* to read, even though Wikipedia told him it had shut down completely for a long time and this new one was a different business. It looked different, for sure. He liked it, still, and started with its ads, and followed it up with the editions of the *Brooklyn Paper*.

It took him a week and a half to find a place that was *right*. Third floor of an older building. Before, that would have been one of the ratholes where there weren’t even windows in every apartment. Now, it meant one of the places that had been *nice* when he was a kid.

“The hardwood floors are original to the building,” chattered the real estate agent, smiling brightly as he turned the faucets on and off for lack of anything better to do. Some of it was blocky and angular, too new, but that was all right, he could adjust. He could adjust *slowly*, here. The sink was porcelain, not plastic. “Many of the furnishings are also original!” she chirped. “People are really loving the historic vibe these days, places like this go fast. If you’re interested, you should really apply today.”

He loved the creaky wooden stairs; he loved them like he hadn’t ever thought he could love them, before they weren’t everywhere, anymore. The same way he loved the iron railing out front on the stoop. God, the building had a *stoop*, just like his. And the linoleum might be peeling in places, gritty and tacky, but it was *there*. Beat up, old, ragged, but familiar like a sigh.

He applied, and he got it, and he brought his things over in a couple of cardboard boxes from the other place. He put the mannequin with his dress uniform on it in a closet. He didn’t need much space, after all.

He kept going to the gym. So Fury knew about it. That was okay.

He’d pound the bags until they turned back to stuffing, and sometimes after that he could sleep.

He got a call a couple of weeks later, when he was staring at an empty cabinet, trying to decide whether it would make sense to put the drinking glasses in it. He grabbed the phone off the table and glanced at the number. Not Fury—who else would be—must be a wrong number, but he picked up anyway.

“Hello?”

“Capsicle!” Tony sounded delighted. “I wasn’t sure this was still your number. Fury said he figured you’d be switching to a burner. Of course, that assumes you know what a burner is, and I’m just not convinced you do.”

“Tony.”

“None other! Look, I’ve got an inventory at the moment that consists of a Bruce and a Pepper and, oddly enough, a Clint, so I was thinking we make a day of it, go out and get some superhero lunch. What do you think?”

He could hear Pepper in the background loudly saying *Some of us aren’t superheroes, Tony, we might get offended.*
“I,” he said, and then, “sure, what the hell.”

“Great! Fantastic! I’ll text you the address. Do you know how to use the map on your phone? Please tell me you know.”

“I do,” he said, not mentioning that it had been an embarrassing and painful process.

“Excellent! Okay. We’re meeting up at the restaurant in—let’s say half an hour? Half an hour.”

“Oh, okay,” said Steve, and when he hung up he stared at the phone for a minute, and then went to go change.

The restaurant was ridiculous. It was fancy, and clean, and bright; it was like eating in a greenhouse, all the light radiating in through the glass ceiling.

Steve felt like an impostor before he walked in the door. Pushing the doors open took real effort.

“Hello,” said a young woman, arms full of menus. “Do you have a reservation?”

“I’m meeting friends—uh—”

“CAP!” shouted Tony.

“Him,” he said, smiling at her a little and nodding in Tony’s direction. She smiled back, raising her eyebrows in fond exasperation.

“I see,” she said.

Steve made his way over to the table—Banner was giving him a little wave. There were already four of them, but Tony had somehow commandeered a fifth chair, pulled up at the end.

“I told them we should get you an extra little table,” said Tony. “I’ve seen my dad’s notes, I know you ate like a horse.”

“Still do,” said Steve. “The price I pay to look like a horse, too.”

Tony actually laughed. He had a half-finished cocktail in front of him, celery sticking out of it. Pepper had a glass of white wine, Banner and Barton were just having sodas.

Pepper smiled at him. “I don’t think we’ve actually met,” she said. “I’m Pepper Potts.”

“Steve Rogers,” he said, shaking her hand carefully over the little vase of flowers. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure’s all mine,” she said. “I hear you kept Tony alive. Thank you. I know it may seem hard to believe, but I am fond of him.”

“I only hope he realizes how lucky that makes him,” said Steve.

“Oh, I do,” said Tony, “I do. You better believe it. Look at her, she’s not only the most beautiful creature that ever lived, she’s also a wicked good CEO and she puts up with my crap. My God. Are you a replicant? Is this all a long con?”

Pepper burst into laughter; it was musical and lilting. Barton was watching her with a little quizzical
half-smile on his face.

“What’s a replicant?” asked Steve.

“Okay, you’re going to need, like, a list. Some kind of list. Of all the things you need to catch up on. Not just political events, I’m assuming you’ve done some background reading on those, but the little cultural things, the nitty-gritty of modernity.”

Steve sighed and produced the little battered notebook he’d started carrying around. “So what’s a replicant?”

“Oh, you already thought of that. Good for you, Iceman. It’s a movie, *Blade Runner*, very good, kind of a film noir—did you have film noir? But with robots.”

“Yes, we had film noir. I went under in 1945, Tony, not the Stone Age.”

“It might as well be, though! With all the advances in computing since then, you had, what, Enigma? And that was pretty much it? We’ve got the *world* in our *pockets—*”

“Fury already set me up with a phone, Tony. And a computer. I’ve had computer access for months.” Getting it set up in the new apartment had been a real pain in the ass, but he wasn’t going to admit that.

“And yet you haven’t watched *Blade Runner*. So I’m thinking you need help.”

“Tony,” said Barton, “do you have to talk this much before we even get our food? I haven’t even ordered yet.”

“Of course I do! If I’m not talking how do I know I’m still alive?”

“I can kick you under the table continuously to remind you.”

Banner laughed. He had a soft laugh. “I think you’d enjoy that too much, Clint.”

“Maybe I would. Don’t judge me.”

“Seriously, though, can we order? Steve, did you get a menu? Here’s my menu.” Barton pushed the menu over to Steve. It was full of things that did, in fact, look vaguely familiar, although the price tags looked more like he was buying a feast for a family of twelve than one thing for lunch.

“Is there—okay, there are sandwiches,” he said. “I’m going to get a couple of sandwiches.”

The waiter seemed to sense their need and came to take their orders. “Anything to drink for you, sir?” he said to Steve.

“Just water, please.”

“That’ll be right out.”

Tony said, as soon as the waiter was out of earshot, “I think he recognized you. They definitely recognize me and you’re with me. So I think there will be some blurry phone pictures of this lunch up on the Internet within an hour. Just be prepared.”

“I—okay. Prepared for what, exactly?”

“I don’t know. You don’t have a Twitter account, do you?”
“No. I don’t know what that is.”

“Good. You don’t need one and it would just give strangers an excuse to talk to you about your ass.”

“I don’t really want that to happen.”

“So there you go. No Twitter, problem averted. And don’t read any celebrity gossip columns, either.”

“I don’t think that’s going to be much of an issue.”

“Tony just doesn’t want you to have more Twitter followers than he’s got,” said Clint.

Tony snorted. He was already finishing off his cocktail. Pepper glanced at him sidelong, but when the waiter came back with their appetizers, she didn’t try to stop him from ordering another. She did touch his wrist, gently, when he went to raise it the first time, and that kept it down on the table for a couple of minutes.

Banner had asked Barton something about a new set of engineered arrows, and Barton was talking nonstop. He hadn’t talked much the last time Steve had seen him, but then again, he’d been fresh out of mind-control. If that was anything like the ice, Steve couldn’t blame him for being on the quiet side.

And it seemed like the arrows were something he was pretty passionate about, anyway. He was miming drawing his bow when he almost knocked over Steve’s water, and he turned to Steve and put his hand on Steve’s elbow casually, in passing, to apologize as he kept talking.

It was strange to be touched.

Tony and Barton argued about the arrows and what could be done to improve them (“The weight isn’t great, I’m telling you, it needs to be—” “Yeah, well, maybe it’s your weight that isn’t great—” “That doesn’t even make sense—”) until Steve was three-quarters of the way through his second sandwich, a heavenly melting roast beef, and ready to slow down on it a little.

Banner smiled across at him, past Barton’s busily gesturing hands. “They get pretty excited about this,” he said.

Tony paused to glance over at Steve’s plate. “Wow, you managed to eat that already? You really are some kind of machine, that’s incredible.”

“Four times the metabolism, four times the calories. It’s just math.”

“Yeah, but your speed must set some kind of record.”

“I grew up in the Depression,” Steve said, pausing to dip a gigantic French fry into the little tin of allegedly fancy ketchup. “You ate fast or you didn’t eat.”

“Okay, now, that’s a downer. Let’s try and focus on happy things, like how you can have all the sandwiches you want here in the future.”

“They’re very good,” said Steve. Tony beamed like he’d made them personally.

“You were right,” Tony said to Pepper, “everybody does love this place. That’s it, it’s on the permanent rotation.”
He went to see Peggy.

He’d known—he’d looked her up. Called the number and gotten the care facility. He’d been expecting to talk to her, maybe, or a family member, so the soft, cool voice of the staff on the phone was hard to take.

But he’d asked about visiting and they’d told him. And he’d gone.

Her skin was like paper. Her bones, under the skin, made him feel old, like nothing else had managed; he was still young and strong, and when he walked in, her eyes widened and she said, “Steve!”

“Hello, Peggy,” he said to her.

“I saw on the news,” she said. “I wasn’t sure it was you. I thought it couldn’t be. But they explained the ice.”

“Yeah.”

“It certainly took you long enough to come to see me,” she said, and smiled.

“Well. I wasn’t sure you’d have time for me.”

“I always had time for you.” Her eyes were bright, glittering with tears. “I can’t believe it’s really you.”

He didn’t say much, that visit, and neither did she. He held her hand for hours, though.

When he went to get up to leave, her grip tightened on his hand. He glanced back down at her.

“A kiss for your old sweetheart?” she asked, softly.

He bent over her and kissed her, her lips dry and chapped, the faint sharp smell of hand sanitizer layered under a powdery scent—maybe a soap, maybe just her skin.

When he pulled back she was crying again, tears sliding out the sides of her eyes, but she was smiling up at him.

“I hadn’t thought to ask for a happy ending, during the war,” she said, “but I’m so glad you survived.”

_Did I?_

He left. He didn’t try to drink, or get drunk, or even go the gym and beat the hell out of a bag.

“Steve,” said Tony, “pick up, I know it’s you and your _ridiculously out-of-date land line_ screening this call, so pick up, pick up, pick uuuuuuuuuup—”

“Fine,” said Steve, picking up. “What is it that’s so _important_?”

“Oh, you are gonna _love this,_” said Tony.

It turned out Tony was right; he did love it. It was an app for his cellphone, “highly proprietary and still under development _so don’t show anybody,_ okay?” that translated written text.
Tony was smiling as he patted the phone gently after he installed it for Steve. “This baby is going to open up *worlds* for you,” he said. Crooned, really. Like he was talking to the phone instead.

“Tony, it’s downright uncanny when you get all intimate with the electronics.”

“But they love it,” he said, still to the phone.

He was right, though. It wasn’t perfect; it couldn’t handle most hand-written things; they were apparently nowhere near having a great speech-to-text-to-speech interface; it missed context. But it let him read things he’d never expected to be able to. It was fun.

“*Rogers,*” said Fury grimly.

“*Sir,*” he retorted.

“I *know* this does not sound like something you’re going to enjoy. I am *asking* you, as a favor, to do it anyway.”

“They’ll have my face up on the wall. They don’t need me there.”

“Your presence would give the exhibit more credibility. Besides, if there’s anything you don’t like, you can tell them. Make them take it down. You haven’t been to see it once during the construction, and I *know* they asked you. *Repeatedly.*”

Steve huffed angrily, and the silence sat on the line for a couple of uncomfortable moments.

“Yeah,” he finally said. “I haven’t been. I don’t want to—look, sir, that was *my* war, and for you it was seventy years ago but I’ve only been awake for a couple of *months.* I don’t, I don’t want to see people staring at my uniform and my friends and talking about us when I can still see—” He cut himself off sharply.

Fury gave him a moment before he said, not unkindly, “You don’t have to look at the exhibit if you don’t want to, Rogers. They just want you to show up and smile and inspire a new generation. That’s all. There are kids who want to grow up to be heroes. You give them something to believe in.”

“Maybe they shouldn’t believe in us,” he said, bitterly. “We made mistakes, you know.”

“Leaving aside our recent troubles, New York is still standing because you took that plane down in 1945. That’s a hell of a legacy.”

“You want me to be grateful—for what, that they *remember*—”

“Grateful, no,” said Fury. “*Gracious,* yes.”


“You’ll need a tux. Stark’s got a good guy. I’ll have him call you for an appointment.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“It’s just a suit, Rogers, you’ve worn worse.”
He’d never been measured for a suit before. It was the most anyone had touched him in (don’t think about it).

He called Tony.

“Star Spangled Man!” shouted Tony as soon as he picked up. “Good to hear from you!”

“Are you—are you drunk? It’s ten in the morning!”

“No! Just on a test flight! My sound-dampening algorithms are a little off at this altitude so it’s hard to hear you, better speak up, old man!”

“I’ve got this museum thing to go to, I wanted to ask Natasha if she could go with me. Do you have her number?”

“I can get it, let me hassle Clint. You’re not asking me?”

“I think Pepper might object.”

“Come on, I’m sure you’d be a perfect gentleman!”

“Besides, Natasha looks a lot better than you do in a dress.”

“I’m wounded! How would you know? I’ll have you know I made a very fetching Juliet in a production at the all-boys boarding school I was briefly forced to attend—”

“Tony, I just need her number.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll get it for you.”

The opening of the museum exhibit was classy as hell. There were women in beautiful floor-length gowns, silk and furs, and there were waiters with trays of little snacks and champagne flutes.

Natasha kept her hand in the crook of his arm and said, “Let me do the talking, you’re as stiff as a board.” She was wearing a black wig and a black silk dress; she looked breathtaking.

“Of course I am,” he muttered. “Look at this shit. It’s embarrassing.”

“No swearing. Public image.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

His hearing was a problem. He could catch conversations—some of them were flattering, some less so. He looks like he hates it. Probably does, can you blame him? Everybody wants a piece of him. God, of course they do, look at that ass.

The champagne did nothing for him. He sipped it when he needed to do something with his hands or dodge a question, but that was it. The taste was a little sour.

Natasha kept smiling and deflecting, smiling and deflecting. “You’re a godsend,” he said to her under his breath between handshakes.
Fury had said he wouldn’t have to spend much time in the actual exhibit but it seemed like that was where he spent the whole damn night, kept turning around to see something of himself, a movie short, a giant blown-up photograph, and once, hitting him like a gut shot, Bucky’s face, staring out at him from glass. *Best friends since*

*Inseparable*

Jesus Christ, he thought, get me out of here, get me out, get me out. There was wind whistling around him, he couldn’t hear a damn thing. People were talking to him but he couldn’t hear them. Just the wind. Just Bucky howling as he fell. Like the nightmares weren’t enough, like he needed to see Bucky’s face to remind him how handsome he was, like he didn’t know that face like the back of his hand, *better*, like he wasn’t waiting to hear his voice, but none of the exhibits had his voice, no recordings of Bucky talking, and he had to excuse himself once to throw up in the bathroom. He rinsed and spat in the sink. There were complimentary mints.

On the way to drop him off back home, in the car, Natasha said, “How did you deal with the publicity, before?”

“Didn’t mind it so much. It’s different now.”

“Well, you did just fine tonight.” She patted his arm gently. “For an old fogey.”

“I think you’re older than me.”

“Never say that to a lady.”

“I’ll keep that in mind if I see one.”

It used to be *fun*. He couldn’t remember it. He couldn’t imagine it. He knew it, the way he knew that the capital of Idaho was Boise. There’d been a time when Captain America meant at least some of it when he signed pictures and kissed babies. But he couldn’t really picture it ever having been fun to be gawped at by crowds of people who wanted to touch him and pinch him and make cruel, sexual jokes.

Natasha started coming by sometimes to watch television shows with him. She’d grown up in Russia, she said, without elaborating, and she’d missed a lot.

So they watched old shows—*The Dick van Dyke Show*, and *Mary Tyler Moore*, and then *All in the Family* and *Cheers*. He really liked *Cheers*. A bunch of weirdos and losers who found each other comforting. Maybe it was a little on the nose, but it worked.

Once they finished that they started on *Friends*, and that was fine, too, but Ross was such an asshole. Rachel could do better.

If Natasha was doing it out of pity, she did a good job of hiding it. They never talked about the past.

*Scientific Defense Progress Committee #3-255-7 Update 2012-12-9*

*Subject to be transferred to North American facilities pending formal leadership transition.*
“The recent work pairing SSRIs with the ECT could have unintended consequences,” said the tech, earnestly. “I can’t guarantee that we’re going to be able to use the wipes the way we did before. There may be some... persistence.”

“You’re telling me he might remember?” asked Pierce, scowling. Pierce. He had a name. The Winter Soldier knew it.

“Given the appropriate stimuli, it’s possible.”

“What would prevent it?”

“Don’t,” said the Winter Soldier. Pierce’s head jerked in shock. The tech looked like he was going to wet himself.

“You get him in that machine and light him up. Now.”

Fury called him when there was a situation on the Mexican border.

“You’re going to love this,” grunted Fury. “Some wing-nuts with a whole lot more weapons than they should be able to get their hands on are holed up in a federal building on the border. They’re saying they’re going to blow everything to shit if any Mexicans cross over.”

“But that’s—”

“Insane. I know. But the feds are worried about another Waco situation. You know what that is?”

“Yeah.”

“So they want a low-key mission to extract the nuts from the shell, if you get me.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“You want in?”

“Who am I working with?”

“Just you and the Widow.”

“Perfect.”

It wasn’t quite as easy as Fury made it sound—the nuts were actually highly trained and incredibly well-armed, and Steve had a feeling the racist demands about the Mexican border were some kind of cover—but Natasha grinned around a mouthful of blood and whipped electroshock devices at them while she tightened her legs around their leader’s neck, and Steve took the ones raising their guns out with the shield, and in the end he hauled them out with zip-ties around their wrists three at a time like sacks of potatoes.

Fury actually smiled when he debriefed Steve after, even if it didn’t reach his eyes.

“That was an audition,” he said. “You did just fine. You want to come back on a more permanent basis?”
“Maybe,” said Steve. “Let me think about it.”

“No pressure. The Widow’s working with Barton most of the time. We could always use you, though.”

He visited his mother’s grave for the first time since 1943. He’d never made it out as often as he meant to before, why should the future be any different? The cemetery felt smaller, tucked in between what had been vacant lots and were now developments.

He didn’t say anything, didn’t talk to her—just set the bouquet down on the headstone and then dropped to his knees.

He didn’t cry. The stone had worn down with the decades, blunting the letters. **Beloved wife and mother.**

“Rogers,” said Fury on the phone, later, “you’ve got to be careful. There are paparazzi out for you now.”

“Do they know where I live?”

“Not yet. But they will.”

“And what are you specifically worried about them seeing?” There was a flare of hot anger behind his breastbone. “Me at Ma’s grave? Did you have a tail on me, Nick? That how you know to call me up, warn me?”

There was a moment’s silence on the line, and then Nick said, “Would you believe me if I said no?”

He crushed the apple core in his hand until it oozed out the sides of his fist. “No.”

“Then it doesn’t matter what I say.”

It was two more missions for Fury and two more months before he made it to Bucky’s grave on a road trip down to Arlington.

He wasn’t there. Obviously. But Steve sat behind Bucky’s tombstone, leaning back against it, and this time, he did talk. He said, *I miss you so goddamn much.* He said, *If I’d had any idea.*

He didn’t leave any flowers at that one.

Tony invited him to things with whoever was in town pretty regularly. On good days, he went. There were more lunches, movies, *brunches,* which it turned out he liked. Once, memorably, horse-racing. He watched *Real Genius,* of course, like Tony was going to let him escape that, and *Breakfast Club,* and got more jokes. He watched *Blade Runner* on his own time—it was good, sure. Every week or two he tried to watch the top movie from some year. He wasn’t really working his way through them chronologically, but it helped.

*Moonstruck* was—good God, somebody won an Oscar for that thing? He was embarrassed for
everyone in it. Across the board.

One night Tony said, loudly, “Brokeback Mountain? Anyone?”

Pepper sighed. “I don’t feel like crying tonight, honey,” she said.

“Come on! Gay cowboys! Tragic forbidden love! Can’t go wrong!”

“Crying,” she said, more forcefully. They ended up watching Legend instead (Tony mumbling that he didn’t see how this was less sad but Pepper vehemently insisted it had a happy ending Tony shut up).

Steve looked it up when he got home and made the mistake of watching it. He had to shut it off partway through and go sit in the other room and stare at his hands for a while.

He came back out and finished watching it, and then went and ran until the sun was coming up.

Six months after New York, when his lease was up, he moved to DC to be closer to SHIELD headquarters. He was getting sick of the commute. And it seemed wasteful, anyway.

He was Number 4. There were huge, beautiful carved wooden railings on the stairs.

He didn’t visit Bucky’s grave again. He was—he wasn’t busy, really. But he’d said what he needed to say. Mostly. Enough of it. Bucky wasn’t there, anyway. You didn’t get a second chance. He’d known that, back then, hadn’t he? He’d seen enough men go down with a bullet. Torn apart by shrapnel. Shredded by flak in the air.

Death wasn’t beautiful. Not even close.

“You should start dating,” said Natasha on their next mission. “It’s not healthy.”

“Oh, like you know about healthy,” he said, and punched a guy in the face.

“I wouldn’t need to be an expert to know more about it than you,” she huffed as she flipped a guy to the ground and then socked him right in the nose.

He whipped the shield to the side and heard a satisfying thunk. “I ever tell you I’m not much of a fan of your sass, young lady?”

She laughed out loud. “No, seriously. Steve. It’s been six months. You can start living a little.”

“And you can get your nose right back out of my business.”

“Oh, trust me,” she said, grunting as she took out a goon with a length of rebar, “if I were in your business, you’d know it.”

He didn’t take her seriously. He didn’t take out any of the women she suggested. It waxed and waned; sometimes she’d suggest three women in a week, sometimes it would be a month and a half between them.
“You’re like a matchmaker werewolf,” he said to her one morning as she kicked his ass from hell to breakfast in sparring. “Every full moon you have somebody for me to try.”

“I’d get off your case if you’d actually ask one of them out!” She punctuated that with a spinning kick that caught him on the jaw and snapped his head back. He loved this; he loved that she didn’t hold back. She went after him like she was trying to kill him. He’d have bruises for the rest of the afternoon. It was great.

“Is it that I’m not picking your type?” she mused out loud once, when Clint was piloting them in to a remote location to bust a drug cartel. “I’ve been trying a variety pack. Is there something specific I should be looking for?”

“You couldn’t find what I’m looking for,” he said, and then opened the hatch so the scream of the wind would drown her out until he jumped.

One time Tony called him to ask if he wanted to get drinks, “Or, you know, apple juice, given your metabolism, what I’m saying is Pepper’s out of town and I’m so bored I could die.”

“Sure,” he said. “I’ll drink something useless.”

Tony laughed, and gave him the address for a bar. When he got there it was the kind of place Tony liked—all polish and class—that always made Steve feel like he was about to get asked to leave.

Tony was in a far back corner booth, frowning at a drink that looked like Scotch.

“Hey,” said Steve, sliding in across from him. “How’s it going?”

“Eh.” Tony waved a hand vaguely. “Fine. Just—I get lonely and I get bored and next thing you know I’m looking at whether I can reanimate dead flesh.”

“Don’t go Frankenstein on us. I don’t think the world needs that.”

“Thanks, Captain Buzzkill. I’d come to that conclusion all on my own.”

The waiter popped up at his elbow. “Sir, would you care for a drink?”

“What beers do you have?”

The waiter started rattling off a list. Steve cut him off and ordered the third one.

Tony tapped his fingers against his glass. “So how’s SHIELD going? You beating up some bad guys?”

“The usual. Well, not my old usual. No Nazis. And no aliens. But other than that, yeah.”

“Christ.” Tony leaned forward, arms crossed. It looked like this wasn’t the first drink, maybe wasn’t the second, either. “I don’t get it. You volunteered.”

“You volunteered to go to war. I mean, leaving aside offering up your body for science, which, you know, I feel like science has to say thanks for that one, because that could have gone really wrong,
but aside from that. You wanted to fight. A war.”

“It was the right thi—”

“Thing to do, yeah, yeah, I get it. I still don’t get what makes an otherwise sane human being go to war on purpose.”

“I would think you would know,” said Steve, “with your former line of work.”

“I didn’t! I never had a clue! If I’d known—well, you saw what I did when I figured it out. Christ, war is the worst.”

Steve fiddled with a stray coaster. “Not quite the worst.”

“What do you mean? How is people with guns shooting each other, blowing each other up, not the absolute pits?”

“It’s better than if Hitler had won.”

They sat in silence for a couple of minutes after that. Steve’s beer arrived, slid inconspicuously onto the table by a waiter apparently hellbent on earning his tip.

“Suppose I can’t really argue with that,” said Tony, finally, signaling the waiter for another drink. “Hitler’s kind of argument ender. Actually, on the Internet there’s a name for when you bring up Hitler to win, it’s called Godwin’s Law, it means the conversation is basically over.”

“Well, I feel like I have a pretty good handle on the subject.”

“Not saying you don’t, buddy. Just saying you’re going to get rhetorically lazy if you can keep relying on that.”

Steve rolled his eyes, and Tony managed a chuckle.

“No, but seriously,” said Tony, “I feel like since—since the whole thing, I’m just—I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop, you know?”

“It might,” said Steve. “Things can always get worse.”

Tony shook his head slowly. “I thought I had it figured. First there’s the whole, you know, building the suit, becoming a—do I get to call myself a hero now?”

“Yes.” There was still a knot of shame in his chest over that one.

“Great, yeah. So first there’s the becoming a hero, and then that fucking shitshow with Vanko, you know, you saw that?”

“Yeah.”

“Figured. So then I’m sitting there going, great, okay, I’ll just keep—I’ll keep doing Iron Man stuff, it’s fun, anyway, I get to fly around, play with the tech, and hey, look, I’m not slowly dying anymore! So that’s an upside! But then aliens from outer space show up and it is not like I was hoping for when I was a kid.”

Steve nodded, raising his eyebrows and sighing. He knew what that felt like.

“And now every time I look, I look up, I’m thinking, is this it? Is today the day the army comes we
"can’t fight?" Tony’s hands were shaking where he had them wrapped around his glass.

“Hey,” said Steve quietly. “It’s okay.”

“Tonight, yeah! As far as we know, yeah! But what happens when something comes through we haven’t figured out yet?”

“We fight it then. We deal with it then. Not today.”

“I can’t help it! I’m a scientist, we like to plan! We like information, we like to know what we’re up against. And what do we have? Diddly fucking squat. We don’t know what the size of the original Chitauri force was, how much they have left. We don’t know whether they breed those leviathans or construct them. We don’t know what their tech capacity is. We just forked it all over to the Asgardians when the Asgardians couldn’t keep a lid on it to begin with. So pardon me for being just a little bit concerned that we’re fucked.”

Steve sat, and Tony sat, and they didn’t say anything.

After a couple of minutes, Steve said, “It’s not—look. It’s not that you’re wrong. You’re not wrong. There’s a lot we don’t know. But look at what we put together, look at what we did, with no warning.”

“It was barely enough! It almost—we almost died, and I don’t know how to stop it from happening again.”

“I don’t think we can stop it. There’s always going to be war. There’s always going to be people who want something someone else has. That’s why there needs to be people like us.”

“I don’t want to be people like us,” said Tony.

Steve spun his beer bottle, just fidgeting, then said, “Well, then I don’t know what to tell you. I think you’re fucked.”

Tony cracked up laughing at that.

“Okay, no, but for real,” said Tony, “let’s skip the rest of the part where I depress you and myself and go straight to ranking the other Avengers in terms of hotness.”

“Oh, Thor, definitely,” said Steve.

That got Tony laughing again, very, very hard, doubled over the table.

“Shit,” said Tony, tears in his eyes, when he managed to straighten back up, “you didn’t even have to think about that one. Did you already think about it? Have you already ranked us? Oh my God, you think Thor is hotter than me.”

“He is basically a god.”

That set Tony off again. By the time Tony’d made it through that drink and one more, they’d categorically ranked every SHIELD employee they could think of, and Tony was ready to call it a night. Steve slung an arm around his waist and half-carried him out to the car.

“We could give you a ride?” Tony offered, but Steve shook his head.

“ Took the motorcycle.”
“And you’re still good to drive? Oh, right, yeah. You’re forever good to drive. All right. Try not to let your ghosts haunt you too much tonight.”

Steve smiled tightly. “Lost cause, buddy,” he said, slapping the roof of the car as he shut the door.

He spent a lot of time at the library. There were still books there, smelling of old paper, like they had when he was a kid. Even if there were banks of computers too, now.

He checked out books, but he did like to use their computers. It felt less like Nick was probably tracking what he looked up, there.

He had a burner phone that Nick didn’t have the number to. He didn’t know how long that would last, but it counted for something, made him feel like he had a little bit of independence, anyway.

The soft glow of lamps over the reading tables felt like coming home. He read The Invisible Man and To Kill a Mockingbird and 1984, and he tried to read at least one relatively new book every week or two, plucking them off the shelf where the librarians propped up their favorites. So he read American Gods and Harry Potter, and he re-read Lord of the Rings, and he finally, finally got around to finishing A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.

After that last one he sat at his kitchen table, staring at his clasped hands, until it turned dark.

Tony turned out to be right about there being more threats, but at least the next time somebody targeted Tony for violence, they were human. He didn’t call Steve until it was all over and Steve had tried him a couple dozen times, frantic with worry, finally getting through to Rhodes, who sighed heavily and yelled, “Tony, it’s your platonic supersoldier life partner! He’s worried!”

“I know it looked bad on the news,” said Tony, “but I’m fine, really, I swear,” and Steve laid into him.

Steve let him have it like he was Ma, laying down the law after a prank that could have gotten somebody killed, Tony, what were you thinking, don’t you ever do that again.

After Steve ran out of words, Tony was silent for a moment before he said, sounding a little choked up, “Oh my God, you actually do care. You were worried about me.”

“Of course I was!” Steve shouted into the phone. “So help me God if you ever give out your home address on television to terrorists again I am going to find you and beat you so hard you’ll be eating through a straw for the rest of your natural days! I will make you long for a death as swift as getting blown up!”

“I love you, too, Cap,” said Tony. “Oh, shoot, Pepper needs me. Anyway, we’re fine, good hearing from you, see you soon. We’re going on vacation! Bye!”

Steve managed not to shatter the phone but it was a close call.

The morning was cool, dawn just starting, when Steve went for his run. He was always careful to be quiet when he shut the door to his apartment and headed down the stairs; his sneakers squeaked enough, he didn’t want to wake up any of the neighbors.
The air was perfect. It flooded his lungs as he ran, and he felt like he always felt, like he could run forever without breaking a sweat. He wasn’t sure if he could decondition anymore, but he wasn’t too eager to find out.

The first time he passed the other guy, he just said, “On your left,” because that was the polite thing to do. He got a look at him while he was running up behind him—a black man, out for his own run, in green shorts and a big gray sweatshirt, cheekbones gleaming with sweat in the light.

The second time he passed him, he said it again, even though they weren’t on a narrow path. The guy snorted and said, through heavy breaths, “Uh-huh. On my left. Got it.”

By the third time, he was ready to just mess with the guy, who heard him coming and, jerking his head to the side, said, “Don't say it. Don't you say it.”

“On your left,” Steve said over him as he passed.

“Come on!” the guy yelled. It was pretty funny. He had a nice voice.

Steve backtracked a little on purpose to find him when he was finished running. He found the guy sitting back against a tree, clutching his chest and breathing hard. “Need a medic?”

The guy looked up and laughed. “I need a new set of lungs.” Steve put his hands on his hips, finally breathing hard himself. They talked a little shit. It was good.

“What unit you with?” Steve asked, gesturing at the logo on the sweatshirt.

“58th Pararescue. But now I'm working down at the VA.” He raised one arm and gestured with his fingers for Steve to give him a hand up. “Sam Wilson,” he said as Steve pulled him to his feet.

“Steve Rogers.”

“I kind of put that together.” Sam had braced his hands on his knees, but straightened up. “Must have freaked you out, coming home after the whole defrosting thing.”

“It takes some getting used to.” Steve turned to go. “It's good to meet you, Sam.”

Sam called after him, “It's your bed, right?”

He turned back. “What's that?”

Sam took a few steps towards him, but he stopped before he got too close. “Your bed, it's too soft. When I was over there, I'd sleep on the ground, use rocks for pillows, like a caveman. Now I'm home, lying in my bed, and it's like...”

“Lying on a marshmallow. Feel like I'm gonna sink right to the floor.” Steve was talking too fast, but Sam was giving him a faint smile anyway. “How long?”

“Two tours. You must miss the good old days, huh?”

“Well,” said Steve in a half-sarcastic drawl, “things aren't so bad. Food's a lot better. We used to boil everything. No polio is good. Internet, so helpful. I've been reading that a lot, trying to catch up.”

Sam was laughing again. He stuck his tongue between his lips and looked skyward for a second while he thought, and then said, one hand out toward Steve like this was critically important, “Marvin Gaye, 1972, Trouble Man soundtrack. Everything you missed jammed into one album.”
Steve was already pulling out his notebook, which at this point was half-serious (who the hell was Lucy?) and half-joking (because someone had said “but see, the moon landing,” with incredible intensity and absolutely refused to believe that Steve had heard of it before, and people kept telling him Star Wars and it was just faster to nod and write it down again and again). “I'll put it on the list.”

His phone went off and he glanced down—a text from Natasha, coming to pick him up. “All right, Sam, duty calls. Thanks for the run,” he said as he shook Sam’s hand, “if that's what you want to call running.”

“Oh, that's how it is?” Sam looked delighted.

“Oh, that's how it is.”

“Oh.” They finally let go of each other’s hands. Steve turned to leave again, but turned back again when Sam started talking. “Any time you want to stop by the VA, make me look awesome in front of the girl at the front desk, just let me know.”

He felt the smile slip off his face a little, kept it on through sheer will. In front of the girl. “I'll keep it in mind.” Of course. Stupid to think he might be, might want—

“Yeah.”

A fast little black car pulled up, and Natasha rolled down the window. “Hey, fellas. Either one of you know where the Smithsonian is? I'm here to pick up a fossil.”

“That's hilarious,” Steve said, rolling his eyes, as he pulled open the door.

Sam was looking past him, into the car, at Natasha. “How you doing?” he said, voice like honey.

“Hey,” she said back, with a little smile in it.

“Can’t run everywhere,” Steve said to Sam.

“No, you can’t.”

Rumlow’s explanation of the mission didn’t thrill him. “You know, I’m getting a little tired of being Fury’s janitor,” Steve said, but they finished putting the plan together anyway.

They were getting ready when Natasha said, “Did you do anything fun Saturday night?”

“Well, all the guys from my barbershop quartet are dead,” he said, “so, no, not really.”

“Coming up on the drop zone, Cap,” somebody said over the comm. Natasha was grinning at him.

“You know, if you ask Kristen out, from Statistics, she'd probably say yes.”

“That's why I don't ask,” he called over the noise as he put his cowl on.

“Too shy, or too scared?” Natasha called back.

“Too busy!” he yelled back as he stepped off the edge of the ramp, into nothingness. For a few seconds it was just him and the night sky, the boat glittering with lights below him. He tightened up to fall faster and went into the water clean, barely a splash, off their bow.

Being in the water was a little like Italy again, a little like that first frantic push up the beach, but then
he’d never gone in over his head. But he’d practiced this, now, and he pushed up through the ink until he could see the long, gently curving side of the boat, and he found the ropes he needed to make it up the side.

He took down the first men he ran into. When he heard the gun behind him and glanced back to see the scared man holding it, muttering, “Touchez-pas, touchez-pas!” he thought for a moment about just bringing the shield right up into his arm and seeing if the man could still get a shot off with a broken wrist.

Rumlow made the choice easy for him, taking him out neatly with one silenced bullet as he floated down in his parachute.

“Thanks,” said Steve.

“Yeah.” The smile Rumlow gave him was the one he always got when Steve was doing something brave but stupid, which was a lot. “You seemed pretty helpless without me.”

He was trying to raise Natasha on the comm a few minutes later when Batroc came out of nowhere, feet ringing off his shield.

“I thought you were more than just a shield,” Batroc said, in French.

Steve could feel himself starting to grin like a skull, tugging off the helmet. “On va voir.”

The rest of it was a disaster—finding Natasha at the computers, a mission of her own—but the fight. The fight was good.

Fury was one obnoxious son of a bitch. A lying son of a bitch.

“It’s called compartmentalization,” said Fury. “Nobody spills the secrets, because nobody knows them all.”

Steve said, softly, angrily, with a smile on his face that didn’t reach his eyes, “Except you.”

Fury stared at him for a minute before saying, “You're wrong about me. I do share. I'm nice like that.” He got up and Steve followed.

As the elevator descended, Steve said, “You know, they used to play music.”

Fury laughed shortly, silently, his hands behind him loosely gripping the metal bar, and told Steve a story about his grandfather—God only knew if it was true. Steve let his head hang, and then something caught his eye through the glass walls of the elevator. He stared openly, stepping forward to get a better look.

“Yeah, I know,” said Fury. “They’re a little bit bigger than a .22.”

There were three of them. Three fucking helicarriers. Three *secret* helicarriers.

“This is Project Insight,” Fury said as they walked under the massive hulls. “Three next-generation helicarriers synced to a network of targeting satellites.”

“Launched from the Lemurian Star,” said Steve. That part made sense, at least.

“Once we get them in the air, they never need to come down. Continuous sub-orbital flight, courtesy
of our new repulsor engines.”

“Stark?”

“He had a few suggestions once he got an up-close look at our old turbines. These new long-range precision guns can eliminate 1,000 hostiles a minute. The satellites can read a terrorist’s DNA before he steps outside his spider hole. We’re going to neutralize a lot of threats before they even happen.”

“Thought the punishment usually came after the crime.”

“We can’t afford to wait that long.”

“Who’s we?”

“After New York,” Fury said, tipping his head back to look up at the machines, “I convinced the World Security Council we needed a quantum surge in threat analysis. For once, we’re way ahead of the curve.”

Steve was staring at the helicarriers. “By holding a gun to everyone on Earth and calling it protection.”

Fury squared up to him, starting to get in his face. “You know, I read those SSR files. ‘Greatest Generation’? You guys did some nasty stuff.”

“Yeah, we compromised.” Compromise. Fury had no fucking idea. Compromise meant you lost everything, every damn thing, every person, every place, every thing, and kept going, like it was nothing, like you could just keep walking and talking like a real goddamned boy. “Sometimes in ways that made us not sleep so well. But we did it so that people could be free. This isn't freedom. This is fear.”

Fury took another step into his space. “SHIELD takes the world as it is, not as we’d like it to be. And it's getting damn near past time for you to get with that program, Cap.”

Steve just stared at him, letting the silence drag for a minute, before he said, “Don’t hold your breath.”

He turned and walked away.

He went to the museum, because it was an itch in his bones, this ugly desire to be reminded.

“...the world’s first super soldier,” droned the narration. He saw a kid staring at him, put a finger to his lips impulsively: shh. The kid nodded slowly.

Steve wandered into another section, knowing already what he’d find. It was so bizarre to see the mannequin with just the suggestion of a face in Bucky’s clothes. Well, reproductions. The ones he’d been wearing were lost with him, somewhere in the Alps—frozen and thawed almost seventy times, now, if the mountains thawed in the springs. He’d be gone, just bones, maybe, wrapped in fabric.

He was almost ready for it. Almost ready when he came face-to-face with Bucky’s ghost in the glass.

The narrator went on, “Best friends since childhood, Bucky Barnes and Steven Rogers were inseparable on both schoolyard and battlefield. Barnes is the only Howling Commando to give his life in service of his country.”
Steve stared for a long time at the films of the two of them. On repeat, wavering in and out of existence; Bucky’s smile.

The movie of Peggy was still hard, still hard, sitting alone in the darkened theater room. Listening to her choke on her tears. Aw, honey, he thought, I was never worth it.

“You should be proud of yourself, Peggy,” he said, looking at the photographs beside her bed.

“Mmm,” she said, following his gaze and smiling. “I have lived a life. My only regret is that you didn’t get to live yours.” She was watching him, and she said, still smiling but just a trace, “What is it?”

She could still read him like a book. He lowered his eyes. “For as long as I can remember, I just wanted to do what was right. I guess I’m not quite sure what that is any more. And I thought I could throw myself back in and follow orders. Serve. It’s just not the same.”

“You’re always so dramatic,” she said to him, laughing. He had to laugh, too; she wasn’t wrong, was she. “Look, you saved the world. We rather mucked it up.”

“You didn’t. Knowing that you helped found SHIELD is half the reason I stay.”

“Hey.” She took his hand in hers, the papery skin and ropey veins standing out as she squeezed. “The world has changed, and none of us can go back. All we can do is our best. And sometimes the best that we can do is to start—and start over.” She started to cough.

“You have a new target,” said Pierce.

The Winter Soldier nodded. The bank vault was quiet, damp, musty. It felt familiar.

“We expect him to be a difficult target. We’ll send in a strike team to soften him up, but you’ll be responsible for clean-up.”

Sam seemed like a good leader for group therapy. Got people talking. Steve—he didn’t want to talk. Not yet. Well, maybe just some chitchat. Say hi to Sam. Maybe make a friend. Talk about—about friends, and losing them, and maybe getting out of the business of war.

“What makes you happy?” asked Sam.

“I don’t know.”

Pierce had been right. The target was tough. The strike team had his car half-shredded with bullets, they’d clearly used the ram, but he was still going by the time he reached where the Winter Soldier had calculated they’d intersect.

He fired the explosive directly at the vehicle, and it worked like a charm. The blast caught the SUV and flipped it neatly—he stepped out of its way, leisurely.

By the time the car had skidded to a halt and he’d gotten to it, weapon ready, all that was left of the
target was a hole burned in the street.

He hadn’t failed in—he didn’t fail. He’d just need another crack at it.

What makes you happy? The wind in his hair was nice, he thought, as he parked the motorcycle. Didn’t quite count as happy, maybe.

He was jogging up the stairs when he heard his neighbor’s voice drifting down—she was on the phone. She glanced up from fiddling with her door and saw him, and added to him away from the phone, “Hi,” before going back to the conversation. When she hung up, she looked back at him and they chatted for a minute.

She was pretty, very pretty; blonde, curling hair, and even if she wasn’t a bruiser like Peggy she had toned arms, jogged up the stairs two at a time herself. A nurse, probably good with people, good with kids. He was smiling at her, thinking about Natasha getting on his case, getting him back into the world, when he asked her—well, sort of on a date.

She seemed maybe but not quite amenable, which was almost nice. Either she hadn’t noticed he was Captain America or she didn’t care. He nodded, and turned away, but then she added in a carrying voice, “Oh, and I think you left your stereo on.”

“Oh. Right. Thank you.”

There was music. It wasn’t loud, but loud enough that whoever was in there must have known he’d hear it; he was meant to hear it. It was a—warning? Threat?

He watched her until she’d gone, down the stairs. Then he went in. Kept his back to the wall. He put his head around the side and saw Nick Fury.

He leaned against the wall with his hip. Recalibrating. “I don't remember giving you a key.”

The conversation was cryptic, but the notes on the cellphone Nick held out to him—ears everywhere, SHIELD compromised—didn’t leave a lot to the imagination. He started turning, looking for someone hidden somewhere, a shooter with an eyeline.

But he was looking in the wrong places, because the bullets punched through the wall, a tight pattern of them that took Nick down in seconds.

The Winter Soldier knelt up on the roof, waiting. Watching.

In the apartment, the blond man who’d been talking, whose gaze he’d been following as someone sitting across from him stood up and moved toward him, crouched and dragged the target back into the kitchen, leaving a streak of blood. His head turned toward the window, searching for the shooter.

The Winter Soldier should have been running, withdrawing. Right then. He should have. The target was down. Injuries would be non-survivable at this distance from medical care.

He didn’t.

It had taken him extra seconds, precious extra seconds, to shoot the target in the first place. Because the man standing across from him, the man whose apartment that must be, looked—there was
something about him. Bells were ringing in his brain. It was deafening, in the normal city noise of the night around him.

“Don’t—trust—anyone,” Fury gasped out, raggedly, pressing a thumb drive into Steve’s hand. As Steve took it, somebody started pounding on the door.

He saw her advancing down the entryway, gun out, laser sight. The pretty neighbor. The neighbor. Sure. “Captain Rogers? Captain, I'm Agent 13 of SHIELD Special Service.”

“Kate?” he said, quietly.

“I'm assigned to protect you.”

“On whose order?”

She got around the corner and saw Fury sprawled out. She nodded down at him, dropping to kneel. “His.” (Easy enough to say when Fury couldn’t verify.) She was reaching for a pulse—maybe she was a nurse, maybe she was hostile, but then she got on the radio. “Foxtrot is down, he's unresponsive. I need EMTs.”

The voice on the other end asked, “Do we have a 20 on the shooter?”

“Tell him I'm in pursuit,” said Steve. And one more time, he took off running.

The Winter Soldier saw the moment the blond man decided to pursue. He saw the face harden with resolve, and then he was lunging for the window, snatching something up as he went.

It was time to run, now.

The Winter Soldier was heavy, but fast. He tore across the roof without getting winded, hurtled from rooftop to rooftop, but he could hear the blond man beneath him in the building, running, too, crashing through doors and walls, shattering windows. He could hear the man pacing him. Trying to get ahead.

But the Winter Soldier didn’t have go through obstacles, and he hit the final rooftop in the exit strategy before the blond man did.

He heard the grunt and then the soft, singing noise, and without knowing why, he snapped his metal arm back—and he caught something that hit him with a huge, jarring blow. But he caught it, and he stopped it.

The man was staring at him, shock in his eyes, and there was a moment of vertigo. He looked like—something, something—but what—he looked—he was—what was he, who was he—he looked—

He threw the shield back, hard enough to hurt, hard enough to stun, but not to kill. Not to kill that man.

He and Natasha stood together, looking in at Nick lying unconscious on the table.

“Is he going to make it?” she said softly.
“I don’t know.”

“Tell me about the shooter.”

“He’s fast. Strong.” *He looked like he was in pain* wouldn’t have made sense. He hadn’t taken any injuries. But that moment where their eyes had met—he’d looked—“Had a metal arm.”

Hill came up to stand with them again.

“Ballistics?” asked Natasha in a shadow of her voice.

“Three slugs, no rifling. Completely untraceable.”

Natasha said, “Soviet-made.”

“Yeah.”

There was a flurry of activity in the OR, cutting off any questions Hill might have asked—or Steve—and Natasha looked sick, whispering *Don’t do this to me, Nick.*

It was quiet, after all, at the end. “Time of death, 1:03 a.m.” they said, and he felt brittle, breakable.

He walked out of the room. He found the vending machine, hid the drive as best he could, because that was the best he could do, because that was all—that was more than anyone should have been able to ask from him.

“Why was Fury in your apartment?”

“I don’t know.”

They were talking to him, distracting him, trying to get him to come back to SHIELD—

“You’re a terrible liar,” Natasha said to him bitterly, which was a little unfair, considering how many things he’d lied about. Only some of them showed.

Steve did not particularly enjoy his conversation with Pierce, who seemed a hell of a lot more interested in finding out what Fury had said than who killed him.

“He told me not to trust anyone,” said Steve, at the end, tired, heavy with it.

Pierce’s lips quirked in displeasure. “I wonder if that included him.”

“Orders from Pierce,” said one of the techs. “Wipe time again.”

“Any time in cryo?”

“No, he’s going to need him for a mission. Soon. Says max days, probably hours.”

The Winter Soldier looked up from where he was sitting. He’d completed the mission. He’d made it back to base. He’d thought—he’d hoped maybe they wouldn’t wipe him, this time.

“These back to back wipes aren’t good. We don’t know how well the protocol works if there’s no cryo, we don’t really know what effects it has.”
“You’re telling me. Still. Orders.”

Ever since the successful attempt at the target. Ever since he ran over the rooftops. He’d been thinking, he’d had something rattling around in his brain, a face, a face. He didn’t—he didn’t want to lose it.

“Winter Soldier,” said one of the techs in flawless Russian, “please go to the chair.”

He did.

Steve got onto the elevator, gripped the metal bar with both hands. It was cool and slick through the gauntlets. How long had it been since he’d been in here with bare hands? Clean hands?

Rumlow got on with some men, murmured some pity. More and more men got on. They looked tense. They wore suits but had guns. It took a minute for Steve to catch on—too long, really, considering Nick’s last words. They weren’t here for the elevator. They were here for him.

“Before we get started, does anyone want to get out?” Steve said, in a hard voice. Marlene would have approved. She’d always said You sound too soft, sugar buns, you make people think you’ll take whatever they dish out. But it was the new body, back then, his fear of hurting someone with it.

He wasn’t afraid of that anymore.

The electric prod was bad. He’d seen things like it before. People outside had thought stun guns were new. He’d almost laughed when he heard that: when he was a kid and they were drunk and talkative, he’d met men who used field telephones for it in the first World War, for God’s sake.

But the suit took some of it, and he hadn’t gone in to Erskine’s machine for nothing.

He had a lot more practice jumping from high places than they were giving him credit for, he thought, staring at the glass wall of the elevator—he wasn’t going down like this, not like this, not leaving behind a poisoned well, a nest of snakes.

The fall wasn’t peaceful, and took too long, and didn’t end in water. But it ended with him getting up.

He couldn’t go back to his apartment. That was a given. Couldn’t use a credit card. SHIELD would have turned them all to useless plastic and odds were they had trackers anyway. But he had cash—old-fashioned habit, Fury had said, mockingly but without any meanness to it—and there were stores everywhere, so he had gotten out of what he could of the uniform, stashed the parts he figured would have trackers in a school gym he slipped through. Bought clothes as fast as he could and headed back to the hospital. To the flash drive.

Which was gone.

Natasha’s reflection in the glass was enraging. He slammed her back through the door to an empty office and grilled her in furious whispers, hands clenching on her arms. There would be bruises.

Finally, she gave him something—whether it was true or not, who knew. The fear in her eyes meant nothing. “I know who killed Fury. Most of the intelligence community doesn’t believe he exists. The ones that do call him the Winter Soldier. He’s credited with over two dozen assassinations in the last 50 years.”
“So he's a ghost story.”

“Five years ago, I was escorting a nuclear engineer out of Iran. Somebody shot out my tires near Odessa. We lost control, went straight over a cliff. I pulled us out. But the Winter Soldier was there. I was covering my engineer so he shot him straight through me.” She lifted her shirt; there was a mangled scar. “Soviet slug. No rifling. Bye-bye, bikinis.” There was a little smirk on her lips.

“Yeah, I bet you look terrible in them now.”

“Going after him is a dead end. I know, I've tried.” She held up the drive between them. “Like you said, he's a ghost story.”

He plucked the drive from her hand. No resistance in her fingers. “Well, let's find out what the ghost wants.”

“We'll have to find somewhere,” she said. “Not the hospital.”

“No,” he said. There might be computers here, but they’d all be locked, and if there was a fight here—if they called in a strike here—there would be too many civilians.

“I have an idea. You're not going to like it.”

“When do I ever?” he grumbled, and for a minute they sounded so much like they always had that it hurt.

“The mall. There’ll be an Apple store. We can plug it in there and be gone in no time.”

“Possible civilian casualties—”

“Too public. They’re not going to risk blowing it without getting us in the clear first. We won’t give them that opportunity.”

He nodded slowly. “Okay. Okay. I’m on board.”

“Good.”

“I still hate the idea.”

“I knew you would,” she said, a trace of a smile on her face. She was still deadly pale, washed out. She snagged a man’s coat off a chair for him on the way out; he thought about protesting, but took it anyway. He’d done worse.

“Natasha,” he said as they struck out on foot, sliding through blind spots in alleys, ducking behind street vendors, to stay out of the way of cameras that would be working on facial recognition processing, just like for Clint, back when he was someone who needed to be found, back when SHIELD had been doing the right thing.

“What?” she asked, sounding distracted.

“If you’re lying to me—”

“I know.”

“No. I was going to say, I’m going to really regret it, because you were my best friend since they thawed me.”
She didn’t say anything for a minute, and then said, “Well, if you’d ever let me set you up with anyone, maybe you’d have made some other friends, too.”

“Oh, like *that nice nurse across the hall*?”

“She is nice!”

“You knew she was SHIELD!”

“Of course I knew. You’d have something in common.”

“She shot me down, anyway.”

“You tried? I’m proud of you. Well, she was still keeping her cover.”

“Lying to me.”

“Same thing in the field, Rogers.”

He shook his head. “I really hope to God you aren’t working with HYDRA, because if you are, not only am I screwed here, but with my luck you’ll try and set me up with the executioner.”

He was spared any more of that by their arrival at the mall.

“The drive has a Level Six homing program, so as soon as we boot up SHIELD will know exactly where we are.”

She was working on it when the guy came up to them. “Can I help you guys with anything?”

“Oh, no. My fiancé was just helping me with some honeymoon destinations,” she said, syrupy sweet, which stuck him in another awful conversation.

“You said nine minutes,” he muttered as the guy walked away. “Come on.”

“Relax,” she murmured. “Got it.” She saw how he looked at it, getting closer to the screen. “You know it?”

Camp Lehigh. “I used to. Let’s go.”

They were on the escalator when he spotted Rumlow. Natasha did, too; she turned around to face him.

“Kiss me,” she said.

“What?”

“Public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable.”

“Yes, they do.”

She pulled him in for a kiss; he didn’t move, didn’t breathe—her hand cupped around his face shielded it from view; her hair, though, that straight red hair, that would surely—Rumlow went right by them. It was insane.

“You still uncomfortable?” she asked after she released him.
“It's not exactly the word I would use,” he said grimly, and followed her out.

When the Winter Soldier came to, later, wiped down, the soft haze of the sedative clearing from his brain, he wasn’t empty. It wasn’t like it usually was. There was something there, crisp and beautiful, hovering just out of reach.

He concentrated on it until it started to take form. His head hurt. It was—he’d been—he’d caught something. He’d caught something round. Something round, something round, something round. Metal. It had hit his hand—his metal hand. He’d caught something round and metal in his metal hand.

It took hours. Painful hours of reconstructing it one sliver at a time until suddenly there was the image, flashing in front of his eyes, a face, a blond man, he couldn’t have said where or when, it could have been a thousand years ago. But there was a pair of eyes he recognized. Electric blue, more vivid than a weapons blast.

He held onto that blue as he fell asleep, exhausted.

“Is there a reason we’re not calling Tony?” Steve asked, as they eased away from the curb.

Natasha was staring out the window. “He worked on Insight.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t have—”

“There are all kinds of things we think we can be sure of, Steve. Do you think every person we know is incorruptible?”

He drove in silence for a long time.

Finally he said, “I don’t know if he’s incorruptible. But I think he’s a good man.”

Natasha snorted. “He’s a scared man. A scared man is a man who compromises his principles.”

“Still,” he said. But he didn’t argue it further.

They hit Jersey before she asked him, “Where did Captain America learn how to steal a car?”

“Nazi Germany,” he said tightly.

“Mmm.”

“And we're borrowing. Get your feet off the dash.”

She pulled her feet off the dash slowly and deliberately and without taking her eyes off him, which was not a good sign. “All right, I have a question for you, which you do not have to answer. I feel like, if you don't answer it though, you're kind of answering it, you know—”

He cut her off to ask in annoyance, “What?”

She was openly grinning now. “Was that your first kiss since 1945?”
“That bad, huh?” He’d hardly—just a couple of girls, and then—there was a split second of
memories crowding into his head, rushing him—what if he’d been—what if he hadn’t—

“I didn't say that.”

“Well, it kind of sounds like that's what you're saying.” It was easier this way. Easier if they didn’t—
nobody needed to know. It was a better world but he wasn’t a better man.

“No, I didn't. I just wondered how much practice you've had.”

“I don't need practice.”

“Everybody needs practice.” They were talking over each other, it reminded him of—no, no, no,
stop thinking about it.

“It was not my first kiss since 1945.” (That was, technically, true.) “I'm ninety-five, I'm not dead.”

“Nobody special, though?”

He huffed out a laugh. Somebody special—

“Believe it or not, it's kind of hard to find someone with
shared life experience.”

“Well, that's all right. You just make something up.”

“What, like you?”

“I don't know. The truth is a matter of circumstance. It's not all things to all people,
all the time. Neither am I.” She had a little smile on, but it was tired.

“That's a tough way to live.”

“It's a good way not to die, though.”

“You know, it's kind of hard to trust someone, when you don't know who that someone really is.”

“Yeah.” Her head lolled toward him on the seat. “Who do you want me to be?”

“How about a friend?” he said, quickly, glancing over at her.

“Well, there's a chance you might be in the wrong business, Rogers.” They pulled up to the gates.

“This is it.”

On recon, trying to figure out what the big secret was at the deserted base, she paused by Peggy’s
picture. “Who's the girl?”

He stared at her blankly. There was no way Natasha wouldn’t know who Peggy was. She was
saying it to—to test him, to watch him squirm. He said nothing.

“If you're already working in a secret office, why do you need to hide the elevator?”

They were poking around the technology when they woke up Zola. Or something that managed to
sound like Zola. Managed to make his skin crawl.

“Accessing archive. HYDRA was founded on the belief that humanity could not be trusted with its
own freedom. What we did not realize was that if you try to take that freedom, they resist. The war
taught us much. Humanity needed to surrender its freedom willingly. After the war, S.H.I.E.L.D. was founded, and I was recruited. The new HYDRA grew. A beautiful parasite inside S.H.I.E.L.D.” It was getting to him, making him sweat; the top of his head felt like it was going to come off. “For 70 years, HYDRA has been secretly feeding crisis, reaping war, and when history did not cooperate, history was changed.” There was the brief flicker of a metal arm—red star on it—

Natasha said, “That's impossible. S.H.I.E.L.D. would have stopped you.”

“Accidents will happen,” droned the machine, and showed them Howard Stark’s face, his wife, eyes blotted out. Howard. “HYDRA created a world so chaotic that humanity is finally ready to sacrifice its freedom to gain its security. Once a purification process is complete, HYDRA'S new world order will arise. We won, Captain. Your death amounts to the same as your life. A zero sum.”

He slammed his fist into the screen. The screen shattered, cracks spiderwebbing out from the center.

It only took a moment to reboot on another screen. “As I was saying...”

“What's on this drive?” Steve demanded.

“Project Insight requires insight. So, I wrote an algorithm.”

“What kind of algorithm? What does it do?”

“The answer to your question is fascinating. Unfortunately, you shall be too dead to hear it.”

The doors started to shut. Steve hurled his shield to block them, but it was too late.

Natasha pulled out her phone. “Steve, we got a bogey. Short range ballistic. 30 seconds tops.”

“What fired it?”

“SHIELD,” she said, voice clipped.

“I am afraid I have been stalling, Captain. Admit it.” He was looking around frantically, spotted a metal grate in the floor as Zola droned, “It's better this way. We are, both of us, out of time.” He yanked the grate out with his bare hands and pulled Natasha in just as the blast hit, with a hail of debris, cold, wet dirt covering him.

_Hail Mary, full of grace, he thought. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, be with us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee..._ until the fire stopped raining down and he realized, with a dull aching resentment, that he was going to live. Again.

The Winter Soldier reported to Pierce’s quarters as per orders.

“The timetable has moved. Our window is limited. Two targets, Level Six. They already cost me Zola. I want confirmed death in 10 hours.”

The maid came back. She saw the Winter Soldier. He watched Pierce shoot the maid.

Pierce turned back to him. “I'll have someone else handle the body,” he said. “You take care of the targets.”

The Winter Soldier nodded once, tersely.
The ride back happened in another stolen car, ditched and replaced twice, the last one stashed in the garage of a house Natasha surveyed before pronouncing temporarily abandoned. “Nobody home,” she said, grimly, “nobody coming back for a while.”

When they made it to their destination Sam slid the glass door open, confusion and concern on his face. “Hey, man.”

“I’m sorry about this,” said Steve. “We need a place to lay low.”

Natasha chimed in, “Everyone we know is trying to kill us.”

He glanced back and forth between them. “Not everyone.” Sam’s eyes were hard, but not unkind. He let them in and closed the blinds. “You want to clean up? Bathroom’s through there.”

Natasha gestured ahead of them at the bathroom door, just visible. “Age before beauty,” she said, very seriously, and he made a face at her and flapped his hand. She shrugged and went ahead.

“Is she going to need anything?” asked Sam from behind him.

“She’ll figure it out. Clean clothes, but I don’t think she’ll fit yours.”

“I’ll put out a tee and some sweats in case,” said Sam, and he started rustling through a closet, emerging with a pile of clothes that he went in to dump on the bed.

Steve blew out a huge breath. “You’re a better man than we deserve to find.”

Sam just pursed his mouth a little in thought. “Those clothes look like somebody tried to bury you alive in them.”

“Close,” said Steve bitterly. “They bombed a bunker we were in.”

“Holy shit, for real?”

“Yeah. It’s... it turns out SHIELD is rotten.”

Sam whistled softly. “Damn. That’s going to be a problem.”

“You’re telling me. I don’t know how long it will take them to figure out that Nat and I aren’t dead.”

“You sure they will?”

“I’m sure.” They’d comb the wreckage, looking for charred bodies, and they wouldn’t find any; they’d look for DNA, for bone fragments, and find nothing. And then they’d realize that Steve and Nat were on the run, and God only knew how long it would take them to find Sam.

He looked at Sam, and Sam looked back at him, and Sam gave him a short, firm nod. Sam was on board. Sam had figured it out.

“All yours,” called Natasha from the bedroom.

Sam raised his eyebrows at Steve. “She always this fast?”

“Nat’s very efficient.”
Steve didn’t bother with a shower, just stripping off the hoodie and t-shirt, switching them out for one of Sam’s tank tops and scrubbing off the residue. The bruises were fading, cuts closing, but there were places where embedded shrapnel was still trying to force its way out.

When he looked up from scrubbing the last of it off his arms, he could see Natasha sitting on the bed, looking deadly tired. He stuck his head out. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said.

He tossed the towel down and came out to sit next to her on the bed. “What's going on?”

“When I first joined S.H.I.E.L.D I thought I was going straight.” Her voice was still hoarse from the smoke. “But I guess I just traded in the K.G.B for H.Y.D.R.A. I thought I knew whose lies I was telling, but,” she cocked her head to one side, smiling a terrible little smile, “I guess I can’t tell the difference anymore.”

“There’s a chance you might be in the wrong business,” he said very seriously.

She cracked a ghost of a laugh. “I owe you.”

“It’s okay.”

“If it was the other way around, and it was down to me to save your life, now,” her voice dropped, “you be honest with me, would you trust me to do it?”

“I would now. And I’m always honest.”

“Well, you seem pretty chipper for someone who just found out they died for nothing.”

“Well,” he sighed, sitting back against the wall, “guess I just like to know who I’m fighting.”

Sam leaned into the doorway. “I made breakfast. If you guys eat that sort of thing.”

“Are you kidding me?” asked Natasha. “He eats like it’s going out of style. Every time.”

“Super soldiER, super metabolism.”

“Sure, sure.”

The revelation over breakfast that Sam was ready and willing to pilot an experimental flight exoskeleton for them was a good one, even if they were going to have to steal it from a secure facility. Steve felt a moment of gratitude, a profound rush, and then thought, He’s missed the sky. Because you could—you could love a person, and losing them—but being in the air, that meant feeling alive.

They decided to go after Sitwell.

Sitwell’s story wasn’t a good story. But it made sense.

They bundled him back into the car and got ready to go.

“We’ll use him to bypass the DNA scans and access the helicarriers directly,” said Steve.

“What? Are you crazy?” Sitwell was leaning forward. “That is a terrible, terrible idea.”
There was a sound on the roof. *Thump.* Steve knew—that meant—

Sitwell’s window shattered inward and a metal arm yanked him out, sent him flying, before any of them could move. The gunshots started coming down through the roof. They would have hit Nat if she hadn’t scrambled out of the way, up front, pretty much into Steve’s lap. The footsteps moved forward—Steve slammed the e-brake, and the car screeched to a halt, the smell of burning rubber all around them as the figure flew off and landed in front of them—rolling, turning, digging his metal hand into the pavement for grip. Sparks flew, and the screeching noise from it was penetrating his brain.

The man pulled himself to his feet. Long hair, mask, black tactical suit. Metal arm out and shining in the sun, brazen as anything. This wasn’t a *ghost story,* this was—

The Humvee slammed into them from the back while Nat was aiming at him.

The Winter Soldier flipped himself up and onto the roof of the car again as they skidded toward him, back bumper crushed to the front of the Humvee. His fingers dug into the metal of the roof like it was fabric. After a second or two, he plunged his arm through the roof and ripped out the steering wheel.

Sam yelled “*Shit!*” just as Nat got her hands on her gun again. She took aim and started firing, and the Winter Soldier leapt casually off their car and onto the front of the Humvee behind them. The cars separated, but the Humvee rammed them again, sending their car spinning out of control. It started edging up the concrete sidewall.

“Hang on!” Steve shouted as he slid his shield around, and he slammed the door hard enough that it fell off its hinges and they dropped out with it onto the bridge—just as the car began to turn lazy flips in the air.

When Steve stopped rolling and could get his eyes back on the action, the Winter Soldier was being handed a *fucking rocket launcher holy shit.* He lifted it as Steve shoved Natasha to the side and raised the shield, and that shield was really something; it took the whole force. Steve went flying off the bridge and right through the windshield of a goddamn bus.

The impact of the truck and the bus flipping was something he could have done without.

The Winter Soldier was advancing on the secondary targets. Backup was peppering the abandoned hulk of an overturned van, before the two of them shot out from behind it like startled birds. The woman made it over the concrete median before the explosion could take her out, but the second explosion billowed out satisfyingly from where she’d been crouching, so he grabbed another firearm off backup as he went to check the other side of the bridge. The blond man should still be in the bus.

He was aiming when the shot took out one lens of his goggles. He whipped back around, dropping behind the concrete; his hand crept up, and he pulled off the damaged goggles. *No good to me,* he thought. He’d just have to squint through the sun, if it came to that. He’d done more under worse conditions.

When he rolled up to layer the area with bullets, she wasn’t there anymore. (Of course she wasn’t. She was a professional, wasn’t she?) The crack of gunfire from her location behind the truck was giving her position away.

Deliberately, he thought, watching her take off running down the street. She was glancing back over
her shoulder at him. Offering herself as bait.

“I have her,” he said to backup. “Find him.”

He heard her voice. Tinny, he thought, not quite right. He rolled a grenade toward the sound, but he wasn’t surprised in the split second after the explosion when she came down on his shoulders, garrote out. He got his hand up between the wire and his throat and managed to fling her off. She hit the side of a car with a sickening crack.

He was grabbing up his gun when she came up, too fast, he thought, and a little metal disc came out of her hand and stuck to his arm. The shock it delivered wasn’t much compared to what he was used to, but it left the arm useless for long seconds.

She was running away. He dug his fingers in around the disc and ripped it off.

Steve saw Nat go down—from the jerk of her body, she’d taken a bullet to the shoulder. He’d—he was short on time, he needed to get to her.

The Winter Soldier was standing, climbing onto a car hood to get a better angle for the shot.

Steve ran. His feet were loud on the pavement, and the Winter Soldier’s head snapped toward him. When Steve brought the shield up, the Winter Soldier was already bringing his fist down.

The noise of it was incredible.

The target fought like a song. Fast, and bright, in his ridiculous khaki pants, and the Winter Soldier knew how he would fight, knew how he would spin—it was like dancing, like waiting for it to fall into place. He discarded the gun as useless (he’d kept firing even after he knew it was, sloppy) and pulled out a knife, twirling it between his fingers to hide the angle it was at, and the target just kept coming, grim determination in the set of his jaw.

They fought across the pavement, car to car, and the target managed to get his hands back on the shield—oh, very good, he thought to himself—and then pinned the Soldier’s arm against it, and used the immobilization to hit him in the face and spin him, flipping him through a complete arc—

He was rolling to his feet as he heard the mask fall. He could breathe again, really breathe. He hated the mask, how hot it was and how sweaty it got. He would never take it off on his own, but this was acceptable.

He turned back to the target again. And froze, long seconds ticking away as they stared each other.

That face—that face, like the target had seen a—a ghost, not just—that wasn’t the right face, nobody looked like that when they saw the Winter Soldier, nobody—who—

“Bucky?” said the target, in a raw, disbelieving voice.

He heard himself grit out in English, “Who the hell is Bucky?”

He was moving forward, without thinking, when something crashed into him from behind and sent him sprawling. Sloppy, sloppy, he thought, but he couldn’t quite care, his whole brain was on fire. It didn’t make sense, none of it made sense, why would someone know him here, why would he have
a name, why would it be, what was happening.

He got back to his feet, sidearm in hand, ready to take another shot, when there was a blast from the rocket launcher. It took him down, long enough for him to hear the sirens. Backup’s backup, finally arriving. He’d failed; three targets, no bodies.

He didn’t care, couldn’t care. *Who the hell is*  

*Who the hell are you*

The STRIKE team surrounded him, guns drawn, shouting, but it was all just white noise. He couldn’t hear a word of it, even as they bundled him into the back of a van.

“It was him,” said Steve. His mouth felt like it was full of cotton wool, his tongue didn’t want to work. “He looked right at me like he didn’t even know me.”

Sam’s face was screwed up in concern and disbelief. “How is that even possible? It was, like, seventy years ago.”

The answer came like a lightning flash. “Zola.”

Oh, God, of course. Of course it wasn’t over with Zola, what had he been thinking, he could have killed Zola there in the hallway, there had been a moment where he could have—and he hadn’t. He could have killed *himself* for that, then.

Steve went on, just reciting the facts, as his brain raced. “Bucky’s whole unit was captured in ‘43. Zola experimented on him. Whatever he did helped Bucky survive the fall. They must have found him and—” He had to cut himself off.

Twice. Twice he hadn’t killed somebody he should have. Twice it had cost Bucky everything. And those eyes didn’t know him, didn’t know *himself*, Bucky, Bucky, baby, why aren’t you, why don’t you know me, why? *You knew me in the pitch-black, you knew me when they’d strapped you to a table and drugged you out of your mind, you knew me like the back of your hand. Body and voice and soul.*

“None of that’s your fault, Steve.”

Steve shut his eyes, head lolling back. He couldn’t stop thinking about—there was too much, too much history there (Bucky’s eyes going soft when Steve was hurting, Bucky’s hair, he’d run his fingers through it a hundred times). And then to hear his *voice* again, like he’d hoped, prayed, feared, and it was a *cruel fucking joke*. That time in Novgorod. His hamstring. Bucky had carried him so easily. He’d wondered, hadn’t he, but he’d pushed it away.

“Even when I had nothing,” he got out, through the chaos in his head, “I had Bucky.”

Given the state he was in, it was a good thing it turned out Maria Hill was undercover in the van with them. She popped the STRIKE guys and pulled the helmet off, and then she took them where they needed to be.

Fury was alive, that son of a *bitch.*
He could hear Pierce’s footsteps before the handler showed, shoes clicking over the marble of the bank’s floor. The hushed voice of one of the techs: “Sir. He’s unstable. Erratic.” Pierce didn’t slow down for that, just kept coming until he was in the room, waving with annoyance at the armed handlers, put those down, without words.

“Mission report,” said Pierce, and paused. Over the racket in his head it was like listening to a mosquito buzz. It didn’t feel meaningful, didn’t feel real. When the Winter Soldier didn’t answer, he said, “Mission report now.”

The Winter Soldier still didn’t answer. Pierce put his hands on his knees, leaning forward to stare into his face. Then slapped him, hard, across the cheek.

The Winter Soldier lifted his head, finally, making eye contact. Instead of giving a mission report he said, “The man on the bridge. Who was he?”

Pierce looked annoyed, but awkward, on top of that. His eyes flickered as he started to answer. Lying. “You met him earlier this week on another assignment.”

“I knew him,” the Winter Soldier repeated. The words came so easily.

Pierce’s lips pursed. He pulled up a stool and started to talk in his low, persuasive voice. “Your work has been a gift to mankind. You shaped the century. And I need you to do it one more time. Society’s at a tipping point between order and chaos. And tomorrow morning, we’re going to give it a push. But if you don’t do your part, I can’t do mine. And HYDRA can’t give the world the freedom it deserves.”

The Winter Soldier’s face was working; he couldn’t keep it still, couldn’t stop breathing hard. “But I knew him,” he said, again, knowing Pierce would hate it, but knowing Pierce was a liar.

Pierce stood up. “Prep him,” he said over his shoulder as he left.

One of the techs protested, “He’s been out of cryo freeze too long.”

“Then wipe him and start over.”

He couldn’t help shaking as the chair tipped back, as the bite block slid into place between his teeth. The terrible buzzing in his head, the fear at the coming pain competing with that single piece of bright knowledge, that he knew the man on the bridge, and that Pierce was lying.

Let me keep this, he thought, desperately, as the electrodes closed in and drove out everything but a blinding white pain.

Steve and Nick fought over whether SHIELD could be rescued, but it couldn’t. It was rotten to the core, anybody could see that. Burn it down. Start over.

“Look, I didn't know about Barnes.”

“Even if you had, would you have told me? Or would you have compartmentalized that, too?” He was keeping it together. But he was thinking I'd have killed you, I’d have tried like hell to kill you.

The Winter Soldier was waiting for orders.
“You have a target,” said Pierce. “Anyone helping him is to be considered a collateral target, but he is your primary target.”

Pierce had to show him a picture. He kept his breathing even, so Pierce wouldn’t know that his heart rate had gone up. He couldn’t have said why.

“You failed to liquidate him formerly,” said Pierce. “So do it right this time. Make it count.”

He’d failed? He’d—that was strange.

“He’s gonna be there, you know.” Sam’s voice was calm.

Steve nodded tersely, looking out over the edge of the bridge. “I know.”

“Look, whoever he used to be and the guy he is now, I don’t think he’s the kind you save. He’s the kind you stop.”

“I don’t know if I can do that.” He knew. He knew he couldn’t. Put a bullet—where? In the head he’d held, the chest he’d touched? But if Sam knew he was lying, he was kind enough not to call him on it.

“Well, he might not give you a choice. He doesn’t know you.”

“He will.” He has to.

“He has to. Gear up. It's time.”

“You gonna wear that?” asked Sam, nodding at his clothes.

“No.” An idea was taking shape in his head. He knew where his old uniform was, could see it clearly in his mind’s eye. “If you’re going to fight a war, you got to wear a uniform.”

And if you had to steal it from a museum first, well, they’d done worse. They’d done a lot worse.

The Winter Soldier was deployed to the facility in time to catch the speech. The voice felt like someone was running a current through his skin.

“Attention all SHIELD agents, this is Steve Rogers. You’ve heard a lot about me over the last few days. Some of you were even ordered to hunt me down. But I think it’s time you know the truth. SHIELD is not what we thought it was. It’s been taken over by HYDRA. Alexander Pierce is their leader. The STRIKE and Insight crew are HYDRA as well. I don’t know how many more, but I know they’re in the building. They could be standing right next to you. They almost have what they want. Absolute control. They shot Nick Fury. And it won’t end there. If you launch those helicarriers today, HYDRA will be able to kill anyone that stands in their way, unless we stop them. I know I’m asking a lot. But the price of freedom is high. It always has been. And it’s a price I’m willing to pay. And if I’m the only one, then so be it. But I’m willing to bet I’m not.”

Talk to me again, he thought, but the voice cut off.

“Hey, Sam, gonna need a ride.”

“Roger. Let me know when you’re ready.”
“I just did!” Steve yelled, plunging off the edge of the helicarrier. The air was screaming past his face. He was trying to spread out, get more surface area, slow himself down, but he was still falling fast, fast, fast.

When Sam caught his arm, he could swear he felt Sam’s shoulder dislocate, but he didn’t let go.

Sam let him off on the last helicarrier, giving him a little shit. The attack from the Winter Soldier came from the side. Steve should have—he should have been expecting it, Bucky was always fast, always so damn fast—and he heard Sam shout, “Steve!” and then the grunts and yells of a fight.

The secondary target went down with the tool he’d been issued specifically for it and went over the edge with a kick, no match for the superior weight. The Winter Soldier watched him fall. Something hot and strange and ugly was struggling inside his chest.

He’d been talking with the target—fighting with the target—he—who was he? Nobody, he felt like snarling. Nobody at all. Secondary target.

But the Winter Soldier had seen him before. He was sure of it. Seen him before, fought him before, hated him before.

A few moments of sick tension later as Steve struggled to pull himself back up, Sam’s voice came through. “Cap! Cap, come in. Are you okay?”

He finally managed to get a decent handhold. “Yeah, I’m here! I’m still on the helicarrier. Where are you?”

“I’m grounded. The suit’s down. Sorry, Cap.”

“Don’t worry. I got it.”

He spotted the opening he needed and went for it. He had to get in and swap out the targeting system chips. (Don’t think, don’t think about what else you’re here to do.) He was clattering across the metal catwalk when he heard the soft ringing noises of boots ahead of him, and he looked up, right into Bucky’s eyes.

His hair was long, now, like it had never been. Grown out, falling around his face, into his eyes, his eyes red around the edges. He had stubble, someone must be shaving him sometimes. He looked like he was waiting for orders, or like he was about to say Don’t do anything stupid, Stevie.

“People are going to die, Buck,” he said, softly, feeling the weight of his old suit across his face, his chin. “I can’t let that happen. Please don’t make me do this.” Empty threat. Bucky had to know, couldn’t know.

Bucky was almost smiling. It was—it was more than he could take. They were running out of time. He gritted his teeth and threw the shield.

The primary target had engaged. The primary target had eyes like a blue core of fire. The primary target had a round metal shield that made a singing noise as it flew through the air. The primary target fought like dancing.
He knew the gunshot was good, the soft sound of it grazing the target’s side, his quiet grunt. That should be enough to immobilize—it wasn’t, the primary target hurled the Winter Soldier back despite the wound.

The primary target was scrabbling to get the console open when the Winter Soldier came back at him with a knife. He could feel his face twisting like melting wax. I hate you, he thought, why are you, and attacked, again and again, as the target tried to push him back long enough to swap the chips.

He shouted with rage as he forced the target back over the railing. He was supposed to be silent but his head was ringing with noise.

They dropped levels at a time, the impacts spinning them. He took the target down with his own shield, watched him get back up again. Plunged a knife into the soft meat under his shoulder and listened to the pained yell. Snatched up the chip. The target spun him through the air like he was weightless and then dislocated his shoulder, shouting, Drop it! Drop it! He kept fighting, struggling, until the target pulled him back against the broad, warm chest, wrapped him in his arms and legs, pinned his metal arm with inhuman strength. Until the target had him clutched tight with a forearm across his windpipe and the blackness swallowed him.

Pinning Bucky for the first time in (years decades forever) felt obscene. The huge solid heat of him, fighting Steve tooth and nail, struggling desperately to get free—this was as close as he was going to get to an embrace. He wrapped himself around Bucky like a vise and kept pressure on the larynx until Bucky went limp.

Steve grabbed the chip from where it had fallen from Bucky’s hand. (Bucky’s face was so still, but he wasn’t, he was okay, he had to be) Steve had made it nearly back to the console before the gunshot rang out and searing pain ripped through his thigh. A sick relief filled him, thicker and sweeter than the pain.

He kept going. Bucky shot again; he looked confused, woozy, when Steve stole glances down at him (don’t look down, don’t look down).

The shot to his gut when Steve was at the console took him down like a sack of bricks.

Levering himself back up was the hardest thing he’d ever done, he thought, but then, at least he wouldn’t have to live with this long. And he and Bucky—they’d—they’d be together, at the end, the way it was supposed to be. Maybe once it was done. Maybe Bucky would let him—maybe he could touch Bucky again.

Breathing was agony. “Do it,” he said, over Hill’s objections, and because she was a good soldier, she did.

He pulled himself back out onto the catwalk. He should—if he could get to him—he needed to see him, needed to say I’ve missed you, I’m sorry, I love you, goodbye

He heard the scream. It was Bucky, pure agony. A huge metal beam had fallen on him, his face screwed up tight in pain.

He half-fell, half-dragged himself to Bucky. He could see the fear in Bucky’s eyes as Steve got closer.
The target lifted the damn beam up long enough for the Winter Soldier to crawl out from under it. Which was a hell of a thing to do, you’re going to get yourself killed, kid.

“You know me,” the target got out through the obvious pain, glaring up him with blood on the side of his mouth and blood all over his belly.

What kind of fucking nonsense—“No I don’t,” he shouted, lurching forward to punch the target right in his smug stupid face. They both collapsed with the effort of it as the helicarrier lurched to the side.

The target pulled himself to his feet again and said, like it was breaking him, “Bucky. You’ve known me your whole life.” There it was again, the Winter Soldier could feel his face moving without meaning to, mouth twitching, flinching. He went for a backhand. It was shaky, sloppy, sloppy.

It didn’t shut him up. He didn’t know why he’d ever thought it would, this fucking punk kid would never shut up, never—

“Your name,” the target gritted out like he was dying, “is James Buchanan Barnes.”

“Shut up,” he howled. He hit the target again.

This time in the scramble back up the target pulled off the helmet. That face that face that face, his mind was screaming, singing, shouting, laughing, crying, that face

“I’m not going to fight you,” said the target, dropping the shield. It fell and kept falling. The target tilted up his chin like he always did when he was going to say something that he figured would get his ass kicked. “You’re my friend.”

The Winter Soldier was swaying dangerously, blood loss, damage, and he took a run at the target, bowled him over, bodies in contact, something about the warmth and the pressure familiar, perfect, ideal, said, “You’re my mission,” and punched him, screaming, “You’re—my—” Six hits in all and the target did nothing, didn’t move, didn’t fight, what’s wrong with you baby why won’t you fight me like I want you to—

Just looking up at the Winter Soldier with those blue eyes blazing like the sky over a sandy beach on a hot, hot day

His fist was hesitating in the air

“Then finish it,” the target slurred through his swollen mouth. One eye was swelling shut, too. “—’cause I’m with you til,” he had to gasp a little, “the end of the line.”

He couldn’t stop staring

looking at you on a sandy beach on a hot day, your lips pink from the

looking at you on a sandy beach in darkness, watching you run in front of me through artillery fire, you jackass, be careful

looking at you when your eyes are shut and your mouth is just a little bit open and I’m

Something crashed down next to them, the glass shattered, and the primary target with the eyes from a Coney Island heat wave fell.

Steve thought, I think he remembered
I think he remembered me

The fall was still so long, and the blossoming blackness was the water, maybe, or maybe just unconsciousness at last.

The Winter Soldier didn’t lose consciousness when he hit the water. Arms pulled in, body streamlined, he cut into the water, plunging down, and when it slowed him he made himself slice through the murky green. He followed the trail of glittering bubbles until he caught a glimpse of gold hair, white hands lifted.

If I’m too late no no no

He grabbed one of the white hands and started to kick. God damn it you’re heavy, he thought.

He left the man next to the water. Coughing. Alive.

When Steve came to, Sam was there, and said, quietly, “On your left.”

The music was nice.

“I think he remembered me,” he said.

Sam looked away, face creasing in poorly-concealed emotion.

“I fell, didn’t I? Into the water. Somebody had to—had to get me back out.”

“Yeah,” said Sam. That was one great thing about Sam; he didn’t bullshit. He held out a little cup of ice chips. Steve sucked on them gratefully. His throat felt raw.

“He was still on the helicarrier when I fell.”

“So you figure he came down after you and got you?”

“Yeah.” Talking hurt, though.

“Well, let’s just go with the assumption for now that whatever happened, you’re in a world of hurt and you need to keep your ass down, Rogers, I see you, you know what? You have no clothes. No clothes. You’re not leaving here yet.”

“Fine,” he said, subsiding after his abortive attempt to sit up. He wanted to be more pissed about it, but Sam was right. He hurt like hell and he had no clothes and if he didn’t get out of the bed he didn’t have to start—didn’t have to start looking, yet.

Looking was going to be rough.

First objective: get some civilian clothes.

Found them on a damn clothesline, of all things, haven’t seen these since... His old shit went up in a
hobo fire, a metal barrel on the street

Second objective: get some fucking sleep

“They’re going to release you to my care,” said Sam. “Figure your place is—well. After that firefight, and the EMTs going through there... You might want to get some workmen over there or something. And I don’t know if it’s safe. SHIELD knew where it was.”

Steve let his head fall back. “Can I just set it on fire? The whole thing. The whole fucking thing.”

“I don’t think your renter’s insurance covers that.”

Third objective: who the fuck was Blue Eyes

He slept, on and off, for two straight days, in a blind alley where he cozied up with some cardboard. Fit right in. He got the shakes, for a while, and had to throw up once, but other than that it was fine. He’d popped his shoulder back into the socket on the helicarrier, but the bruising was taking a while to go down. Dumpsters had plenty of food for now. Things flashed into his head and out again just as quickly. Ragged pieces of words, names, places. He started lifting abandoned newspapers, which was how he found out that the target was Captain America (who was currently in some hot fucking water with the authorities, and was also, apparently, missing—but not dead, nobody said dead, nobody said they’d found a body). There was an exhibit on him at the Smithsonian.

He didn’t want to show up on any security cameras, so he slipped in through a service entrance and mingled.

It was a hell of a history lesson, the narrator booming out in English overhead, the costumes that made something hurt behind his eyes, but the worst of it was coming face to face with himself.

It had been a long time. But he’d been looking in mirrors, windows, reflective surfaces.

James Buchanan Barnes, it said, so either Steve Rogers was a hell of a liar, setting this up, or he’d been right.

And it would explain, wouldn’t it—it would explain—

He had to get the fuck out of there, but he made himself finish reading.

When Bucky Barnes first met Steve Rogers on the playgrounds of Brooklyn, little did he know that he was forging a bond that would take him to the battlefields of Europe and beyond.

They said his marksmanship was invaluable and it looked like Rogers hadn’t been the last person to find that out, had he.

It was insane. Rogers had been on ice for seventy years. And if it was true—if he was—then he’d been on ice for damn near that long, too. He didn’t look old enough, didn’t feel old enough to have been awake the whole time, and the cryofreeze might have been a punishment but it must have kept him fresh, too, like meat, like a hunk of meat left in the cold for his handlers to fucking feed on over and over again.

He noticed his hands clenching into fists. He forced them to relax.
He couldn’t afford to come back later. So he stared at the pictures, the text, committing them to
memory, committing it all to memory, and he thought, *Good fucking luck taking it from me this time, asshole.*

With everything that had blown up, it would take them a while. And when they came, he’d be ready.
*No more chair, no more wipes, no more cryo,* he thought, *I’ll kill you all first. I’ll die first.*

And then he thought, *And if I find you while you’re still scattered like ants and scrambling, how much easier will that be?*

Objective four: find everyone who had ever fucked with his *fucking head*

“So, you’ve experienced this sort of thing before,” said Fury.

Steve said, “You get used to it.”

“We’ve been data mining HYDRA’s files. Looks like a lot of rats didn’t go down with the ship. I’m headed to Europe tonight. Wanted to ask if you’d come.”

“There’s something I got to do first,” Steve said, and tried to sound like someone who wasn’t falling apart.

“How about you, Wilson? Could use a man with your abilities.”

“I’m more of a soldier than a spy.”

“All right, then.” Fury shook both their hands. “Anybody asks for me, tell them they can find me, right here.” He nodded at the headstone.

“You should be honored,” Natasha called, coming up to them in her trim suit as Fury walked away. “That’s about as close as he gets to saying thank you.” She grinned as Fury twitched in irritation.

Steve walked over to her; Sam hung back. “Not going with him?” Steve asked.

“No,” she said emphatically, raising her eyebrows and smiling.

“Not staying here.” It was a question, even if it didn’t sound like one.

She grinned, looking away, into the distance. “Nah. I blew all my covers. I got to go figure out a new one.”

“That might take a while.”

“I’m counting on it.” She was still smiling at him.

There was light filtering down through the trees, green-gold and soft, washing over them. Like they were normal. Like this was a park instead of a cemetery.

“That thing you asked for,” and she pulled out a faded tan folder with Cyrillic lettering, “I called in a few favors from Kiev.”

He took it from her and took a deep breath, gripping it in both hands.

She said, gently, “Will you do me a favor? Call that nurse.”
“She's not a nurse.”

“And you're not a SHIELD agent.”

“What was her name again?”

“Sharon. She's nice.” Natasha kept staring at him intently; she leaned in and kissed his cheek, lightly, before turning to walk away. “Be careful, Steve.” The smile fell off her face as she glanced back. “You might not want to pull on that thread.”

He didn’t bother answering.

When he opened the folder, the first fucking thing was a photograph of Bucky in a cryostasis chamber. All blue lit, frost rimming the window, and his face smoothed out like he was sleeping; like he was about to wake up and say, Hey, Steve. And in the lower corner, his old photo, in his old uniform, from before the Commandos, even, so young it was physically painful to look at him.

Sam sidled up next to him. “You’re going after him.”

“You don’t have to come with me,” said Steve without raising his eyes from the file.

“I know.” Sam let out a small sigh. “When do we start?”

Steve did look up, then. He felt his face cracking in a small smile. “Well, I was thinking I’d get lunch first.”

“Great. Fine. Pastrami, then hunt for a brainwashed super-assassin. Sounds about right.”

They did get sandwiches—thanks for mentioning it, Sam, he had started craving pastrami—and sifted through the reports. Decades of them. Bucky hadn’t been on ice the whole time, but he’d been frozen a lot more often than he’d been thawed. Some of the reports were in English. Most were in Russian. Some he could pick out a few words on, but mostly he used Tony’s translation tech and prayed the phone wasn’t booby-trapped to send it all right back to Tony.

The sections on the electro-convulsive therapy, the bastards had the nerve to call it therapy, made his gut clench. Significant neuroablation. Hippocampal damage. He got online and searched for “hippocampus function” and it was—it was not good, was it, that so much was gone.

But even then they were saying his brain was trying to regrow lost connections. Maybe. Even if he didn’t remember, never remembered all of it, maybe he could at least get back enough function, make new memories. Keep them.

*Unclear whether long-term memories prior to early ECT could be recovered in extended absence of ECT.*

In the back there was a slip of paper in Nick’s handwriting, sharp and jagged, but recognizable. It was a set of coordinates. New Mexico. *Might start here,* the note read.

It took him hours to read the whole thing, look up what he wanted to, start making plans. But Sam came back, loosely jingling his car keys as he came up the walk to let Steve know it was him. It was time to get ready. It was time to go.

“You should call Tony,” said Sam as they got close to the airport.
“I don’t know what I’d say.”

“Maybe that you’re sorry you didn’t call him sooner? He’s been freaking out.”

“You’ve talked to him?”

“More like he figured out who I was and kept calling me until I picked up, but yes. I talked to him.”

Steve slowly shook his head. “I wanted—I wanted to talk to him. But me and Nat, we talked it over and we knew he’d worked on the project, and we didn’t know how deep in he was.”

“He was exactly ‘technical support for what he thought was a regular ol’ helicarrier and not at all a massive laser machine of death’ deep. Allegedly.”

“So he’s pretty pissed.”

“I don’t even know, man. If it were me I’d be pissed, but he just seems worried about you.”

Steve looked away. “I think—look, I’m just not sure it’s a good idea for Tony to be involved with this. He had that shit going on with the Mandarin, does he really want to be picking fights with the US government right now?”

“He thinks he does. He said, ‘Do you think Steve will call me back? Is he okay? Should I dip his pigtails in the inkwell?’ I’m just adding that last one because if you two were still in elementary school that is definitely what would be happening here.”

“So you’re saying I should call him.”

“Or at least stop ignoring his calls.”

“He’s only tried a couple of times.”

“A couple of times a day.”

“Do you argue with your patients this much?”

“We call them clients, and you’re not one, and most of them aren’t this stubborn anyway, so you get zero slack here. Get him off my ass.”

“Fine. Fine.”

When he did pick up, as they made their way in to the airport, the relief in Tony’s voice paralyzed him with guilt.

“Jesus Christ, I’m just saying, I have to find out about this from the news? The news? I thought we were buddies! I thought maybe you’d tell me if you almost died!”

“I was in a coma. I have an excuse for that. And besides, you didn’t call me when you got blown up.”

“Okay, fine, good point, but look, Sam said you’re going on a manhunt. Right? And that needs money.”

“I have money.”
“Yeah, very, very traceable money. Look, here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to courier you some credit cards that don’t have any tracker chips in them, and that don’t have credit limits, and whatever happens, happens, okay?”

“Tony.” Steve took in a deep breath. “He might not—he might have done some things that would make you regret helping him. He still might do things.”

“Yeah, but this isn’t about him, this is about you, and you and me because we’re bros, all right? And bros help bros out when they’re looking for brainwashed bros in the Siberian wilderness. At least, I’m pretty sure that’s in the bro code somewhere.”

“I—okay.”

“Great. So you’re at the airport already? Crap, that’s going to make sending a courier harder. Tell you what, wait a little on going through security, I can have a guy there in twenty-five minutes. Or girl, I’m not sure.”

“All right. That—that would be helpful. Thanks, Tony.”

So that was how Tony gave them the money, and his tacit blessing. Steve kept thinking about Howard’s eyes blacked out when Zola was showing them what the Winter Soldier had done, and feeling sick in the pit of his stomach.

“He’s not trying to buy you, you know,” said Sam later on the plane. “That’s just the only thing he feels like he can do. Throw money at problems.”

“I know,” said Steve. He did know. The stewardess was smiling at them, offering them beverages. He’d gone for first-class, even though the money was ridiculous, because he did not want to get stuck next to someone who was invested in recognizing him. The brown hair dye and the stubble, the baggy sweatshirt and bagging jeans, would only go so far. Traveling under his own name made some things easier, and other things a lot harder.

“Okay.”

It was a dream outside Gabalinskaya six weeks later that made him sit bolt upright without a sound, hand at his neck.

Someone was—but no one was there.

He took deep breaths. Counted them, in and out. But no one was there. The land was empty for miles.

In the dream—he tried to remember, tried to hold on to it. Dreams slipped away and it was terrifying, because that was what the machine did, what the wipes had done, taken things. But he’d always felt weaker, stripped, after the wipes. Dreams were different. He felt more after them, not less.

He couldn’t remember. In the dream there had been—somebody, he’d been—talking? Talking to someone? It was fading even as he reached for it.

The freighter had been a pain in the ass, but he hadn’t been able to think of a better way to get across the ocean. And he knew he was going to need to. If he wanted to hit HYDRA hard, hit them where they lived, well, that was mostly Russia these days, deregulated corrupt candyland that it was. The money was American, he’d figured that out. Pierce proved that. The Russians didn’t have shit to
spend on a program like this. They’d been able to negotiate his ass right across as soon as the
Avengers formed up, as soon as they realized Steve—

If he’d known, if he’d known Steve was alive—

He couldn’t remember finding out Steve was dead, but they must have told him, it’s what he would
have told him, to break him.

It helped that he had the face and the voice. (It was bad, very bad, that he had the memory of
stabbing him in the shoulder, shooting him in the gut, punching him in the face over and over.
Hadhn’t stopped. Hadn’t been able to stop, hadn’t wanted to stop, hadn’t known to want)

By the time the sun came up and he’d figured out his approach to the target, he was feeling a little
better. On the freighter and after, he had started to categorize the memories he was pretty sure were
real, and were related to Steve:

The beach. This one was complicated because there was so much beach. Steve ranged in age from
just a kid to grown man, and although most of the beach was sunny and had a boardwalk, there was
also beach in the pre-dawn near-dark, with thundering noise and corpses.

The apartment. There had been a radio. Steve had liked to sing. Wood floors, he remembered his
socks slipping on them.

The foxholes. All of these had him about the same age. He was big by then. Some of them were
stranger, messier than others, like the memories were only half-there. Pieces missing. Cut out, or
smeared.

But there were memories, and he checked them over each day, cataloguing them, adding when a
new one popped up.

Sometimes he thought—he hoped there were more and more memories every time he woke up.

Steve didn’t sleep much anymore. It wasn’t that there wasn’t time—he’d been on transport for days.
It was more that when he slept, he dreamed.

“You should sleep,” said Sam, for the eightieth time.

“I’ll sleep when I need to,” he snapped, and then rubbed at his face. “Christ. I’m sorry.”

Sam sighed heavily, sounding pissed. “Look, I’m here for back-up, okay? I’m not here so you can
take your shit out on me.”

“I know. I know. I’m being an asshole. I’m just... I’ve been in this car for two days. I’m ready to go
crazy."

“Think you already went,” muttered Sam, but he pulled off at the next exit that promised food
anyway.

They’d figured out pretty quickly that Bucky wasn’t in the States anymore. No trace of him in New
Mexico, although they did bust up a half-assed HYDRA cell that seemed as confused by recent
events as anyone; then back to DC, Brooklyn, Manhattan, watching their tracks, looking out for
anyone coming after them; then, following up on another of Nick’s leads, delivered by a stony-faced Maria Hill to them as they sat at a restaurant, a couple of sites back out west in California. It was rapidly becoming appallingly clear that they were going to have to start picking through possible HYDRA sites in the former USSR if they wanted to find anything.

So they were on their way back to an airport. Time to cross the Pacific.

The problem with the dreams coming back, he figured, was that nightmares started coming back, too.

He’d done bad things. Hadn’t bothered him much at the time. He could remember thinking about tactics but not about lives. People. They were—it was all just jobs back then.

But now, at night they rose up again, like it was Judgment Day, mouths open in fear, throats bloody. Clutching at gunshot wounds. Doubling over around knives.

He’d wake up, shaking. It seemed only fair. More than fair. They weren’t going to wake up, after all.

Steve hadn’t been in Russia since—God. Novgorod? And here he was in Moscow, like any other tourist, staring around the airport like he’d just woken up.

Sam, standing next to him at the baggage claim, said, “Tell me you booked a hotel.”

“Yeah. I—yeah. We have a room.”

“Okay, now tell me you read enough Russian to get us there.”

“I do. Learned a little bit during the war. Been brushing up.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Of course you have.”

Steve could hear the judgment in that—was meant to hear it, he knew—but he wasn’t going to apologize for spending time on learning something Bucky spoke now. A new mother tongue.

“One room or two?”

“One. We can get two at the next place, but Moscow’s expensive.”

“I call whichever bed is closer to the TV,” said Sam. “Preemptive dibs.”

“Fine.”

Steve caught them a taxi, and then argued with the driver just enough that he didn’t seem like a complete rube. The hotel was fine, nothing fancy, but they got their twin beds and Sam had his TV.

“First shower, too,” said Sam as he slung his bag onto the bed. “Dibs.”

“Go for it. I’m just going to go over our route for tomorrow.”

Sam nodded tersely. They were going to hit a suspected HYDRA safehouse. It was going to be tricky to do it without getting recognized, but they’d—borrowed—the electronic mask technology and they were leaving their usual accoutrements behind. Just bringing some Kevlar.
The Winter Soldier, it turned out, could still terrify the bejeezus out of a roomful of HYDRA scientists. Especially since they were stupid enough to have let some of their security go to what they figured were higher-priority sites.

He had them—he had the drop on them, he could kill them. He could kill them all—but

He’d done so much killing for HYDRA already

_He was so tired of killing_

He went through and pistol-whipped them, one at a time, until he had a row of unconscious bodies. Not much time. He ziptied their wrists, threw them into one of the cargo trucks, and padlocked it. He went back to the safehouse, destroyed it, some with his bare hands, some with accelerants and a match.

If SHIELD had existed, had meant anything—if there’d been anyone good in it, he would have turned them over to SHIELD. But SHIELD had been Pierce and Pierce was dead.

Instead, he found a bunch of heroin in a nearby processing warehouse and left it with them in the truck, and called in a tip to the cops and the paper at the same time. It would be hard for the cops to turn them loose in front of the paper, at any rate.

And what were they going to say? They’d have to get creative with that part.

The safehouse Steve and Sam hit would have been a bust, except that there was a message on somebody’s cellphone, collected from their slack hand after they’d all been beaten into submission, about losing communication with a Belarus outpost.

There was a story on the news about a drug ring being cracked. Steve didn’t pay any attention.

They rented a car. Sam frowned at Steve as they climbed in.

“How exactly are you planning on returning this car?” he asked.

Steve shrugged, eyes on the road. “They have a card to charge it to.”

The next time, Bucky’d had some time to think about it. He didn’t like the paper-and-cops plan. It was going to get pretty unwieldy, pretty fast. And if they’d greased the local palms enough they could still be out in no time.

He was lying awake in a dark room in an empty building—it was under construction and no one came by at night—when he thought, _I have an idea._

He changed tac, hit a different target than he’d been meaning to. This one had something extra he needed.
It took a lot of effort to get the components and find an abandoned building nearby, more to get the power hook-up he needed, but once he had, he left secure in the knowledge that there was a basement full of HYDRA scientists in deep-freeze. Just suspended, just stasis, but they wouldn’t wake up until he came back for them or someone else found them.

No one else was going to find them. Not for a while, at least.

They didn’t find him in Belarus. They didn’t find him in the Ukraine. (They did almost get shot in the Ukraine.) They came back into Russia, quietly, in the dead of night, and still didn’t find him.

They went through five suspected locations, three of which panned out, for HYDRA. Every place they went, there were signs—empty buildings, trashed hard drives. Twice, chairs like the one in the file.

Steve shuddered, running his hand over the leather. It had been torn apart. The knife marks were clean, precise, in vertical lines, like it had been put through a shredder. The electronics had been removed. They found them downstream.

“Looks like I was wrong,” said Sam.

“About what?”

“He’s not the kind you stop. He’s the kind that stops them.”

Steve’s fingers tightened on a hunk of stuffing hanging out of the chair.

“It’s a good thing,” said Sam quietly. “For us. Not sure whether it’s going to be good for him.”

“I thought we might find more bodies,” said Steve. He’d been thinking it in the middle of the night when he couldn’t sleep. Saying it out loud in the daytime felt like admitting something terrible.

“Me too. But we can’t be sure what’s happening. We’re not finding them. That’s all we know.”

“Do you think,” said Steve, and stopped.

Sam sighed heavily. “I don’t know, man. You’re going to have to give me a little more to go on than that.”

“What you think we’re ever going to find him?” It wasn’t what he’d wanted to ask, but it was something.

Sam leaned back against one of the charred walls. “I don’t know. I think we’ll see him, but I don’t know when, and I don’t know whether it’ll be because we find him, he finds us, or he shows up on the six o’clock news.”

Steve nodded tightly.

“Man, I’m hungry. Look, let’s get some blini.”

“Okay.”

“Never thought I’d get into Russian food,” Sam added, a little wistfully. “It’s fine, but I think I’d kill for a good Philly cheese steak right now.”
Steve managed to laugh. “Don’t tease me with things I can’t have,” he said, and then heard how odd that sounded and flinched.

Sam was kind enough to pretend he hadn’t said anything.

They were outside St. Petersburg, two, two and a half months since the helicarrier, and too close to heavily populated areas for comfort, when Sam said, “Okay, this is it.”

Steve nodded, looking up at the building. There was nothing unique or interesting about it, just another big concrete block in a land of Soviet-era concrete blocks, but Nat had sent him this address in code with no explanation, and that meant it needed checking out.

“Same plan as last warehouse?”

“Yeah,” said Steve. That meant Sam coming down from the roof, where the exposed spaces meant less risk, with Steve working his way in on the ground floor. “Radio silence unless there’s an emergency.”

When he walked in, there was a door gaping—it had been a vault, like maybe a quarter of the sites. An abandoned bank. They must have liked the idea of being able to seal their secrets away.

He slipped back into the vault, careful to stay up against the walls, minimize the size of target he presented. No uniform, but he had the shield with him, held up tightly against his chest.

There was a chair. It was destroyed, like the others, but more—pieces torn off and flung around the room. But that wasn’t what caught his eye about it. It was a piece of paper, a faded blue. Like a carnival ticket. Tucked into the crack at the back of the chair.

When he pulled it out, it was a ticket stub from a theater. The movie title was in Cyrillic, but. Maybe it was nearby. Maybe. He started to pull his phone out to use the translation app, but hesitated. If this was getting routed back to Tony—if JARVIS was watching his use of the app—it was one thing for Tony to know what he knew, what he’d read in the file, but something else entirely for Tony to know this.

Did you leave this for me, he thought, heart starting to thunder out of control. Did you.

Sam found him a few minutes later. He’d tucked the ticket stub into his pocket, and when Sam said, “Nothing,” he nodded even though it wasn’t a question.

On the way back to the hotel he was staring out the window of the car when he saw the theater. It wasn’t three full city blocks away from where they were staying. It was like an electric shock.

That night he waited until Sam went to bed in the next room. He could hear, faintly, the sounds of Sam settling in, the soft chatter of the English-language station Sam had managed to pick up. Eventually, Sam’s snores.

He’d been sitting, waiting. Fully clothed. He went out the window instead of the door.

He wasn’t sure whether to get a ticket or not, but he did anyway and went into the theater. It was quiet; this was the last showing of the night, with only a couple of other people scattered around him.

It was in Russian with no subtitles, which meant he had to just watch and guess. It looked like some kind of tragic boy-meets-girl story.
He kept waiting for something to happen. Someone to sit down next to him, a familiar breath on the back of his neck.

It never did. When the movie got to its conclusion, he slowly figured out that the point of the story was that the boy and girl couldn’t be together. They were sobbing, holding on to each other, but she got on a plane and left, and he stayed.

No, he thought. No.

He balled his hands up into fists.

When he was leaving the theater, he stopped in the men’s room. He hadn’t vandalized anything in years, but this time he just picked the clearest spot on the wall of graffiti and scratched with the key to the rental car: No.

He made it back to his hotel room. No one tried to talk to him. If anyone was following him, he couldn’t hear.

Steve had almost convinced himself it was a fluke, until in the next safehouse there was another one.

His heart seized at the thought of Bucky, doing this, and in the time between—going to movies. Watching people being people, maybe, relearning it. Or—maybe remembering what it had been like, to go to the movies, maybe thinking about the times they’d—sat next to each other, sometimes knees touching, legs touching from knee to ankle, only when it was dark, only when Steve was feeling at ease, at peace, and how often had that been—

He almost crumpled it completely in his fist. This time the title was English. He shoved it in his pocket.

Like before, the theater was close. He searched for it when they got back to the hotel. The new Starkphone was supposed to be tap-proof, according to Tony, but that of course meant by anyone except Tony. Tony who was a good man, Tony who was a scared man. But a specific theater, that could be suspicious. He just searched “theaters” and then “showing English movies” and that was how he found it, after all.

“You want to go to a movie?” he asked Sam when they met up for dinner. Sam looked at him like he’d grown another head.

“Normally? Yes. Tonight? No. I want dinner. I want to go to bed. I don’t understand how you figure you have room for something in between those two things.”

He shrugged. “It’s just getting—monotonous.”

“Fine. You go if you want. If you figure you need backup, I’ll come.”

“I don’t think this is going to be when he shows up. That site was cold.”

Sam was watching him carefully, but he nodded.

So he didn’t have to sneak out that night. He went out like any American tourist looking for a little piece of familiarity. He paid for the movie in cash, and he went in and sat down.

He hadn’t been kidding. He didn’t expect Bucky to show up. Expect and hope could be different
things.

This movie was more film noir style. A woman kept trying to tell a man, “I’m no good for you, darling.” At the end of the movie, he stared at her with tears in his eyes and she stared back at him over the bullet hole in his chest. “I tried to tell you,” she said.

In the bathroom, on the way out, he scratched it again: No. He had no idea if Bucky would see it. But just in case, just in case.

They lost the trail for a while.

Bucky rested his head against the back of the theater seat, slumped down. The movies helped. He didn’t have enough slack to take things with him when he went looking for the next place, no books, no nothing, but everywhere with enough people had theaters.

And sitting in them, in the dark, was peaceful. People didn’t try to look at him or talk to him, make conversation.

Sometimes the movies set things off. There was a lot of violence in movies. He could have lived without that. Tried to watch the meandering, introspective films instead, things from France instead of the US. He didn’t speak French as well as some of the others but there were usually subtitles, and something about hearing French made the tight feeling in the pit of his stomach ease.

He was sitting in a little art-house theater in the hip sector of the city, watching an indie movie, when one of the male leads leaned in and kissed the other. He sat up slowly, staring at the screen, something in his mind trying to snap together like—not like puzzle pieces, but like magnets.

Your eyes when I

He’d remembered Peggy Carter. She’d come back in bits and pieces after the museum. He’d looked at her talking about Steve in her interview and he’d thought, Okay, figured that was that part solved. Memories had filled in, her looking at Rogers, Rogers looking back at her, that made sense. Except. There’d been moments. Pieces. Always pieces. Never the whole. But he’d thought—

Holy shit, he thought, long after the brief kiss on screen had broken, long after one of the leads had died in a suitably tragic way and the other, the one who hadn’t started the kiss, had ended up with a woman.

Bucky didn’t leave anything else for Steve in the next series of targets. Maybe. Maybe Steve would stop following. But he felt raw, exposed, suddenly tender, like a hermit crab without a shell.

He wasn’t trying to pay attention to Steve and the other guy following him, but it was hard to miss them. Obvious foreigners, tooling along behind him, showing up a day or two after him. They’d only been a couple hours behind on the Belarus job, which was how he’d first spotted them, when he went back to strip whatever intel he could from the husk of the building after disposing of the crew.

Twelve and a half weeks since the last mission, he sat in the darkness in a building across from their hotel, and he stared at the window where he’d spotted Steve. Steve left the blinds up. Bad form, for a man who had to know snipers could always be after him. The other man wasn’t sharing the room
tonight. He probably wouldn’t have let Steve leave the blinds up.

_Are you waiting for me_, he thought. _Are you wondering if I’m watching you._

Steve stripped out of his shirt and walked into the bathroom; came out later, dripping wet, in a pair of boxer shorts. He sat up on the bed, staring at the television but never changing the channel, for a long time.

Bucky fell asleep watching him. He woke up at 0400 hours. Steve’s room was dark; Steve, a lump under the blankets. He knew, the knowledge clicking into place like the tumblers of a lock, that he’d watched Steve sleep before. Not from far away, but inches, like a lover.

He didn’t go back to watch Steve again. It was a risk. And it hurt, in ways he hadn’t expected and wasn’t prepared to accept.

As his memories grew back, fear was growing back with them.

Steve was staring out his hotel window. There was condensation on it.

Fourteen weeks. Sam wasn’t saying anything yet, but there hadn’t been a lead in over five days, and the last lead before that hadn’t panned out.

He started doodling idly in the condensation, tracing his finger through it. When he realized it was Bucky’s face, recognizable even with how thick the lines were, he dropped his hand like he’d been burned.

He couldn’t bring himself to blot it out, though.

Bucky was sleeping in a youth hostel—if he shaved and put in some hair gel he could pass for years younger than he should have looked, just another unremarkable piece of Eurotrash—when his eyes snapped open in the middle of the night.

He wanted a banana. Christ. _Come on, brain_, he coaxed it. _Back to sleep. You paid for the whole night._

_Banana_, his brain insisted.

He managed not to get up. The soft breaths of the other sleepers in the room had raised his hackles initially, but he’d gotten pretty good at dealing with that, sleeping through it.

_Think about something else_, he told himself. He could try to remember something.

Okay. Try to remember something. Something new. Close your eyes.

He let his thoughts drift back. Had he had bananas before? He thought he had. He remembered them being a little different, a little cloying, stronger flavor. The first time he’d picked one up at a fruit stand he’d been surprised at how mealy it was.

What else had he eaten, before? He’d had a lot of oatmeal and borshch and shchi at HYDRA, plus high-protein rations that were basically just bricks. Nuts, too. Couldn’t say he was a fan of them anymore.
He had eaten there was a pot on the stove and Steve was leaning over it, smelling it. Looks good, Buck, what meat is it? Or is that a mystery? Eyes meeting his over the pot. Smiling. He was small then.

Stew. He remembered stew. You got a hunk of the cheap meat and chucked it in the pan. Simmered til it got soft enough to chew. Vegetables to go with.

Okay. There was a memory. Maybe he could aim high, bat for another one tonight.

There was something wonderful about remembering Steve before the serum. No one else, not a single person on Earth, would remember these things but him. They were his, just his.

He thought about the flash of the kitchen he could remember, gleaming faucets, the light on the hardware, and it hit him like a truck. Not the kitchen but the bathroom, a bathroom, open to the hall, and

My hand on his face

His face under my hand

There’s blood on it, he’s got a lip that’s going to swell, press the cold washcloth to it, my hand moving so slowly, I’m staring at him

He’s staring back at me, looking up at me, his eyes are so wide, we’re both breathing too fast, his shirt hanging on the doorknob, I’m thinking do I do it? do I kiss him? right here in the fucking bathroom with the door open to the hallway, Mrs. Halloran could walk by any minute, and I’m staring at him thinking do I do it?

but I don’t, do I

I don’t

He opened his eyes again. Great. So much for sleep.

Well, he could lie here until dawn. Then he’d go get a banana. And some bread, Jesus, he was starving.

The next safehouse was abandoned but it hadn’t been for long. Steve stared at the tracks in the dust, wiped away in just a few places, just where somebody would have needed to use what was there. There was a little kitchenette. A single cup, washed and dried, set up on the shelf. A plate.

He didn’t realize how angry he was until he found himself holding the cupboard door in one hand, hinges wrenched off.

Bucky was drinking some vodka in a shitty bar on a Friday night—just blending in, just listening to the locals talk, letting the vodka burn off as he drank it—when he thought, oh.

His brain had just presented him with another gift. This time it was Steve’s hand cupping his cheek. Big Steve. They were both smeared with ash. No. They were clean. No. It was a foxhole—it was an office—it was a foxhole. Steve was in the Captain America uniform but no helmet, no hood. I was worried about you, Steve was whispering, and Steve kissed him.
So he did know, thought Bucky. Eventually.

He set the vodka down very carefully before he could break it.

If only he could be sure. If he could be sure the memory was real.

Steve was the one, after all, who said, “One more. Then we should—we should think about whether it’s worth being here.”

Sam watched him, fork poised over the pancakes. “Okay,” he said. “Any particular reason you’re thinking this now?”

“Four months,” he said. “He has to know we’re here by now. He’s proved he can stay ahead of us. I don’t even know if he even has to try. We’re just playing catch-up to a ghost.”

“You’re thinking maybe he doesn’t want to be found.”

“Not by me, anyway,” said Steve. He scrubbed at his face with one hand. “I don’t know how much he remembers. Whether he knows I’m, I’m safe. Am I even safe? I don’t know. Maybe Tony is tracking me. Maybe SHIELD had its fingers in the pie. Maybe if I got close enough I’d just be putting him in more danger.”

“That didn’t stop you before.” Sam’s voice was gentle, but there was no give in it.

“Yeah, well, that was before. How long can I spend doing this? How long do I hang around if he doesn’t even want me here?”

“That’s up to you,” said Sam, and he put a bite of pancake in his mouth.

The next raid was an abandoned naval station, so far north they’d had to drive out to get close it and then sleep in the car, sleeping bags tucked around them. They were going in the next morning as soon as it started to get light. Sam was sprawled out in the driver’s seat, Steve in the passenger’s side, listening to the even rhythm of Sam’s breath as he slept. Steve realized, with a sick feeling that never quite went away now, that he wasn’t even expecting to find any trace of Bucky here.

He’d said he wasn’t going to, but he was just giving up.

He eased out of the car, trying not to wake Sam. He needed some fresh air.

Steve went to sit where he could just see the water over the grass and rocks. It was freezing, his breath coming in little puffs that just barely distorted his night vision. There were stars everywhere—they didn’t have stars like this back home. God, Brooklyn. A million years ago. A lifetime, two lifetimes, ago. Sitting out on the roof on hot nights, waiting for the breezes to get cool enough so they could sleep.

“Hey,” said somebody behind him. It wasn’t Sam’s voice.

Steve whipped around, heart pounding.

“Hey,” he said, staring at—at Bucky. Long hair brushing his jaw, face just visible in the starlight, eyes meeting his. It sounded like him, it was him, it had to be. After a minute, he added, “Am I dreaming?”
“No.”

Bucky moved, and it took Steve a few seconds to realize that Bucky was climbing up on the rock next to him. It felt a little like a dream, both of them talking quietly, moving slowly, trying not to disturb the fragile equilibrium.

“I don’t remember everything,” said Bucky, softly, “but enough to know that you should definitely go.”

“I don’t think I can do that,” Steve said.

Bucky cocked his head, considering. “Even if I asked you to?”

“You—why?”

“Because I have a lot of work to do. Because this is a bad time for me to have company. Because I remember trying real hard to kill you.” His voice was even, level, in the cold night. He sounded like pure Brooklyn, like himself from seventy years ago.

“You didn’t—you wouldn’t have, if you’d known it was me.”

“You’re pretty sure of that. And that’s fine. But I’m not telling you, Steve, I’m asking you.”

“To—what? To go?”

“Yeah. Back home.”

“I don’t think I can go back to Brooklyn. Not without you.” Steve distantly realized that there were tears in his eyes.

“Sure you can, buddy.”

“No. You don’t understand. You’re not—you’re not an acceptable loss. You never were.”

“Neither were you,” said Bucky, “but you died, too.”

They sat in silence for a little while, staring out at the water. The waves were rolling in, crashing on the rocks.

“I didn’t know,” said Steve. “If I’d known. If I’d had any idea.”

“You would have torn up the world looking for me. I know.” Bucky sounded so gentle.

“How much of me do you remember?” asked Steve, helplessly.

“You really want to get into that game? Trying to figure out where all the holes are? I told you. Enough.”

“Do you know—” He choked on it, couldn’t get it out.

Bucky let him be quiet for a bit before he said, “Look, what if we make a deal?”

“What kind of deal?”

“I’ll finish what I have to do. Then I’ll come home.”

“I don’t,” said Steve. “I don’t need you to be who you were. I just need you.”
“Ah, Stevie,” Bucky murmured.

“I don’t know if I can wait. How long is it going to take? I don’t know if it’ll be safe for you to come back.”

“It’ll take as long as it takes. We’ll make it safe. What were you going to do, run with me?”

“You know I would.”

“I know. And you’d hate it, and maybe you’re safe with me, and maybe you’re not. But I’m not all here, Stevie. Just bits and pieces. The longer I go, the more comes back. So maybe by the time I’m ready to come back, I’m mostly me again, you see?”

“I can’t,” Steve said, choking on tears, “please don’t ask me to leave you. Not again.”

“You didn’t leave me on purpose. I know. Look, what am I, your father confessor? I’m telling you, I’ve been under for a long time, and I’m coming back, but I need to do it my way, on my time. I’m not killing people. I decided not to do that. I’m getting them out of the way. Your conscience can be clean.”

“It’s never going to be clean.”

“It can be. Steve. Baby. Go back home. Wait for me. Doesn’t have to be Brooklyn. Anywhere you are, I’ll find you, but you have to go home and let me do this.”

There were tears on his cheeks, wet stripes freezing cold in the wind. Baby. “Do you remember me?” he said, because he didn’t know how to say what he wanted to say.

Bucky smiled ruefully. “You were the only thing. You made me remember. I didn’t know why you mattered. Just that you did.”

Steve couldn’t answer that. They sat there together, side by side, for a long time. It was too cold to smell the salt in the air, too late or too early for birds. Just them, listening to each other breathe in the silence.

Eventually, Steve said, “Can I—I have to know that you’re real.”

“You want to touch me? Go ahead.”

Steve reached out and took Buck’s hand. It was the metal one. Beat up, dinged.

“I know a guy,” said Steve. “If you want to get this fixed up.”

“It’s still working just fine.”

He ran his fingers over the back of the knuckles. “Can you feel this?”

“Yes.”

He started to run his fingers up the arm. When he got to Bucky’s shoulder he could feel through the fabric where the metal met flesh. His fingers skated across it for a moment before Bucky pulled away.

“Nah, baby,” he said. “Not a good time.”

It was—he’d heard that before, not a good time, half a dozen times, just like that, and it broke
something in him to hear it now.

“You should get back to the car. He’s going to get worried.”

“I thought he was asleep.”

“Pretending. He knew you needed to be alone. Or figured you needed to piss, I don’t know.”

Steve laughed a little through the tears that were fogging his eyes again. “Don’t go,” he said.

Bucky shook his head. He was standing up. “I got to,” he said. “But we made a deal. You go. When I can, I’ll follow you. Okay?”

“If anything—happens to me,” said Steve, “you don’t follow me there. You know what I’m saying?”

“Same for you.” That sent a sharp spike of fear and anger through Steve’s gut. *If anything happened to you, if you, if I lost you again.* Bucky added, “Not like St. Peter can handle both of us anyway.”

Steve nodded, couldn’t manage a smile.

After Bucky was gone, Steve sat for a while longer, crying in the dark at the unbelievable pain of absolution.

When he climbed back into the car, Sam said, “Gone for a while there.”

“Had to think.” He hoped he didn’t sound like a man who’d been crying.

“Figured.”

He slept a little. He didn’t think he would.

The base was deserted. No secret passageways, no tunnels, no bunkers through hidden doors. There hadn’t been HYDRA there in decades, if ever.

“Yeah,” said Steve, “let’s head home.”

Sam watched him narrowly as he nodded. “Sure.”

He didn’t talk at all on the flight back. He was still reeling, still in shock. He stayed with Tony for a couple of days. Bruce had gone back to India, but he was starting to split time, spend a week or two here and there back at the Tower.

“Look, you need to stop beating yourself up,” said Tony on the fourth morning.

“What?” Steve squinted at him over the scrambled eggs.

“For not finding him. He didn’t want to be found, he’s a world-class trained assassin, you didn’t find him. It doesn’t reflect poorly on you.”

“I’m not—what the fuck are we even talking about right now?”
“You went on a manhunt, came up with bupkis, spent an ungodly amount of my money—”

“I told you, you can pull it from my account—”

“Yeah, right, I’m going to take money from the national hero—”

“I abandoned a car, you should really take me up on that—”

“Anyway, you look like crap. So what I’m saying is, you should stop beating yourself up, take a day, do something fun.”

“Something fun.”

“Yeah. I don’t know. See a movie.”

Steve started laughing and couldn’t stop, and Tony looked surprised, then annoyed.

“Sure,” he said, finally, wiping the tears of laughter out of his eyes. “Sure. I’ll see a movie. What’s good?”

He did, too, that was the hell of it. Sat through a whole movie with special effects he would never have believed as a kid, and at the end he thought, that wasn’t so bad.

It was survivable. It was going to be survivable. It had to be.

When he brought up leaving, of course Tony had opinions about that, too.

“You should get a new place,” said Tony.

“I don’t know,” said Steve. “I really liked the old one.”

“It’s got Nick’s blood on the floor!”

“Yeah, but he’s not dead.”

“You’re not traumatized? Even a little? By watching him maybe-possibly-die in front of you?”

Steve started laughing. He couldn’t help it. “Tony, buddy,” he said. “I been traumatized by a lot of things lately.”

It wouldn’t be good to say I want to see the bullet-holes in the wall. I want to know he was here.

Tony eventually agreed to let him move back in without throwing a huge shit fit, but only if Steve let him upgrade the security “to like, eleven, Steve, seriously, if Nick bugged your place before he will definitely do it again, and I’m just saying, as a man who respects the need for privacy to a possibly unhealthy degree, you could use a technical expert on this. Plus you need more security, God only knows who’s going to come after you now.”

“I couldn’t stop you if you wanted to bug it,” said Steve, “but if you did, we wouldn’t be friends anymore.”

Tony nodded sharply. “Fair.”

He talked Tony out of fixing the bullet-holes by explaining that he wanted to do the spackling and
painting himself, “symbolically start the healing, you know?”

“You’ve been talking to Sam too much,” grumbled Tony.

The first night back was unbearably quiet.

He pulled up a movie to watch. It occurred to him afterwards that he couldn’t remember a damn thing about it.

Sam called him a few weeks later to tell him that Nick had been in touch, separately, to ask if Sam would consider continuing to work on finding the Winter Soldier.

“I told him I’d need to talk to you,” said Sam. “This was yours. If you have an objection, I’m listening.”

“No,” said Steve. “No, it’s fine. I know Nick has his own reasons, but I honestly—I don’t think he’s going to find Bucky if Bucky doesn’t want to be found. And I think if Bucky wanted to be found, we would have found him.”

Sam was quiet for a minute. “Yeah,” he said. “That’s what I figured. But this gives me a chance to get back to something resembling action, and you know, it’s wacky but I miss it.”

“Makes perfect sense to me. If I had wings I’d want to fly.”

“It’s going to put me on the road again. I won’t be around DC as much.”

“Oh,” said Steve. “Okay.”

DC was a lot quieter with Sam gone. He’d gotten used to going on runs together pretty regularly.

After a week he figured he really needed to get a hobby, at least. He kept dying his hair dark, and he started painting again. With an apartment full of canvases and the perpetual reek of paint thinner and linseed oil, he eventually admitted to himself that he was overdoing it. He at least tried to paint outside more. And eat outside. And not choke himself with fumes.

Nick started to get in touch, from time to time, and even though Steve didn’t want to be an ace up Nick’s sleeve, he started to help out.

The first mission he went on he found Natasha, and that was nice. Really nice.

“Thought you were underground,” he said, kicking a confused AIM guy down a flight of stairs.

“Got boring fast,” she said. “You?”

“Close enough.”

They went out afterwards for coffee in Belfast, once they’d scrubbed some of the dirt and blood out of their hair.

“How’s Clint?” he asked, wrapping his hands around the warm mug.
“Oh, he’s good. He’s actually taking some time for himself right now.”

“For himself? I didn’t know he had things to take time for.”

“He could surprise you. How have you been?”

He shook his head a little. She didn’t press.

“Let me know if you’re up for a date,” she said. “I met a really sweet mycologist, I think you two could get along.”

He laughed out loud. “Mycologist?”

“She studies fungi.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“No! It’s a perfectly legitimate field of study.”

“Well, thanks for the thought, but I’m not really in a good place for that right now.”

“You wait for that, you’ll be waiting forever,” she said, with her sharp eyes watching him.

She stayed in Europe and he caught a jet back. Nick was slowly rebuilding, he knew, not quite SHIELD but something of a core of old friends. He’d heard rumors that Coulson had been spotted, and when he’d asked Nick, Nick had looked profoundly shifty for a minute before admitting that it was possible that some cutting-edge experimental treatment had in fact preserved cardiac function after it had been initially believed he was beyond recovery.

“You son of a bitch,” Steve had said wonderingly, “he really is alive. Who’s actually dead? What other memos did I miss?”

Once, he got a postcard with no return address. It was a gaudy picture of the Minsk Botanical Garden. The writing just said, in a scrawl he knew like he knew his own, “Glad you’re not here.”

He sat down right there on the stairs, all the breath leaving his lungs. When Mrs. Alvarez came up the steps maybe ten, twenty minutes later, she found him sitting there, clutching it.

“Oh, sweetie!” she said, stopping in her tracks. “Are you okay? Do I need to call someone?”

He shook his head. “No. No.” He dragged the back of his hand across his eyes, shakily. “Just. Heard from someone.”

“Bad news?”

“No, actually,” he said, and then he was laughing through the tears. She stared at him until he pulled himself to his feet. “Thank you, though.”

Natasha came to visit him a month or two later. He was settling in, huge books on history lining his bookshelves, going through them while listening to modern music. (He didn’t see why people got so upset about “pop.” In the 30s and 40s it was all pop because there was no room on the airwaves for anything else, and you didn’t get to hear the whole song just how you liked it whenever you wanted
He pushed one of the bookshelves in front of the bullet holes before she came over. On the outside of the building it was patched, but he hadn’t been able to bring himself to get rid of them on the inside. On really shitty days, he’d just sit by them and run his fingers over them. *Come home,* he thought.

“You seem cozy,” said Natasha from behind him as he stirred the pasta in the kitchen. He managed not to shriek. “Jesus,” she added, “you suck at noticing when a stealthy, stunningly attractive woman is sneaking up on you.”

“How did you get in?”

She cracked a grin at him. “I told Tony I was staying with you and I got locked out and couldn’t get you on the cellphone.”

“Such *duplicity.*” He set the spoon down and hauled her into a hug. “Good to see you, Romanoff.”

“You, too, Rogers.”

“You going to be up for sparring later?”

“Tomorrow. Tonight I need to eat and shower and crash.”

“Sounds like a plan. Pasta’s almost done.”

“Probably overdone already. You people in the dark ages ever hear of *al dente*?”

“Hey, I was in Italy eating *authentico* before you were born, you whippersnapper.”

She looked around the apartment. “I wasn’t kidding. It’s nice.”

“I’m thinking about moving back up to New York. Not much left for me to do down here.”

“Running out of scenes to paint?” She nodded at the canvases.

“Something like that, yeah.”

Over dinner, they talked a little bit about Tony, who was working on a new toy for Natasha —“they’re electrical, he says he thinks he can do better than the ones I had for the last job.”

“Do you think he’s doing better?”

“I think he is,” she said, seriously, sipping at the wine cooler from the sixpack Steve had picked up just to make her smile. “He’s still pretty wound up, but he’s sleeping better and Pepper says he’s drinking less.”

“Good.”

“Bruce is around a fair amount. He seems to help. Tony loves having somebody to geek out with.”

“Bruce is a good guy,” Steve said.

“Yeah,” she said, something softer than usual in her voice. Steve raised his eyebrows, but she just met his gaze with an impassive Russian stare until he smiled a little and let it go.
After dinner, she helped him rinse the dishes, and then he set up the couch for her with sheets while she took a quick shower. (“I can take the couch,” he started to say, and she just casually kicked him in the shins with her pointy boots.)

She came back out, toweling her hair, and smiled as she took in the tidy couch. “Still making hospital corners, Rogers?”

“Could bounce a quarter off them.”

It was nice to fall asleep to someone else’s breathing.

She invited him along to Tony’s lab. He squinted at her suspiciously.

“What?” she asked, straight-faced. “I can’t just want to visit a couple of friends?”

“You could. I doubt you do. What’s your angle on this?”

“You’ll have to come along to see,” she said serenely.

With some grumbling, he did. When they got there, Tony lit up, smiling big at him—“Hey, it’s Nat and the Capsicle! Pepper’s off in Tokyo but she’d be so glad to see you, you want me to raise her on the phone? Oh, crap, time difference. She’d kill me. Anyway, it’s good to see you. Come on in.” He stepped back, waving them into the lab. Natasha walked in first, glancing out the huge bank of windows at the view.

“Good to see you, too,” said Steve.

“So did Nat tell you about the Widow’s Sting?” Tony picked up a couple of batons from the table. “Twice as nice at half the price.”

“For hand to hand combat?” Steve picked one up. It wasn’t doing much. Tony reached over and switched it on for him; it glowed an eerie blue, not quite like HYDRA weapons. More like Tron.

“Yeah, it should deliver a hell of a jolt. Traditional electroweapons have some pretty serious downsides. If you get hit with it, you’re foggy for hours. These are built with a special CNS-protective function; peripheral nervous system goes down like a house of cards, no mobility, but central nervous system doesn’t take the hit. Kind of splitting the difference between a straight electrical blast and nothing, so if you get hit with your own weapon you still have a chance.”

“That’s interesting.” Steve hefted it, getting a feel for the balance. “Things like this used to be more for torture than combat.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “You encounter much torture back in the age of carts and horses?”

“You think everybody just took a break from it between the Spanish Inquisition and Guantanamo? Yeah, we had torture.”

“We? Like, we were tortured, or we tortured?”

“Both. Every country in the war was torturing. I just didn’t know about all of it until I read up on it later.”

“Well, shit,” said Tony. “I guess that takes the air out of at least one of my tires on the Disappoint Steve in Humanity tirade parade for later.”
Steve gave him a little half-smile. “I do read, you know.”

“I just figured it was all about the mating habits of the bald eagle.”

Natasha chuckled, putting down her phone—she’d been texting somebody. “Okay,” she said, “enough foreplay. What do you want to do for testing today?”

“I’ve got holographic opponents. You won’t be able to make contact, but I need to see how you’d attack them with these babies. I want to know where the blows are likely to land. It’s harder to keep the juice from hitting the CNS depending on where you hit.”

Natasha nodded, making a little face—she’d never liked holographic opponents—but she started to square off against them.

“So why’d she drag me up here?” Steve asked Tony under his breath.

“Good question. If I had to guess, I think she thinks you’d be better off moving back to New York.”

“Really.”

“Well, look at it this way: SHIELD is caput. The Avengers are pretty scattered at the moment. You, in particular, don’t have a lot in the way of social ties—pretty much just Sam, right? Down in DC. And she worries.”

“She worries.”

“And texts me in the middle of the night to ask if I know what the best areas are for NY real estate.”

Steve sighed. “We talked about it. I’m thinking about it.”

“I just want to say, you’re more than welcome to stay at the Tower indefinitely. I mean, your name is on the building. Well, your team name. It’s definitely your team.”

“Thank you, but I’d really rather have my own space.” If he had to live in the same building as Tony long-term, there was a small but real chance he would end up trying to strangle Tony with a power cord. Well-meaning: check. Talkative know-it-all show-off in a flying tin can with no respect for what other people wanted to watch at movie night: check.

“That’s what I figured. Anyway, if you wanted to look at some options while you’re up here, just say the word.”

“Not today, I don’t think,” he said slowly, watching Natasha flip into a lunge that would have let her tap the batons to either carotid artery. “But maybe soon.”

It took a while, but he did it. He plastered over the bullet-holes (after he spent a couple of hours sitting in front of them, resting his hand over them, thinking, thinking, thinking) and got some of his security deposit back, and he moved up into Manhattan. (The postcard gave him something else to touch, anyway, something better.)

There were upsides. It wasn’t quite home but it was close. (He didn’t, couldn’t, go to Coney Island yet.) He spent a lot of time at the MOMA. He let his hair go blond again and stopped trying to hide quite as hard. Subways were great because nobody seemed to really believe that Captain America would ride the subway, and they were usually trying pretty hard to focus on their phones, anyway,
not make eye contact with the big guy in the hoodie.

The paparazzi did figure out where he lived, after a couple of weeks, but he kept being pretty boring, emerging at the same time every morning for runs and never bringing dates back, so they eventually got bored and stopped staking him out unless it was a real slow news day. He kind of liked knowing that his location would be semi-public knowledge. (If somebody was, say, looking for him, trying to—well.)

Tony had done the security again, and Bruce had been in town at the time and had helped, which was good. Steve had talked to Bruce off to the side, mentioned very quietly that he was always a little concerned about Tony’s back-end access to Steve’s security systems. Bruce’s mouth had flattened into a thin concerned line and later he’d caught raised voices from the room they were working in: *Privacy,* Bruce was saying, and Tony was saying, *But functionality,* and if anyone could twist Tony’s arm into doing a decent thing, it was Bruce. Pepper, too, but for the tech angle there was nobody like Bruce.

At the end of that process Tony had said, looking distressed, which on Tony meant like his suit was itching, “It’s been brought to my attention that I should try harder to not leave myself the option of spying on you like a creeper despite how good my intentions are, so I just wanted to say that I’ve set it up so JARVIS acts as intermediary. He’s autonomous, so if you ask him not to notify me about something, even something *really important,* he can make the decision about whether to tell me or notify the police or whatever.”

“Really?” asked Steve. “JARVIS? What’s his access here?”

“Security system only. Cameras are purely external, no bugs, fire sensors everywhere. But if you need him, you can talk to the lock on the front door. He doesn’t start listening until he hears his name. Proof: I’m a little teapot, short and stout. JARVIS!”

“Yes, sir,” said the front doorknob politely.

“What did I just say?”

“You activated my sensors within Captain Rogers’ security network with my name.”

“Nothing else? Potentially embarrassing?”

“I regret to say that if that occurred, I was not aware of it.”

“So that could have been faked, obviously,” Tony said to Steve, “but I really don’t think JARVIS would have missed out on the chance to give me shit.”

“Sir, I’m an artificial intelligence. I would never, as you say, ‘give you shit.’”

“That’s a damn lie and you know it,” said Tony to the doorknob conversationally. “Okay, JARVIS, close up here.”

“That’s the end command?” asked Steve.

“It sure is. Try it out.”

“JARVIS,” said Steve, “how many people in the stairwells?”

“Long-range infrared is reading zero, sir.”
“Knew you’d have infrared,” he muttered to Stark. “Going to track how many people are in here? Whether I have a hot date?”

“I said cameras were external only and I mean it! JARVIS, how many people in the apartment?”

“I don’t have that data, sir.”

“Besides, like you’d have a hot date,” Tony added to Steve. “Face it, our homoerotic banter is as close as you get to a love-life.”

Steve made a face and stuck his tongue out at Tony, and Tony burst out laughing. Tony was more manic than Howard had been, but he was more—well, more fun, too.

So the apartment was nice. It was an industrial loft, because if anyone was planning on attacking it, it would be nice if there weren’t any civilian casualties.

Eastern European newspapers didn’t pay a lot of attention to Captain America, so Bucky hit up an Internet kiosk whenever the nostalgia started to act up. It was crazy, having feelings like this, like an itch he needed to scratch.

NY Bystander, his favorite gossip site these days, had paparazzi shots of Steve leaving his new apartment in his running gear. He saluted them, the fucking goober. His shirt stretched over his chest like it was hanging on for dear life.

Bucky stared at the picture for a minute. I’ve touched that, he thought. Hot damn. I was a lucky bastard.

“So remember,” Bruce was saying, “when I fell from the helicarrier?”

“Vividly,” said Tony. “I was pissing myself. Where am I going to find another scientist who sings along to Diana Ross?”

“Shh. Anyway, I crashed through the roof of this, I think it was a warehouse, and there was this little old man there who was a caretaker. You know what he said?”

“What?” asked Steve, a grin playing around his mouth. The city lights out Tony’s windows were twinkling a little in the smoggy air.

“He asks if I’m an alien. When I say no, thanks, but I’m not, he says, ‘Then, son... you got a condition.’”

They all busted up laughing, Clint slapping his own thigh just like Dum Dum used to.

“Jesus Christ,” wheezed Natasha, “that’s going in the official biography.”

“You got to tell me, though,” said Steve, “and be honest, Tony. Did you make the eyes on the suit look mad on purpose?”


That set off a fresh round of laughter, and Pepper smiled as she poured Natasha another glass of wine.
“Do you have any plans for Christmas, Cap?” asked Tony.

“Going to serve at a soup kitchen, I think.”

“Swing by here after that. It’s just me and Pepper this year, we could use some company.”

Steve smiled crookedly at him. “Will do.”

The Avengers went on a few more missions together. It felt good. They were getting used to each other. Even Bruce was starting to meld into the group.

When Bucky got the information about the Enhanced twins out of a Sokovian scientist, it was in the context of running his hand up the scientist’s thigh while explaining to him that he really doubted that he was that good a scientist, after all, in his HYDRA division, he hadn’t even heard of the work this scientist was doing. He didn’t love playing dumb, but it got results. With a pair of glasses and his hair pulled back in a neat ponytail, convincingly flesh-toned accessory sleeve on his arm (he’d picked it up from one of the first bases he’d hit, where they’d stored him), it was like it didn’t even occur to them that the Winter Soldier was still active.

After the scientist told him, he knocked the man out with a finger over each carotid for just long enough. Then he put him into the Freezer. He’d ended up setting one up in each of the major cities. There were enough of the scientists on ice now that he’d had to figure out how to wire new cryochambers from raw parts. They weren’t even close to finding out where their missing friends had gone.

It felt a little bit like being a serial killer, with his freezers full of bodies, but—nobody was dead. Not yet.

He set up the leak. He’d seen the Avengers on TV a couple of times lately; it seemed like they had their shit together enough to take on the bigger raid, one he couldn’t have done on his own. And with the Enhanced with psychomorphic powers, he couldn’t take that risk. He couldn’t get close. He’d rather die than lose it all again.

He had so much more, now. He had the time he hit a two-sewer ball in front of Ducky Jameson and won a nickel off him. He had the time they were at a Dodgers game and Steve had turned to him, grinning against the brilliant sunlight, mouth wet from where he’d been biting his lip in anticipation of the hit, and he’d been lost in a helpless haze of lust and love. He had England, coarse white sheets and Steve’s face melting into pleasure as Bucky stared down at him in the darkness.

The ghosts—the bloody faces, open chests, mists of blood spraying up from motor vehicle impacts—they were still there, too. But every time he hit a base it was a promise to them. And he was learning, relearning, how to live with being sorry. With being afraid.

It had been maybe a year since the helicarrier when they went after Loki’s scepter at Strucker’s lair. “God damn it,” said Steve when he found out about the mission, “wasn’t somebody supposed to be keeping an eye on the damn thing?”

Clint looked a little pale. Natasha was rubbing circles on his back with her free hand and she said something to him softly.
“Look, it’s some bullshit,” said Tony, “but the fact remains we think Strucker has it and we want it back.”

“I want it sunk in the damn ocean,” said Steve.

“You were going to try to stop swearing so much,” said Natasha. “New Year’s resolution? Remember?”

“Oh, bite me,” said Steve bitterly. “I didn’t fight World War Two so some kid could lecture me on not saying ’fuck’.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m actually older than you,” she said, and he flipped her off.

The actual mission wasn’t quite a trainwreck—Steve couldn’t understand why the enhanced in the field didn’t do more to them, but he couldn’t be mad they didn’t.

Strucker had a big mouth on him, but he wasn’t going to get to use it for much. Steve took him into custody without much more than he’d expected going wrong, just getting pushed down the stairs in between finding Strucker and apprehending him. Strucker had somehow acquired a body of one of the Chitauri beasts, which was messed up. But if he had Loki’s scepter he probably had some pretty deep connections.

Tony seemed to take the mission hard; Steve couldn’t figure out why. After the fight, Tony was withdrawn and cold. His eyes kept sliding back over to Steve when he thought Steve wasn’t looking. It was getting weird.

Bucky stared at the castle, tensely flipping his knife over and over again.

The Avengers had taken the lead and run with it. They’d come to get Strucker. Things should be better, even if they hadn’t picked up the Enhanced twins. Why didn’t he think they really were?

Maybe because he knew HYDRA, he thought. Maybe because he knew there were more of the bastards out there, like cockroaches, scuttling away every time the light started to fall on them.

Maybe because he’d been able to see Stark’s face through the binoculars when they were leaving, and Stark had looked gutted. That wasn’t a successful mission face. Not even close.

At the party after the mission wrapped up, it was good to see Sam, catch up a little. He wasn’t trying to pump him for information but he was glad when Sam said, “I’m very happy chasing cold leads on our missing persons case. Avenging is your world.”

Cold leads. Good. He’d figured, but still.

“You find a place in Brooklyn yet?”

“I don’t think I can afford a place in Brooklyn,” he said, like it was money and not the stifling feeling of seeing buildings he remembered shiny and new crumbling into dust.

“Well, home is home, you know?” said Sam. The look in his eyes was too knowing.

Thor found them and slung his arm around Steve’s neck. “Steve!” he boomed. “Do us the honor of joining us for a drink!”
So he did, what the hell. Thor’s elixir of whatever had a little kick. Steve drank a bit, and for a while he felt the heady buzz he remembered from when his lungs still ached and a beer was all it took to tip him over into a spinning world. But it faded, although not until after he’d gone and gotten embarrassing with Bruce over Natasha. Like he was trying to give them his blessing or something. What did he know? What the fuck did he know? World’s leading expert on waiting too long, he said, and smiled an awful smile.

Well, he was, wasn’t he, although he hadn’t meant to say that; hadn’t meant to tell them anything. They always figured—they always figured it was about Peggy. And the thing about Peggy was. Well. It was hard to think about Peggy without feeling a twisting knot of guilt and shame and warmth. She had been a hell of a woman. Still was.

But she’d been better off, hadn’t she, with Steve in the ice, where he couldn’t say anything stupid, do anything to hurt her. He would have hurt her. It was so inevitable, looking back. What would he have done, married her? And then what? How long before he and Bucky started up again? Would they ever even have been able to stop? She was an intelligence operative. She would have figured it out.

He’d been blindly focused on the war and winning the war and he’d never really meant to come back from it. And he hadn’t, how about that.

But the things pride made you do or kept you from doing. That was the poison.

Tony said, “Cap! Can you bring it?”

Tony did a few dance moves to demonstrate what he was talking about—well, it had to be dancing, from context—and Steve said, keeping a straight face, “I suppose I’ll have to.”

He did a couple of steps Julia had taught him, and Tony laughed out loud before clapping him on the back and shouting, “Good sport! You, sir, are an excellent sport! Allow me to congratulate you on out-classing me!”

“Oh, Tony,” he said, “that was never going to be a fair fight.”

“Wounded!” Tony shouted, before going back for another drink.

By the time the party had wound down and they were just sitting around shooting the shit, trying to lift the hammer, Steve was feeling sober again. Helen Cho, Bruce’s friend who had come in to help out with Clint with her space-age healing machine, was napping on a couch, little soft snores erupting from time to time. Steve gave Mjolnir’s handle a good yank; it twitched a little—he caught a glimpse of Thor’s face out of the corner of his eye. He looked alarmed. Steve made a show of pulling again, but he didn’t try too hard. It wasn’t—he wasn’t worthy, it wasn’t fair to worry Thor.

Although when Ultron showed up a couple of minutes later, that thought seemed downright quaint.

It wasn’t the first grandiose speech he’d heard from a megalomaniac computer. He was getting pretty sick of them, honestly.

The fighting was a little more satisfying. He stomped on the table, flinging it up to use as a shield, but
it was better when he got his hands on his actual shield. It was as familiar to him as this body. He’d never named it, didn’t see the point in it. The one that had gone down in the river had been fished back out because Tony wasn’t going to let vibranium go to waste, and because Tony owned a fleet of robots.

“There are no strings on me,” crooned the malevolent AI as the lights in its eyes dimmed.

“Well, fuck,” said Tony into the silence.

“Tony,” said Steve, “what did you do?”

“You know, normally I’d be a little concerned with your tone,” said Tony, and his voice was just barely shaky, “but I think this time I may have it coming.”

The conversation got heated, especially once they’d moved it to the lab; Tony kept insisting that they needed a defense, something big, something global. Steve finally said, “And what do you think Project Insight was supposed to be?”

He could tell, from the look in Tony’s eyes, that it hadn’t clicked. Tony hadn’t figured it out. Tony thought if the good guys had it, it couldn’t be bad. Preemptive strikes just gave you more war, every time. Every damn time.

They figured out that it had to be the vibranium he was after. That’s why he’d killed Strucker, and that’s how they tracked him to the ship. Steve knew he was looking at a bad time. He still wasn’t quite prepared for Wanda Maximoff.

She got him while he was down. The world slid away and he was somewhere else, somewhere else. It was like being in a dream, but the most vivid, intense dream he could have imagined; it was the Stork Club, wasn’t it? Had he ever even been there? And there was music, big band music, loud and brassy, filling his brain. Noises all around him that were the sounds of war—no, a party—no, war—shells going off, flashbulbs going off. And then Peggy’s voice, her hand on his arm.

“Are you ready for our dance?” she asked. She was smiling. Those weren’t her eyes.

He turned back to stare at the dance floor. It was somewhere caught between this and a battlefield. The rumbling of artillery, the twirl of a skirt, gouts of blood pouring from a severed artery.

“The war’s over, Steve,” she said. “We can go home. Imagine it.” She sounded so intense, so happy. It wasn’t—she’d never sounded like that, not once.

The room was empty.

The room was full, and they were dancing; he was spinning her, bending to whisper something in her ear, smell her hair, like they were happy, like they were a normal couple, and he looked up over her shoulder and saw a glint of light on metal—

Passing out was a blessing.

Afterwards, he felt stiff as a board, cold in a way he hadn’t been cold since the first weeks after he
woke up.

“Well, Julie, there appears to have been an attack on the Avengers Tower, formerly Stark Tower,” said the American broadcaster on the airport television. “Right now it’s unclear what happened, but it is certain that the Avengers have gone into hiding. We’ve had no new developments since this story broke several hours ago, except to hear from some witnesses who observed some unusual activity at the Tower.”

“Right,” said Bucky to the woman who was squinting at his passport, “American student? Etudiante? Traveling abroad for study?” He was doing his best entitled-American voice, the one that would signal loud and clear that if anybody stopped him he was going to be a whiny asshole about it and threaten to call his undoubtedly influential parents. He adjusted his dark-framed glasses.

She nodded wearily. He got on the plane to New York.

The retreat to the safehouse made sense. Clint having a secret fucking family made significantly less sense.

It wasn’t that he couldn’t see the appeal. Having a family was a liability. Clint had been right to keep them off the radar, even off SHIELD’s radar, but come on. “Auntie Nat?” he hissed to Natasha.

She smiled blandly back at him. “I keep a lot of secrets,” she said.

Thor took off, looking for answers to his vision.

“Steve,” said Laura, Clint’s secret wife, “I hate to ask, since you’re company, but could you chop some wood?”

“Be glad to,” he said, and went out to the woodpile. The rhythm of the axe reminded him of his weeks in the cabin, after they first thawed him; let his mind settle into something, then start to wander.

If they went back to Sokovia. To Eastern Europe. How was that going to—he’d gone on the mission to Strucker’s castle not really letting himself hope, but still hoping—maybe he’d run into Bucky there. He hadn’t, of course, no trace, not a sign. Bucky going after HYDRA had meant exposing more and more sites, more and more people, but it turned out the records Natasha had successfully dumped had huge holes in them, and in those holes were people doing terrible things.

So where was Bucky, now? And was he safe? If they had him they would have said something, surely. And what would Wanda—Christ Almighty. What would Wanda do to Bucky’s head?

He was jarred out of it by Tony wandering up to join him, nodding to Steve before tying his flannel shirt around his waist and grabbing some wood and an axe. They fell into the rhythm together after that. It felt tense, though, things that weren’t getting said, festering.

After a couple of minutes, starting to sweat, Tony said, “What happened to Thor?”

“He said he was going to look for some answers.”

“Thor didn’t say where he was going for answers?”
“Sometimes my teammates don’t tell me things.” He sighed, grabbing another log. “I was kind of hoping Thor would be the exception.”

“Yeah, give him time. We don’t know what the Maximoff kid showed him.”

“I don’t know what she showed you,” said Steve, “I just know it made you do something stupid.” He brought the axe down with a crash. “‘Earth’s mightiest heroes.’ Pulled us apart like cotton candy.”

“Seems like you walked away all right,” Tony said, like he was insinuating something.

Steve paused, straightening up to stare at him. “Is that a problem?”

“I don’t trust a guy without a dark side. Call me old-fashioned.”

Without a dark side. What a fucking joke. “Well, let’s just say you haven’t seen it yet,” he said, trying to keep a lid on it.

“You know Ultron is trying to tear us apart, right?”

“Well, I guess you’d know. Whether you’d tell us is a bit of a question.”

“Banner and I were doing research,” said Tony, pissed, getting louder.

“That would affect the team.”

“That would end the team! Isn’t that the mission? Isn’t that the ‘Why We Fight’? So we can end the fight. So we get to go home!”

Home. Steve grabbed a log and ripped it in half with his bare hands. Splinters drove in to his palms, and the pain helped, grounded him. He managed to keep his voice even when he said what he had to say. “Every time someone tries to win a war before it starts, innocent people die. Every time.”

“I’m sorry,” Laura’s voice broke in. “Mr. Stark... Clint said you wouldn’t mind, but our tractor doesn’t seem to want to start at all. I thought maybe you might...”

“Yeah, I’ll give her a kick.”

And so of course Nick showed up. Needing help. For such a powerful man, he sure needed help pretty regularly. And never small favors, never little things. Always the end of the world with him.

Steve secretly suspected Nick liked giving speeches.

“Ultron says the Avengers are the only thing between him and his mission. And whether or not he admits it, his mission is global destruction. All this, laid in a grave. So stand. Outwit the platinum bastard.”

Natasha kept a straight face when she said, “Steve doesn’t like that kind of talk.”

“You know what, Romanoff?” he said in a soft aside, getting ready to sling some shit, but the conversation kept going.

“When you two programmed him to protect the human race, you amazingly failed,” Natasha said to Tony and Bruce, which was nice; it was good to hear them take some shit too.

“Ultron’s going to evolve,” said Bruce, a look of revulsion creeping across his face.
“How?”

“How?”

“Has anyone been in contact with Helen Cho?”

And that was how they ended up in South Korea, chasing a perfect body for a deranged robot.

He found Dr. Cho bleeding on the floor in her lab, which wasn’t a good sign. At least she had intel for them. Clarified what they needed to be doing: get the cradle, don’t let Ultron upload himself into it, don’t blow up the gem.

The hunt for the cradle was nasty and confusing, trying desperately to keep up with the chase, keep Ultron down. Even his current body was too strong. He kept coming back from blow after blow. The Maximoff twins showed up—thank Christ, they were on his side this time.

After it all, Wanda said to him, “Did you get the cradle?”

“Stark will take care of it.”

She stared at him in dawning horror. “No, he won’t.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, slowly. “Stark’s not crazy.”

“He will do anything to make things right.”

He couldn’t raise Stark on the comm.

“Ultron can’t tell the difference between saving the world and destroying it,” she said. “Where do you think he gets that?”

Well, fuck.

And Natasha’d been captured. Not the best mission he’d ever been on.

(Still not the worst.)

When Steve showed up on the television in South Korea, Bucky swore under his breath. The woman on the treadmill next to him shot him a startled glance.

He quit his workout early, went up to his moderately-priced-business-travel hotel room, took a shower, and wondered whether it was going to be worth flying to Asia. He decided against it.

He hated being two steps behind Steve. If this was what hunting for him had been like—well. He didn’t envy Steve that. At all.

He went back to stake out the Tower. He got lucky; they showed up there, Stark first, alone in the blue light, and Banner, with him.

When Steve showed up he took a deep breath and let it out. Okay. Okay. Steve was alive, Steve was all right, Steve was here. Steve was—just a couple of buildings away.

Wanda was right, after all. Steve supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised that the mind-reader had a pretty good bead on what Tony would do. Including creating a whole new superpowerful
robot.

Good thing Vision wasn’t a murderous psychopath, no thanks to Tony.

“Maybe I am a monster,” Vision said. “I don’t think I’d know if I were one. I’m not what you are, and not what you intended.”

He had to admit, though, having an incredibly powerful artificial intelligence for them was a hell of a good thing when they already had one against them.

They were going to have to go to Sokovia. Finish the fight where it had started.

Steve wasn’t really ready to die when Tony told them it was blow the city or kill the world. But he didn’t see a way out. It had been different, before, staring up at the Chitauri, waiting for the nuke. There hadn’t been anything he’d left unfinished. Nothing left he was waiting on. Nobody to make it back to.

“I’m not leaving this rock with one civilian on it,” he said.

“I didn’t say anything about leaving. There’s worse ways to go,” Natasha said, staring off the edge of the floating city, a city turned into a bomb ready to drop on the rest of the world. “Where else am I going to get a view like this?”

He looked over at her; in the dust and grit, hair blowing around her face in the wind, she looked like a saint. She’d always been better than him, he thought. A liar, but honest about it.

Tony was going to have to do it.

“Glad you like the view, Romanoff,” said Nick over the comm. “It’s about to get better.”

The helicarrier rose into view.

“Fury, you son of a bitch,” said Steve, smiling.

“Woo-hoo! You kiss your mother with that mouth?”

You make a New Year’s resolution one time.

Offloading the civilians was not, as it turned out, going to go smoothly, or even well. But it went. Pietro—Pietro Maximoff had been a brave man, was a regrettable loss. He’d died defending his city, saving its civilians, at any rate. He’d died doing the right thing. That was some comfort.

He wasn’t sure, watching the city fall away from the helicarrier, whether Tony would be regrettable or unacceptable, as a loss. But it was too late—nothing left to do but see if Tony could blow the spire.

And survive it.

Bucky had had to sit in a fucking bar and watch, just watch, the shit happening in Sokovia—had to watch the hunk of rock Steve was trapped on, slowly rising, and that wasn’t right, wasn’t right at all, and he had a hell of a feeling about how this was going down.
“If that city falls,” said a newscaster whose poker face was fraying, “it would be devastating. Not just in the local area of Eastern Europe, but across the globe.”

Bucky crushed a beer can in one hand, but everyone else in the bar was tense enough that it didn’t seem that out of place.

When the dust settled—when Ultron was dead, thank God, that piece of shit garbage can with delusions of grandeur—Steve took a shower at Avengers Tower and slept for a day and a half. When he woke up, he didn’t fuck around. He went straight to the kitchen, opened the cupboards, and ate six boxes of cereal before he even bothered trying to cook anything.

They’d lost Bruce. Nobody knew where he’d gone.

They’d lost Pietro. Dead.

They still had Tony. And Vision, Tony’s love-child with JARVIS. Thor. Clint was alive. And Natasha—a little cracked around the edges, maybe, but whole.

“Look,” said Tony, “I need a break. I need a vacation. I’m happy to keep throwing money at the Avengers, but I need to go somewhere and not get shot at for a while. I have a suggestion, though.”

“I’m all ears,” said Steve.

“We’ve got some losses in the original team. We need to rebuild. And we’ve got some pretty amazing people that we’ve picked up along the way, right? We’ve got Sam, we’ve got Wanda. We’ve got... well, we’ve sort of got Vision. I think we should bring them on board. Make them part of it.”

Steve rocked back in his chair, raising his eyebrows. He tried to think of a downside; nothing was leaping to mind.

“That could work,” he said.

Tony lit up. “Great! Because I have a facility I’ve been dying to move something into, and I think an Avengers training program would fit the bill. It’s like the old SHIELD HQ if it wasn’t ugly and, you know, full of Nazis. So let’s head out there tomorrow, check it out. You and Nat can give a thumbs up, thumbs down kind of verdict on it.”

“Okay,” said Steve.

Natasha was, as it turned out, okay with supervising the new Avengers for a while. “We’ll go on missions, though, right?” she said.

“Of course,” said Tony. “Like Nick would let us get away without some unnecessary excitement in our lives.”

Thor decided to leave to see if he could figure out what the deal was with the Infinity Stones popping up all over the place.

When Thor left, Tony turned to Steve and said, “That man has no regard for lawn maintenance. I’m
gonna miss him, though. And you’re gonna miss me. There’s gonna be a lot of manful tears.”

“I will miss you, Tony,” Steve said gravely.

Tony looked like he was struggling not to look too touched. “Yeah? Well, it’s time for me to tap out. Maybe I should take a page out of Barton’s book. Build Pepper a farm, hope nobody blows it up.”

“The simple life.”

“You'll get there one day,” said Tony.

“I don't know. Family, stability... The guy who wanted all that went in the ice seventy years ago. I think someone else came out.”

“You all right?”

He looked around him. “I’m home.”

Natasha was in the training room. She looked young, for once, a little lost.

Steve said, “You want to keep staring at the wall, or do you want to go to work? I mean, it's a pretty interesting wall.”

She snapped out of it and covered well enough. “I thought you and Tony were still gazing into each other's eyes. How do we look?”

“Well,” he said, heavily, “we’re not the ‘27 Yankees.” (He might hate the Yankees, with a passion that had outlived the Brooklyn Dodgers themselves, but he could recognize a dream team when he saw it.)

“We got some hitters.”

“They’re good. They’re not a team.” Yet.

She smiled. “Let’s beat them into shape.”

He unpacked in the on-site quarters. A small, bright room, like a studio apartment, or a cottage, really, separated from the main building.

Not much to unpack. Still. Years out of the ice now and he’d barely accumulated a couple of suitcases of things.

Clothes—utilitarian, mostly. He could remember when he needed suspenders to hold up his pants; he could remember sewing buttons back on to his shirts. When he’d bought sewing supplies to mend his clothes before the Battle of New York, the woman behind the counter had given him a funny look. What, nobody tore things anymore? He’d figured out slowly that they were so careless with their money that half the time they’d buy something new rather than mend the old. It was insane.

His hands slowed as he pulled out a shirt. Just another long-sleeved undershirt. He’d been wearing it in Russia. He’d been wearing it when. He brushed his fingers over the edge of the postcard, sewn into the lining of the suitcase for safekeeping.
Anywhere, Bucky had said. He’d find Steve anywhere.

God, he hoped that was true. It better be.

“Okay, from the top,” he said. “Wanda, you’ve got to relax and trust Sam to catch you, or you’re never going to be able to work your stuff.”

Training with Sam, Wanda, and Vision was actually—Steve almost hated to admit it, but it was fun.

Natasha continued to go after him with no holds barred. The day she got a knife under his jaw and ripped a (small) hole before she stopped, and he bled all over the floor, the new trainees stared at her like she’d grown a second head. Then they stared at Steve with even more obvious disbelief when he just smiled and joked with her through it, one of the medic staff Tony had hired holding the gauze to his chin. It had healed up neatly, no scar, in no time flat. She hadn’t bothered apologizing. He liked that about her.

Sam gave him no respect, but he could chalk that up to familiarity breeding contempt. Sam had seen him with a mouth full of toothpaste in a hotel room trying to reach for his razor and dribbling spit and toothpaste on his t-shirt. But Sam never attacked him with everything he had, no matter how many times Steve told him to.

Vision... Vision was something else. Steve couldn’t always tell whether Vision was being a computer, or just British. He also couldn’t tell whether Vision had hobbies beyond meditating on the nature of the universe. Although Vision did get along just fine with Wanda, who was slowly learning tighter control over the psychokinesis. She’d kindly refrained from reading anybody else’s mind, which was good. Sometimes he wondered how much she’d seen while she was poking around in his head, how much had been laid bare.

It was a little weird, because Wanda obviously looked up to him. Not just literally, although he did feel like a giant next to her. But she talked to him with a certain grave respect.

When they all went out for drinks a couple weeks in, he finally asked. “Okay, come on. Why don’t you make fun of me? You talk shit about Sam all the time.”

She sighed, leaning back, playing with the half-full glass of red wine. Her eyelids were just a trace puffy, a little red—they always were, these days. Pietro dying had done a number on her. He’d hoped a night out would help.

“You know I saw your thoughts,” she said, slowly. Her English was still heavily accented; it probably always would be. She’d told him she didn’t start learning it until her late teens.

“Yeah?” he said, trying not to let the thought of it give him the creeps.

“You are,” and it was like finding the right word was a search: “an honorable man.”

He laughed out loud. He couldn’t help it.

“Oh,” he said, “I think you might want to take that dome of yours in for a tune-up, Wanda.”

She stared at him blankly, and then shrugged, raising her eyebrows in that classically Slavic unconcern. “Does not matter to me whether you believe me or not,” she said. “It remains true.”

Through the rest of drinking a beer that did nothing for him, he chewed on that.
Honorable. That was easier than good, right? It was easier to keep your word than to have pure and true intentions and stick to them.

Not a perfect soldier, but a good man.

Sorry, Erskine. It had been too hard, after all.

The new training facility was relatively well-hidden. Bucky had to give them credit for that.

He’d caught the news report that the Avengers were all right while he’d been on the road, taking care of a few things. And the dizzying rush of relief had made his head throb, and he’d thought, Okay. Well.

Relatively well-hidden, but not from someone like him. It wasn’t Brooklyn. But Steve was there, out in the carefully-sculpted grounds of the place Stark had built.

It was maybe a month into the new arrangement when Steve came back to his room after training to find the windows still tinted dark, but the door cracked. The sun was almost down on the horizon.

He stared at the door for a long minute. He’d shut it when he left. He always shut it. He always locked it.

“JARVIS,” he said.

“Yes, sir?” asked the doorknob. He’d made a deal with Tony, same security only.

“Who’s in my room?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I don’t have that data.”

“Did anyone go in since I left?”

“My data has been dumped since that point.”

“By who?”

“I don’t have that data.”

He pushed the door open slowly, loosely gripping his shield. It could be HYDRA. It could be. It could be—

There was a lump on the bed under the blankets.

“ Took you long enough,” he said, the words leaving his lips without any conscious input.

“Christ, can’t a guy take a nap in peace?” asked Bucky, voice rough from sleep. The pile of blankets shifted, and there was his face. Clean-shaven, hair still long, rumpled. A crease across his cheek from a pillow.

“You’re not asleep. You’re talking.” Steve stepped in, pushing the door shut behind him, throwing the deadbolt. His heart was pounding.
“Picky, picky.” Bucky sat up, stretching. He was wearing a t-shirt, one of Steve’s, Steve realized with a hot visceral shock. He was smiling, face warm and open in a way it hadn’t been since 1939.

Steve dropped the shield and took a few steps, fell to his knees next to the bed. “Jesus Christ,” he said, resting his forehead on the mattress.

“Just me,” said Bucky, “although I can understand the confusion,” and Steve laughed like it was punched out of him.

“Yeah, well, you make a habit out of coming back from the dead, people are likely to get the wrong idea,” he said without looking up.

“Steve.” Bucky rested his left hand on the back of Steve’s neck. It was just a little cooler than skin-temperature, but it burned him like a brand. “I told you I’d come back.”

“You did,” said Steve. “I believed you.” He straightened up, just far enough to see Bucky’s face. He sat back on his heels. Bucky’s hand moved with him; his thumb started to move, just barely, stroking the side of Steve’s neck.


“Okay,” said Steve. He couldn’t look away from Bucky’s face. “Okay.”

“I saw you on the news,” said Bucky.

“When—oh.”

“Yeah, oh. You make a habit of chasing killer robots around the world these days?”

“Only when Tony makes them,” he muttered. “It’s not my fault he’s a jackass.”

“You collect jackasses,” said Bucky.

“Lucky for you.”

Bucky chuckled a little, still stroking Steve’s neck. Steve reached up, wrapped Bucky’s metal hand in his, squeezed.

“So,” said Bucky, “I was thinking maybe we could say hello a little closer. A hug or something.”

“A hug,” said Steve. “Or something.”

“Well, I have been dead,” Bucky pointed out. “I think that’s at least as big a deal as when I came back on leave.”

Steve was laughing, and tears were prickling at his eyes, too. “Fine, you get a hug, you big jerk,” he said. Bucky took his hand to haul him up to sit on the edge of the bed, and then pulled him into an awkward sideways hug.

After a long couple of minutes Steve drew back. He left his arms around Bucky, just lifted his head up off Bucky’s shoulder and pulled back enough to meet his eyes. Steve’s vision kept blurring with tears that weren’t quite spilling. Bucky’s eyes were wet, too.

“Do you remember me?” Steve asked, so softly even he could barely hear it in the little room.

Bucky lifted his right hand and cupped Steve’s cheek; Steve turned his face into it, letting his eyes
close. “I remember us,” Bucky said. Like it was fine.

“I wasn’t good to you,” said Steve. It was easier with his eyes still shut. “You deserved so much
better, you deserved—”

“Didn’t care what I deserved,” said Bucky. “Just wanted you.”

Steve opened his eyes and said, struggling. “I’ve, uh, I’ve been thinking. Been reading. It’s a new—
brave new world. And I, uh, look, I was never ashamed of you, couldn’t have been. Never said.
Never t-told you I, I loved you, I love you, you were my life, when you, when I could have.” His
hands were clenching into fists in the fabric of the t-shirt, over Bucky’s back.

“Baby,” said Bucky. It was gentle. “I love you, too. You know it.”

“I don’t know why,” Steve gasped out, a smile rattling around his mouth that didn’t belong there.

Bucky snorted. “Go figure,” he said, and kissed Steve.

Steve grabbed Bucky’s face in both hands, pulling him in fiercely. It was—he’d wanted to do this,
felt like he would die if he couldn’t, back on the Russian coast. He’d done it a dozen times, a
hundred, in dreams since then. You don’t get second chances, but here he was, getting one.

Bucky hummed softly into his mouth and slid his hands up Steve’s sides, touching him. Relearning
him. He tugged at Steve’s shirt, and Steve let him pull it up, over his head.

They kissed, and Bucky leaned back slowly on the bed, pulling Steve after him; he didn’t have to
ask twice, Steve kicked off his shoes without letting go and followed after him. He held himself up
on his elbows over Bucky for a minute before Bucky poked him firmly in the stomach and he
collapsed.

“C’mon, Rogers,” whispered Bucky, “you’ve got to learn to defend your flank.”

“I, what—hey!” Bucky had run a hand up over his back and down, lightly smacked his ass. Steve
put his head down onto Bucky’s shoulder, stifling a hysterical giggle.

“C’mere,” said Bucky, hoarse and breathless, and wrapped his legs around Steve’s waist to grind up
into him.

Steve gasped and ground back down. “Jesus,” he said, “oh, oh, God, yeah.”

Bucky mouthed at his jaw, landed a kiss on his mouth. Pleasure was burning in his gut, arcing from
his cock through his body. Bucky dragged against him slowly. Through their sweatpants he could
feel—so hot, so good—

“Take them off,” said Bucky, tugging at his waistband, and he awkwardly peeled them off, trying
not to stop touching Bucky more than absolutely necessary. “And mine,” added Bucky, so Steve did.
That was too much, too tempting; so he dropped his head as he pulled the sweatpants down and just
wrapped his mouth around Bucky’s cock.

Bucky made a noise that started as choked-off surprise, lingered into appreciation. Steve hummed a
little and Bucky writhed under him, so he grabbed Bucky’s hips with his hand, pinning him.

It wasn’t long before Bucky was moaning out loud, louder than he’d ever been when they’d been in
cheap hotel rooms, in alleys, in foxholes, and Steve was trying to make it last, drinking in every
sound. He flicked his tongue over the head, curled it around the shaft, barely moving his head, until
Bucky groaned and said, “More, more.”

He took it all at once, down to the root. Bucky gasped. He backed off to the tip, working his tongue when he could, and did it again, and again, until Bucky actually shouted when he came, fingers digging into Steve’s shoulders so hard there’d be bruises. Steve kept his hands on Bucky’s hips and kept swallowing until Bucky ran dry.

“Oh my God,” said Bucky, looking a little shocky. Steve laughed, pleased with himself, propping himself up on his elbows to look up at Bucky’s dazed face.

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” he said fondly, and Bucky just rolled his eyes.

“Okay,” Bucky said, still panting a little, “now that you’re done trying to give me a heart attack, what do you want?”

Steve could feel himself flush all the way to the roots of his hair. Bucky raised his eyebrows and whistled. “You never got shy before. You got an imagination on you? What is it?”

“I,” said Steve.

“If you want to fuck me, I brought—”

“I want you to fuck me,” he got out.

Bucky sat up slowly, and Steve pulled himself back to sit up on his heels again, still feeling hot, flushed, peaky.

“You sure about that?” asked Bucky, his eyes searching Steve’s.

“I—yeah. I’m sure.”

“Because I probably could, by the time I get you opened up.”

“I want it. Please.”

“Man begs for it,” murmured Bucky, looking down at Steve’s body, running his hands along Steve’s sides, sliding down to grip his aching cock, “like I’m going to say no to that offer. All right. All right. Look, you should lie down.”

Light-headed with relief, Steve did, moving to the center of the bed, sprawling out over it, face-down. He wrapped his arms around a pillow, settling in, as Bucky knelt behind him. Bucky’s hands cupped his ass cheeks.

“You remember when you used to do this for me?” said Bucky in a hushed, reverent voice.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. His tongue felt thick in his mouth, with mingling joy and trepidation and relief and memory.

Bucky’s fingers rested over his hole lightly, and Bucky said, “Loved this. I just loved it, giving it up to you.”

“I know,” Steve got out, as Bucky’s fingers left and came back wet, starting to press. Just gentle pressure. “I know.”

“I’m going to go slow.” Bucky’s voice was confiding. “Let you get comfortable. Okay? And you’re going to tell me if anything hurts. I know you’re a super-soldier, you can take it, but you’re still
going to tell me.”

“Yes.”

Bucky was true to his word. He went slow. He went so fucking slow that by the time he was rocking three metal fingers into Steve’s ass, cool at first but heating to body temperature, slick, with no give, Steve was riding back up against them. Ass in the air, no shame. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Steve was gasping, “do it, please, do it, I need you—”

“Okay, okay,” said Bucky. “Pushy.” He sounded wrecked. He pulled Steve’s hips up and back, and Steve got leverage, up on his knees. Steve felt him pressing in and in and in, huge, filling him, electrically perfect on every single nerve. It was. This was.

Bucky was murmuring something over him, and it sounded like god, god, Jesus Christ, fuck, oh my god, and Steve grabbed the sleek modern headboard. When Bucky reached around under him with his right hand, started stroking his cock, he made a sound he’d never made before, a huge high-pitched keen, and when he came, when Bucky started to come in him, his hands tightened on the headboard so hard it shattered.

Bucky groaned, hands still on Steve’s hips, shaking a little from the aftermath. “You,” he managed. “You broke the bed.”

“Don’t care,” slurred Steve. “Let’s do it again.”

Bucky started laughing. Steve could feel it, like trembling. “Ambitious. I like it.”

They did it again. And again. “You’re going to feel this tomorrow,” whispered Bucky in the darkness, stroking Steve’s face with the back of his hand. Steve looked like a goddamn angel, the light from an almost-full moon pouring over his face, on his back this time and his legs bent up, slung over Bucky’s shoulders.

“I want to,” said Steve, low and husky, “I want to feel it forever.”

Bucky shut his eyes against the pressure in his chest and pushed in deeper, and Steve cried out a little, canting his hips up to meet him.

After that, they lay together in silence for a while. Not sleeping, hands tangling, stroking whatever they could reach, kissing sometimes.

“I need a shower,” Steve finally said. “You want to come with?”

“You know it.” Bucky sat up, stretching, and groaned softly.

Steve flipped the lightswitch when he walked into the bathroom, without thinking about it, and had to blink hard when they came on. He turned back to Bucky to apologize, but stopped; he couldn’t remember the words. Bucky was shining with sweat, hair hopelessly tangled, covered in bruises and hickeys and bite marks, cock hanging soft.

“What?” asked Bucky. He reached up to touch his hair and laughed. “It must be a rat’s nest.”

“You’re so fucking gorgeous,” said Steve, and kissed him again, brief and hard.
Bucky’s mouth curled up at the corners into a helplessly pleased little smile. “You always talk this much, or did I just block it out?” he said as Steve turned on the hot water, testing it with his hand—habit of a lifetime, the shower was programmed to the right temperature anyway.

Steve stepped in and Bucky followed.

“I didn’t talk this much,” said Steve. “Not about. Not about this.”

Bucky looked rueful. “I know. Didn’t mean to tease you.”

“No. It wasn’t, I wasn’t fair about it.”

“Look, it wasn’t like we knew how, right? We did the best we could.”

“You were always better at it than me,” said Steve softly, watching Bucky soap down. “But it is a new world. I’ll do better this time.”

Bucky grinned at him and tossed him the soap. “That’s what I like to hear.”

Steve ended up crowding up against him in the shower, up against one of the big glass walls, and kissing him until they were hard again, and then stroking them both off together in his hand.

Later, in bed, Steve said, “I don’t know what happens tomorrow.”

Bucky took a deep breath, sighed; said, “Well, I got an idea.”

“Don’t tell me,” Steve said wryly. “I’m not going to like it.”

“What now,” said Sam, face carefully blank.

Steve sighed, spreading his hands. “I’m saying, we could do worse. We need more manpower.” Behind him, Natasha muttered something in Russian he was glad he couldn’t catch.

“He came to you?” asked Vision.

“He did.”

“And you believe he is no longer under HYDRA’s control?”

“Yes.”

“There is simple way to know,” said Wanda. “Let me see him.”

Steve nodded, jerkily. “Okay.”

“Where is he?” asked Natasha.

“I’d prefer not to answer that until Wanda has a chance to check him out. If we’re all in agreement that her judgment is—is good.”

“I trust her judgment,” said Vision, and he and Wanda traded a weighty look.

Sam sighed, blowing out a gust of air. “Okay. You know what, if our resident mind-reader gives him
the thumbs up, that’s good enough for me.”

“Nat?” asked Steve.

She was slowly turning over and over a knife. “Yes,” she said. “If Wanda signs off on him, he can come to practice and I won’t kill him.”

“Won’t even try?”

“Won’t even try. Spoilsport,” she added, darkly, with a faint smile.

When Wanda got close, Bucky could feel her immediately. She was like a banked fire, a live wire.

“Winter Soldier,” she said, into the stillness of the clearing in the woods they’d picked as a neutral location.

“I’d rather you called me Bucky,” he said, easily. “Do you prefer Wanda or Scarlet Witch?”

She snorted. The media had started in on the “Scarlet Witch” business almost immediately and it wasn’t looking like she was going to be able to shake that anytime soon.

“Not as dumb as you look?” she said, like a question.

He came back at her with a saying from Sokovia, although he had to say it in Russian, that loosely translated to “a beautiful fool is still good for something.” She laughed out loud.

“All right,” he said, after a minute. She had come closer, almost within arm’s reach. Steve was standing back by a tree, giving her space. He looked worried, that perpetual line creasing between his eyebrows. “You ready to read me? However that goes? Please don’t screw it up, I’ve been working my ass off to get these memories back.”

She nodded shortly, and extended her hand. Reality shuddered. A red swirl, like mist, or like ink in water, drifted out from her hand, and he was pretty sure her eyes glowed with it, too.

When it touched him it felt like—like a ghost, a hand brushing through his brain. And he found his first impulse to fight it dissipating like fog.

She was gentle, turning over his thoughts like smooth river rocks, looking for HYDRA, but it was all Bucky, now. Maybe not like he’d been before. But maybe, in some ways, better. You didn’t come back from Hell the same. Anyone could tell you that. But maybe you learned how to walk on hot coals.

When she finally extricated herself, untangling from his brain, she came closer to him—close enough to take his hands in hers. She squeezed them. He glanced up from their hands into her eyes, and everything he could see in them was human.

“Welcome home,” she said.

Nick wasn’t thrilled.

“What did you just say to me,” Nick was grinding out on the phone, like every word was a personal offense to him.
“Bucky’s joining the Avengers?”

“Rogers. Maybe you have the luxury of forgetting, but I do not, that that is a highly dangerous assassin who tried to kill me twice.”

“I’m real sorry about that,” Bucky said near the phone, and Steve put his palm to his forehead, trying not to laugh or yell.

“He’s there? BARNES IS THAT YOU?”

“Yeah, it’s me. Look, you saw the files, you know how fucked in the head I was. I’m doing a lot better now, and I can prove it. I got something for you. Goodwill present.”

“It better be damn good,” growled Nick. “I had to fake my own death.”

“How do you feel about two hundred gift-wrapped HYDRA scientists?”

There was a very long moment of silence on the phone.

“God damn it,” said Nick.

“Tony,” said Steve, “there’s something you need to know.”

Tony was staring at whatever he was welding in his lab intently. “Yeah?”

“It’s about Bucky.”

“He killed my parents. I know.”

The silence grew, engulfing them both.

“If you want us to leave—”

“You know I was tortured, right?”

Steve took a deep breath. “Yeah. I know.”

“Torture’s a funny thing. You think sometimes, oh, you know what? This isn’t so bad. I could do this for a while. Maybe I could do this forever. You think, this is what the world is now.”

He turned off the torch, pulled the visor up. He still had his back to Steve.

“If I hadn’t escaped,” he said, “I would have died. And I can look at somebody like, like Barnes and think, well, shit. Turns out dying isn’t the worst option after all.”

They were quiet for a while, neither of them moving. Steve’s arms were folded across his chest.

“There’s an upside,” added Tony, almost absent-mindedly. “I can stop blaming my dad for dying. Always did, you know. I mean, of course I did, but it felt shitty. Now I get to blame HYDRA. And maybe Bucky a little, but, honestly. You don’t blame a gun. You blame the person who fires it.”

Steve wanted to say He wasn’t a but he stopped himself.

Tony flipped the visor back down. “Besides,” he added, “you want to tell me that a year after the file leak? I had that shit figured out while you were still running around the Balkans.”
“And you kept helping me,” said Steve.

“Yeah, whatever. Bro code, I told you.”

“Tony,” said Steve.

Tony cranked up the torch until it emitted a high, shrieking whine and yelled, “Can’t hear you! You should probably go away! And not have an emotional conversation about what a great guy I am!”

“Well, you are!” Steve shouted back, but he left anyway, throat tight.

It turned out Bucky got along like a house on fire with Wanda and Natasha. He and Sam had a rougher time, circling each other warily, Bucky trying to apologize several times as Sam kept waving the words away. Bucky didn’t get Vision, either.

“Where’s he staying?” asked Sam when they were in the gym after the first full meeting they had, all the new Avengers together with Bucky. Bucky had been quiet and pale, but he’d answered all the questions they asked him. He’d left afterwards, gone to the target range with Clint, who insisted on calling them “brainwashing buddies.”

Steve stared at him for a minute. Natasha burst into laughter. “Oh, Sam,” she said, “poor thing, were you the last to know?”

Sam sighed. “Something tells I’m going to regret asking. The last to know what?”

“Bucky will be staying with Steve.”

“Oh.” He could see the minute it clicked over in Sam’s head, the studio room with no couch. “Oh.”

“You wanted to know if I missed the good old days?” Steve shrugged, and laid into the punching bag again, one-two-one-two. “There are some things I don’t miss at all.”

“You—wait. Were you flirting with me? Did I have a shot with Captain America?”

“See, it’s just cruel to tell him,” said Natasha, over the rat-a-tat-tat of her little bag. “He had no idea he could have climbed you like a tree.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny,” said Steve. He couldn’t quite hide the smirk.

“God damn it! Look, I don’t swing that way, but Captain America! I could have made an exception!”

“Look at it this way.” Natasha stopped for a minute and leaned forward, resting her chin on the bag and smiling at Sam, where he was still standing, gobsmacked. “If you had, I can pretty much guarantee that his jealous ex would have murdered you.”

“He tried anyway! That’s a story to tell for life!” Sam viciously socked his bag.

“You’ll always be able to one-up Rhodesy,” said Steve. “He’s just got a bunch of boring stories about people not trying to flirt with him.”

“Don’t mention Rhodes, Sam’ll go all starry-eyed.”

“Hey, a man can’t have a hero?”
“I thought I was your hero.”

“You were my hero before I found out how bad you suck at flirting! And that you can’t drive for shit. Seriously, you almost killed us how many times in Russia?”

Steve threw back his head, laughing.

“You said once you were going to go career,” said Bucky.

Steve rolled over, put an arm out over Bucky’s chest. “Yeah. I didn’t know. I wasn’t really thinking about the future.”

“Well, this looks an awful lot like you going career.”

“For a while. I don’t know. We’ll see how it goes.”

“You said you were going to go career and I didn’t know what I’d do if you did.”

“You said you were going to go back to Brooklyn.”

“I said that, yeah. But I was thinking what would Brooklyn be worth without you.”

“You aren’t—” Steve raised himself up on one elbow to stare down at Bucky’s face. “You aren’t just doing this for me, are you? You don’t have to. We could figure something else out.”

“Nah,” said Bucky softly. “It’s for me as much as it’s for you. This is what I am, now. I don’t know what I’d do if I couldn’t—it’s built into me in a way it wasn’t before.”

Steve subsided, lying back down. “You ever change your mind, you say the word.”

“I will.”

“There’s nothing that matters more than you,” he added, very quietly.

Bucky smiled at him in the dark, reaching out to run his hand through Steve’s hair. “Yeah.”

“He’s going to need a costume,” said Clint. “Preferably something cool.”

Bucky made a face, nudging Clint’s leg with his foot. “I do not need a costume. I have tac gear.”

“It could be a good idea, actually,” Steve mused out loud. “That way, when it goes public, they’ve already seen you fight without knowing you were the Winter Soldier, they think, wow, what a great guy—”

“—because they’ve never seen you steal the remote give it back,” interjected Sam.

“—and then when it comes out, the whole tragic story, there’s already your record of fighting for good.”

“Besides,” added Natasha, “then you’d be psychologically distinct in their minds from the Soldier.”

“No capes,” was Bucky’s final word on the subject.
That was how he ended up getting to be Captain America Part II, in his words, or Cap’s Cap, in Clint’s.

On their first mission out together, Steve looked over at him and said, “You ready?”

Bucky grinned back at him from under the little fabric mask that just covered a strip of his face, and said, “Ready as anybody in Spandex can be.”

Lover divine and perfect Comrade,

Waiting content, invisible yet, but certain,

Be thou my God.

Thou, thou, the Ideal Man,

Fair, able, beautiful, content, and loving,

Complete in body and dilate in spirit,

Be thou my God.

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