“He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.” -Friedrich Nietzsche

Jack Rollins is a good soldier. A man of principles and fierce loyalty. But even the best of us get lost, sometimes.
Oct 2004

"Sgt. Rollins."

"Yes, Sir," he acknowledged, with a salute perfected years ago.

His new CO returned the salute and offered his hand to Jack, smiling, "Welcome to STRIKE."

"Thank you, Sir," Jack nodded once.

"I'm Lt. Commander D'Esposito," he said, gesturing with his empty hand for Rollins to follow him off the landing pad.

Jack had received his orders three days ago. The recruiting and vetting process took longer than he expected, waiting nearly two months to hear the positive result from his recruiter about his preferred assignment. At least he could say they were thorough. He didn't know he had been a candidate for almost six months. He had been under observation for months, well into the process, before his recruiter made himself known and Jack found out one of his buddies in his Ranger unit, who had left the Army a year earlier for a job with SHIELD, or so he'd thought, had recommended him.

Rollins had been being observed by a recruiter who'd inserted himself into Jack's social circle with his friend's help. Jack had never given HYDRA much thought. Who had? The organization had died after the war. At least that's what everyone believed. On the other hand, he wasn't closed off to the idea of joining their ranks, when their recruiter revealed himself and officially began the recruitment process with Jack. Rollins could see the merit in what HYDRA wanted for the world-order. Through his years with the Army, he'd seen the evil in the world first hand.

HYDRA sought to end the chaos. They had abandoned the genocidal means of the old Nazi Party that had given rise to the organization under Hitler's regime. HYDRA's goals were global and without bias to creed or color. It didn't strike any moral disagreements from him. HYDRA couldn't do any worse than the hundreds of assholes in leadership roles around the world already fucking it up.

When he was finally offered the position, Jack couldn't refuse the signing bonus and the annual salary. His expertise from his time with the Rangers and combat deployments meant extra financial
incentives to joining over a recruit with lesser experience or training. Rollins was brought in at a sergeant's rank and pay, with the expectations of promotions to come, if he wanted them, and began his two months long training and indoctrination to adopt his cover. Three days after successfully completing training, he boarded a Quinjet and left Georgia for DC, having packed what he needed and leaving the rest behind for a friend to sell off.

Jack looked up, eyeing the Triskelion rising above him, the midday sun glimmering off the windows of the towers. Stepping through the hatch from the flight deck into Tower B, Rollins kept pace with D'Esposito as they walked down a corridor and turned to stop at an elevator. D'Esposito pressed the elevator call button and turned to Jack.

"Commander Graves sends his apologies for not meeting you in person," he offered. "He's tied up with a budget meeting. The Commander prefers to meet the new operators personally, size them up for himself." Rollins nodded, moving into the opened elevator when D'Esposito motioned him in first. "Unfortunately, I've got my own meeting to attend here shortly, so I'm gonna pass you off directly to your squad leader, Lieutenant Rumlow. Not the way we like to handle transfers on their first day, but he'll get you squared away."

"Yes, Sir."

Rollins was escorted through the hallways of the division administration offices. He noted important names on doors as D'Esposito pointed them out. They didn't wait to enter when they arrived at Rumlow's office. D'Esposito knocked on the door as he pushed it open, walking right in. Jack followed a couple of steps behind him, stopping at attention off to the senior officer's side.

D'Esposito tossed the folder in his hand onto the desk, as Rumlow looked up from what he was writing. "Fresh meat," D'Esposito announced.

Rumlow shifted his gaze over to Rollins and then back, dropping his pen on the desk to pick up the folder. "S'today the 13th?" he wondered, scanning over the first page of the file.

"Yeah," D'Esposito snorted. "It's Monday. What day did you think it was?"

Rubbing a pair of fingertips into his temple, Rumlow sighed. "It's still last Thursday, isn't it?"

The Lt. Commander chuckled. "Not quite," he smirked. He clapped one hand on Jack's arm and shook his hand with the other. "Good to have you, Rollins." D'Esposito nodded and then pointed to Rumlow. "Bingo, I appreciate the help. You're bailing us out here. Three days liberty starts for you at 1500 and you can finally go to sleep."

"Copy that," he agreed, eyes still on the folder in his hands.

Rollins was waiting at attention when the door shut behind D'Esposito and Rumlow's eyes came up from his paperwork. He frowned, waving a hand at Jack and closing the file, lazily ordering, "At ease." He stood up, adding the folder to a short stack of paperwork on the corner of his desk. "Let's get this show on the road," he said, coming around the desk to extend his hand. "Brock Rumlow, 2nd Lieutenant, STRIKE Team Delta, 2nd Squad, Fire Team Bravo. That's your assignment as well," he noted, motioning for Jack to follow him out of the office, "in case no one's told you."

"Not so specifically, Sir," Jack swept his head.

"It's Rollins, right, Sergeant?" Brock checked, glancing over his shoulder as he shut the door behind them. "John?"

"Jack, actually," he casually noted.
"Jack," he repeated. "Got it. Listen," Rumlow began, pointing him to start walking to his left, "I've been awake for the last two and a half days with a grand total of about six hours 'a sleep in there, if I've been so lucky, so there is the distinct possibility I'm gonna forget to tell you something. You don't understand something or you got questions, don't be a pussy. Fuckin' say so, alright?"

"Yes, Sir," Jack agreed, pleasantly surprised by his new supervisor's candor.

"First things first," Brock held up a finger for his point, "I'm not a "Sir". I earn my fuckin' paycheck. Things I will answer to- Lieutenant, LT, Lieutenant Rumlow, Rumlow, Boss, and, if I decide you're not a complete fuckwit, Brock and or Bingo. Neither of the last two you are currently authorized to use. Understood?" Jack nodded, with an approving smirk, and Rumlow went on.

"In the food chain of our squad, you're coming in above six other operators with more time in service and less rank than you. It will chap their asses. They will test you and I'm gonna let 'em." They stopped, waiting at the elevator. "You'll earn their respect or you will be reassigned," the Lieutenant warned. "I don't have time to play den mother and make sure all you little kiddies get along. And I sure as hell don't have time to deal with a disfunctional team." The elevator car arrived and they were alone when they stepped in and Rumlow directed the AI to the 23rd floor.

"That shouldn't be a problem," Jack confidently assured him.

"From your recruiting file, I should hope not," he said. "Igo's a good man. I'm putting a lot 'a trust in his recommendation. So, don't disappoint either of us."

A suspicious wrinkle came to Rollins' brow, as his eyes gave the Lieutenant a questioning once over. He was briefed, for operational security, that all deep cover HYDRA operatives were unaware of each other's presence in SHIELD. He was never told how many sleepers HYDRA actually had inside SHIELD, but he knew none of them would ever make themselves known unless ordered to or in extreme circumstances.

Rumow looked over and must have read the questions in Jack's face, smirking, "Easy, big guy. While you barely got your toes in the water, I've been swimming in the deep end for years. And you'd piss yourself at the shit I know. Don't worry. You're among friends with Delta. Outside of us, no one knows. We keep your dirty little secret." The amusement dropped from his face and he added, "But fair warning, I'm also the last face you'll see if I even think you're close to making a mistake around here. You copy?"

The elevator doors opened and Jack nodded once, "CFB."

The relaxed grin returned to Rumlow's face and they continued their walk through the building. "You're lucky you're getting in now," he noted.

"How's that?"

"Now that all the positions are filled in the teams again," Rumlow said, "the Commander's looking to do away with letting transfers in to the Division to fill open slots and only allow candidates who've been through a more rigorous and standardized training and evaluation process. Not that we've had any problems with anyone we've taken in, but it'll allow us to get operators online with their teams faster if they're already squared away the way we want 'em by the time they take the commission."

Jack nodded thoughtfully at the idea and Rumlow yawned. Even without that clue, Rollins recognized the fatigue in a couple of the Lieutenant's features and knew his comment about being awake for the last few days straight wasn't a joke. For one, the blood shot eyes were always a dead
"Just come off an op?" Jack wondered, eyeing the plaques on the wall denoting the locker rooms they passed.


Jack admired him for gutting it out when SOP should have put the Lieutenant on three days leave the minute he was debriefed. STRIKE was good to their people like that. They rotated squads in and out of active status biweekly. If squad 1 of a team was in rotation, squad 2 was off but subject to recall for emergencies. Operators in rotation reported for duty daily for two weeks, beginning Friday morning and continuing for 14 consecutive days, ready to deploy at a moment's notice, and then switched off with their counterparts. Out of rotation operators were assigned regular training in all aspects of their job to stay sharp in the down time, Monday through Thursday. They enjoyed weekends off out of rotation to make up for the two weeks of operational readiness and training. After any deployment lasting longer than three days, the squad or fire team that handled the op was automatically assigned three days liberty to recover.

"We come in, 1st Squad goes out," Rumlow complained, tapping his badge at the prox reader next to the Delta locker room door. "An' with the bosses tied up with their bullshit, I've got no one here to get you set up." After a turn down the first aisle, they stopped and Brock pulled open an empty locker, telling Rollins, "Stow your shit in here, while we do the tour and get you squared away with the Quartermaster and Armory. By the time we're done, D'Esposito should be free again to take over and I can hit the rack."

Jack let the ruck and duffel slip off his shoulder, stacking them into the bottom of his locker, for now. The bags had what he needed to live while the rest of his things and his truck were being shipped to the apartment he'd rented sight unseen. Half-assing everything irritated Jack, but it was out of his control. The position came up fast and he didn't have time to plan the details of a move and not miss the opportunity to get into STRIKE.

"Married?"

"No," Jack swept his head, shutting the locker door.

"Girlfriend?"

"Just got in about 15 minutes ago," Jack noted, checking his watch. "So, not yet."

Rumlow's head ticked back with an amused smirk. "Kids?"

"Not that I'm aware of," he shrugged.

They turned to head back out to the corridor, as Rumlow told him, "I like what I read in your files, Jack. Pay attention, work hard and I can see bigger things comin' your way."
Chapter 2

Dec 2004

“Shoot me in the face,” Brock warned, “and I’ll put one in your leg. A real one.”

Across the way, Jack smirked, giving a jut of his chin to accept the deal. Between them, Cephas, Greer, Emery, and Haney all laughed at the idea. Rollins flexed his right hand into a fist, before shaking the stiffness of the cold out of it. Training had started out pleasantly enough, in the low 50s, but the temperature had been slowly dropping all day. Shooting gloves weren’t thick enough to keep hands warm for long and 9 hours on the outdoor range in the chilling weather was catching up to them all. He tucked the rifle back in to his shoulder, holding it at low ready.

”We doin’ this?” Jack wondered, looking over his teammates loafing around on the range.

”Yeah,” Greer waved a hand for his patience. He pointed at Rumlow, holding a thumb up at him to check, “You ready?”

”I’m ready,” he nodded, with a grin. “Let’s go already. It’s fuckin’ cold.”

The others laughed and agreed. Greer turned to Rollins, to see if he was ready. Jack thumbed off the safety and nodded, “Yup. Let’s go.”

”Okay, guys,” Greer said, nodding to his unarmed teammates.

”We set?” Haney wondered, shifting his gaze between the two shooters.

”Right now?” Brock mischievously smirked, pulling the trigger and drilling Jack in the thigh with a sim round.

”Stop it,” Greer flatly scolded, pointing at Brock, who fiendishly chuckled while Jack flipped him off with his support hand.

”Go,” Emery called.

Looking at the others hesitating, Greer herded them along, saying, “Walk. Walk!”

Cephas and the others started milling about, walking, slowly at first, and abruptly changing angles and direction in the 15 or so yards of open space between Rollins and Rumlow to interrupt the shooters’ lines of fire. The muzzle awareness drill was always one of two things: a laugh riot watching the shooters nail each other with simunitions or a quick way to end friendships, if the shooters got sloppy and the decoys started taking too much friendly fire. But today was one of the good days and this was the final drill for the guys who stuck around to play a bit longer, after the rest of the squad was dismissed for the day.

Rollins and Rumlow were both respected shooters who always qualified as “expert”. They traded shots, moving and shooting like the professionals they were, swearing when a round struck a limb and laughing like kids at play when they took a shot in their armor. The decoys didn’t make it easy, either. They bumbled around between them, like bugs scurrying from the light, faster as the drill wore on. Haney even put a shoulder in to Jack, to try and throw him off balance, and Emery took a swipe at Rumlow to try to knock down his pistol. At the end of the two minute drill, though, everyone was still enjoying themselves.
“You shoot like a bitch,” Rumlow taunted, dropping the spent magazine from his pistol and locking back the slide.

"Yeah?" Jack mused, passing his rifle off to Dennison. He pointed at the soap marks on Brock’s plate carrier over his chest. “Doesn’t look like a bitch did that.”

"And he didn’t shoot you in the face,” Dennison noted, taking the empty pistol off Brock’s hands to pack away with the other simunitions weapons.

"What?" Rumlow balked. “I should compliment the guy? He got by on luck.” Brock inclined his head toward Jack’s armor, adding, “The front of him looks like a connect the dots puzzle.” He smacked the back of his hand into Haney’s arm. “Besides, how many times d’he hit you? Huh?”

“Three,” Haney answered, with a frown, holding up as many fingers in Jack’s grinning face.

"It’s what you get for trying to knock me on my ass,” Rollins shrugged.

They all had a laugh, while they unbuckled gear and pulled off armor. They were officially done at the range for the day. Everyone had qualified the day before and this second day was for tactics and drills. All that was left to do was pack the weapons into the agency vehicles for transport back to the Triskelion armory.

“Are we still getting food?” Dennison wondered, nudging an elbow back into Rumlow’s arm as the Lieutenant passed behind him.

"Yeah,” he distractedly answered, press checking his pistol before putting it back in his holster for the ride home.

“The usual?”

"Yeah,” Brock snorted. “I don’t think anybody else’d be interested in serving us looking like this.”

Jack smirked, taking a look at the drying mud on everyone’s uniform pants from prone and other ground shooting positions throughout the day on the grass range. Rollins secured his own pistol and started helping the others police up any brass they could see and packing the gear to go.

"You comin’?" Dennison asked Cephas beside him.

"I need a ride home if I do,” he shrugged. “Laney’s car’s in the shop, so she dropped me off this morning.”

Dennison nodded. “I got you, man.”

Rollins caught Dennison bump Rumlow again, adding a subtle tip of his head, and Brock spoke up. “Hey, Rollins,” he said, with a raise of his chin as he grabbed one of the rifle cases off the table. Jack looked up from the ammo can he was just latching shut, at the far end of the table. “There’s a place, a fuckin’ dive really, but the food’s good and the people there are alright. The guys go there pretty regular. Why don’t you follow us over, have a beer, or something.”

"Sure,” Jack shrugged, grabbing an ammo can in each hand to take to one of the SUVs in the lot.

He didn’t want to come off as too eager, but Jack knew where the team drank and he’d been curious to see how long it’d take to get an invite. It took roughly two months. He didn’t mind the wait. Rumlow had warned him that he’d have to win over a few people on the team. After weeks of putting up good scores in training and physically proving he belonged there, Jack had made the
effort to get to know his teammates, bullshitting with guys when there was downtime and taking mental notes on ticks when people offered them about each other. It looked like he had finally been accepted.

"Cephas is there so much," Haney joked, "he gets his mail delivered there."

"I can’t help it my wife can’t cook to save her life," he shrugged, with a laugh.

"But then, he might just be an alcoholic," Greer suggested.

Cephas held up a finger to argue, "Not until I admit it first."

Barny’s didn’t look like much on the outside. Hell, it didn’t look like too much more on the inside. Jack had been in worse establishments, but Rumlow’s assessment wasn’t too far off base. The bar was split off into two rooms. There was the main room, when you entered, where most of the patrons seemed to sit if they were interested in food with their drinks and a second room, that looked like an add-on some years ago. The back room had billiards and darts squeezed in with the rest of the tables.

For a Wednesday evening, there wasn’t much of a crowd. But Dennison had said the place really picked up on the weekends and after 6 o’clock most other nights. According to Cephas, the bar was the unofficial watering hole of SHIELD and the other alphabet agencies in DC, where the spooks checked egos at the door and were friendly with their competition, and everyone knew who STRIKE was. They found a seat at one of the tables on the wall opposite of the bar.

"Menu for the new guy," a round faced woman offered, holding out the laminated booklet for Jack. "Usual drinks for the rest of you?"

"Yes, ma’am," Dennison nodded.

"And for you?" she wondered, looking to Jack.

"Beer and a Jameson," Brock spoke up for him.

The older woman quirked up a brow, smartly saying, "Didn’t know you two were together."

"Ah, Mary, I only have eyes for you," Rumlow grinned. "Just waiting on you to leave that bum husband ‘a yours."

Mary gave him a wink, despite looking to have a good 10-15 years on Rumlow, promising him, "You couldn’t handle me, LT."

The guys at the table all laughed, and Mary left to get their drinks. "Mary’s husband owns the place," Cephas explained. "It’s been in the family since the 40s."

"She’s practically everybody’s mother," Dennison added. "Knows who everyone is."

"But don’t give her any shit," Rumlow warned, "unless you’re prepared to get it back."

"It’s a shame," Greer began, looking over both shoulders to see the whole room, "her daughter’s not working tonight. Because she. is. hot."

Rollins snorted, giving the menu a look. He got a few recommendations for dinner and settled on a burger and seasoned fries everyone agreed was the most reliable. Mary delivered a tray of beers
and whiskeys and took down everyone’s orders. She lingered for a minute, giving Rollins the third degree about who he was and where he came from. But Jack didn’t mind the needling from the sassy waitress.

The guys talked shit about their day at the range, while they ate, and when Greer called Rumlow “Bingo”, Jack had to ask, “Why Bingo?”

Rumlow smirked, chewing his food, while Dennison answered for him. “Because 5 seems to be his lucky number.”

"He’s a legend,” Cephas noted. “Collected five citations from the Division Command in his first year.”

“What was that?” Dennison wondered, with a thoughtful wrinkle in his brow. “In ‘02 when he stumbled across those five guys who were smuggling the uranium, when we-“

”2001,” Haney corrected. “2002 was the guy who had those five Dobermans in the-“

”Yeah!” Dennison lit up. “And he fucking just tiptoed around them and-“

“I still don’t know how they didn’t eat you,” Greer shook his head. “I mean, I didn’t want to have to shoot a dog, but we were ready to start puttin’ ‘em down, and he just...” Haney shrugged, throwing his hands up.

“Oman in 2000,” Haney added, “he notched five confirmed kills from one Horseman op, when the original two targets ended up inviting some of their weapons dealing buddies over to dinner the same night Rumlow’s sitting up on the hill outside this guy’s house waiting to snipe him. Talk about lucky. CIA was pretty fuckin’ tickled with that one. Closed a couple files for them that night.”

”Five negative paternity tests,” Cephas quipped, and the table broke into laughter.

”Yeah, so, five seems to be his lucky number,” Dennison concluded, with a shrug.

“Five spots on a card...” Jack reasoned.

“Bingo,” Dennison nodded.

Throughout the explanation, Rumlow had been silent, keeping busy with his meal. Jack pegged him as the type that didn’t like to brag. And he clearly didn’t need to, not with this bunch of guys ready to proudly do it for him.

“So, what’s the deal?” Haney asked, ahead of a quick drink of beer. “Is the plebe allowed to start hanging out, or are we just feeding the mutt ‘cause we feel sorry for him?”

The men at the table stifled their laughter, a couple sputtering into their drinks. But everyone looked to Rumlow, watching as he finished swallowing his food and took a pull off his beer. Brock looked over their curious expressions, all waiting for him to pass judgement on Jack.

With an almost indifferent shrug, the Lieutenant simply said, “He’s alright.”

There were a few chuckles and an approving clap on the back of Jack’s shoulder from Emery beside him. “By the way, Rollins...you play poker? There’s kind of a regular game with one of the SF guys. We lost a player last month to a transfer. Got an open seat tomorrow...”
Jack shrugged. “Sure. I’m in.”
Chapter 3

Feb 2005

"This is pretty fucked up," Jack decided, taking a look around.

Rollins' eyes settled back on the machinery in front of them. He stared for a long moment at the small window, curious about the sleeping face of the man locked inside the cryotube. Jack shook his head at the eerie feeling it gave him, thinking about being trapped in suspended animation, let alone volunteering for it.

"This is next level fucked up," Brock nodded. He hit the back of his hand into Jack's arm. "C'mon. Let me show you around."

They left the lab, turning down the hall to their right. Jack glanced at the signs next to the doors they passed, wondering, "Who the hell volunteers for that?"

"Nobody," Rumlow said, with a firm sweep of his head. "Not me." He snorted, before his face fell sober again. "And not him," he added, jerking his thumb down the hall behind them.

Jack was curious, when the Lieutenant called him to his office and told him they were headed out of town. He was almost as confused as he was wary when he climbed into the loach with Rumlow and still didn't know where they were going. Rumlow pointed them West, when he took off from the flight line of the Triskelion. All he offered Jack was a promise that it'd be an “interesting trip”. They landed somewhere in Pennsylvania, at a facility Jack didn't know HYDRA had. So far, Rumlow was right.

"So, who is he?" Jack asked.

Brock made a short gesture to point Jack through the turn at the next corner. "Bucky Barnes," he answered.

Rollins stopped walking and Rumlow caught on a step later. Jack pointed behind him, skeptical to repeat, "Bucky Barnes?" Brock nodded. "How the f-" Jack fumbled. "You're telling me-"

"Yep," Rumlow cut in. "It's a long story." He nodded, seeming sympathetic to Jack's confusion and outright disbelief. "Suffice it to say, he didn't die in '45."

"I kind of think I wanna hear the story," Jack said.

Brock motioned for Jack to follow him again and they fell back into step. "Bucky Barnes," he answered.

"The guy who turned Schmidt red?" Jack checked.

"The same," Brock nodded. "Sounds like you did some of the reading."

"When I need something to help me fall asleep," Rollins deadpanned, and Rumlow laughed.

"Nice," Brock smiled. "Anyway, Zola's first real success was on Barnes. But Rogers sprung him and the rest of his company from Austria and Schmidt blew up the facility, including Zola's lab, in
the process. So, Zola needs his lab rat back, right? Because he could only save so much of his research before it all went up in smoke." Jack nodded along, stopping with Rumlow in front of an elevator. "They leak that Zola's on this train, knowing full well how bad the SSR and everybody wants their hands on the doctor and banking that they're gonna send Rogers and his Commandos after him."

"A set up to get Barnes back," Rollins reasoned, with a small nod of approval for the classic tactic.

"Only it all went wrong," Brock said, as they entered the elevator car. "One of Zola's idiots blows a hole in the side of the train, while he's trying to kill Rogers. Barnes falls out, presumably to his death. Except he doesn't die. The serum he's got in him keeps the bastard alive and the Russians find him at the foot of a mountain." The elevator stopped and Brock gestured down the hall for Rollins to follow. "He's a little worse for wear, but still alive."

"The Allies got Zola, though," Rumlow explained, "just like they planned." They stopped in front of a door and the Lieutenant entered a code on the security pad on the wall to get them through. "The SSR tried recruiting him to work for them. And thus, the infiltration of HYDRA inside of SHIELD began."

"So far, it's a fun story," Jack dryly mused.

"It gets even better," Rumlow promised, waking a computer at one of the workstations in the unoccupied room. While he typed and clicked open files, he went on. "Zola secretly keeps on with his research, as the SSR's employee of the month. In the meantime, Barnes is located with the Russians. It took some time to make the connection. They didn't know right away what they had. They were just treating him like any other prisoner of war.

“When the war ended, Zola got a hold of him again.” Brock straightened up, apparently done with the computer. “He did a good part of his research remotely, at first, having his aides follow his instructions for experiments when he couldn’t sneak away to perform or oversee them himself. It took a little time for HYDRA to work their way in deep enough to be able to move Zola around and replace SSR staff with HYDRA agents without raising suspicions. Barnes lost part of his arm in the fall, but Zola was into some freaky shit back in the day. He was pioneering cybernetics before anyone really knew what it was.”

One of the large monitors in the room came to life and took both their attentions. On the screen was old 8mm film, converted to a digital copy, showing Barnes seated and strapped into a machine. Two robotic arms haloed a device near his face, while men in white lab coats made adjustments on computers and checked the machine. They watched for a couple of quiet minutes. When Zola appeared in the frame, Rumlow spoke up to point him out. The doctor briefly conferred with his colleagues before telling them to begin the procedure. The device was closed onto Barnes' face and the hum of electricity and machinery was heard. A few moments later, Barnes cried out in pain, his body spasming against its restraints, while the scientists took notes.

While the film played on, Brock noted, "This is Zola's first attempt at brainwashing. They say it's as painful as it looks and sounds; like an electric chair that never kills you. It wipes away your memories; your whole identity." They watched for another few moments. "It took them awhile to refine the process," Rumlow shrugged, "but they figured it out. This machine and some standard indoctrination techniques? Got him like Pavlov's dog."

"No shit," Jack marveled, still watching the scientists make adjustments and notes of the tortuous scene.

"No shit," he confirmed. "The procedure used to need days and multiple treatments to stick, but it's
been reduced to a few hours. After Zola died and the Cold War kicked in, the Russians took over proprietary work on the research. They started this program, the Winter Soldier Program, trying to perfect Zola's work with the serum and build an Army just like Barnes.

"That parts still in development," he conceded. "So far, Barnes is the only success any version of the program has had. When he's not in use, they keep him in cryo, like you saw back there." Rumlow stopped the film footage and turned to Jack. "Bet you're wondering what the fuck you're here for, right?"

"If you say I'm the next volunteer," Jack began, "you got another thing coming."

"Nah," Brock smirked. "They still use prisoners for their guinea pigs."

"Good answer," Rollins nodded, not entirely joking, despite his smirk.

Rumlow opened up another file on the computer and the screen switched to an assessment file on Barnes. "The Winter Soldier is operational after he's revived from cryo and reprogrammed. He's capable of solo missions, but he's had a handler since day one. The handler's job is to oversee the mission and monitor the Asset's condition. The programming works, but it's not permanent," he explained. "The longer he's out of cryo, the more the program breaks down. The serum starts repairing the damaged synapses and his memories start coming back. If a handler sees he's been or is becoming compromised, the handler shuts him down and, if necessary, completes the mission. Most times, he's good on his own."

"How do they shut him down?" Jack asked.

"There's a series of commands embedded in him that the Russians used to control him," Brock said. "One is basically the best version of hypnosis. It triggers an unquestioning obedience to what the handler says. But that doesn't last forever either. The idea is to be able to secure and transport the Asset back to the nearest holding facility and get him back into cryo or in the machine to wipe him and start over. There's a release command for that one and a command to render him unconscious, as a last resort."

"And what does the handler base their commands on?" Rollins wondered. "How do they know he's coming 'round?"

"Years of familiarity, my friend," Rumlow nodded. "The handlers train with him and have all the notes and assessments from every handler before them. We get to know him as well as, if not better than, we know ourselves."

"Wait. You?" Jack realized.

He nodded. "Since 2000," Brock confirmed. "Our squad is his support team for any deployment anticipated to last longer than 96 hours, including insertion and exfil. That's their breaking point where they start worrying about the Asset being compromised. There's not a soul among us that can't be trusted with keeping our worst secrets. That's why you're here, Jack. To show you what's behind the last door."

Jack nodded to himself. He had thought it was unusual when his squad was activated last month without him. Rollins was sent to a counter-interrogation seminar the CIA was hosting. He'd been told it was to see if there was anything worth adopting into STRIKE's training, but he realized now it might have been a way to divert him while his squad was on an assignment with the Soldier. The seminar turned out not to offer anything better than what the Division already had in place, but he'd made a new acquaintance while he was there. An agent in their Clandestine Services who was a
mutual friend of one of his old Ranger buddies, Kyle. So, all in all, it wasn't a complete waste of his time.

"The Asset has a mission," Rumlow explained. "He'll be operational in 14 hours. I want you to take some time; get familiar with the Program." He pointed to the screen on the wall. "I've got some files queued for you to start with. I've got to check in with the CO up here. I'll come back for you in a couple hours. We'll get some chow and I'll show you the rest of the stuff you need to know."
May 2005

It was his surprise that first got him interested; made him curious about the spitfire that told the sunburnt asshole two rows in front of her to watch his mouth, speaking up for an uncomfortable looking mom and the group of kids she had charge of that the woman didn't even seem to know.

Jack and his buddies had just taken their seats again in RFK Stadium. The Nationals were off to a decent start for their first season in their new home, and Jack and a couple of his friends from his old Ranger unit, who had all since taken jobs in and around DC, had decided to see what all the fuss was about. Jack had been busting his ass the last few months, making good impressions at his new assignment during and in between missions. He was hoping to have a laidback day off with his friends.

But the loudmouth down the way was poised to ruin it for everyone. Rollins and his friends noticed the man first, trained to spot trouble before it showed, and had been keeping an eye. The guy could put away some beers, which in any other setting that wasn't filled with families and kids nearby wouldn't be a problem. By the fourth inning, his running commentary about the officiating of the game had gone from amusing to annoying and edged on becoming uncivilized. The group of guys with the man didn't seem to notice or care.

Everyone in the section appeared content to let the first couple of tirades go unchallenged. But the boisterous Braves fan was feeling the frustration of his underperforming team and his criticism of all things Nationals Baseball was sinking to a new and impressively expressive level of profanity the further the game progressed. His friend, Kyle, had treated them all to a round of beers from the concessions in the top of the fifth and they had all unanimously agreed, while they waited in line, that one more comment from the drunkard in Row C was going to be the end. Not that their sensibilities were too delicate to stand the language, but the military professionals had standards and it was only right to try and defuse or shut down the situation, for the good of the herd.

Only they didn't have to. The next time the jerk spoke up, spouting a list of curses about his interpretation of the strike zone, Jack was cut off by the blonde ponytail sticking out of the back of a Nationals ball cap.

"Oh, would you please just. shut. up," she loudly complained, much to the approval of everyone around her.

The man turned around in his seat, leveled eyes searching the fans behind him for whoever had called him out. He somehow managed to pick out the woman and pointed up at her, angrily reminding her, "I paid for this seat."

"Yeah?" she scoffed. "So did we. Now, there's kids here, so show some respect and watch your mouth."

The suggestion didn't go over well. But before the man could say his next piece, his eyes were drawn up several rows behind his intended target. Jack and his boys had stood up. They didn't say anything. They didn't have to. They simply stood and looked down at the man, their squared posture, standard issue hair cuts, and warrior physiques more than enough of a resumé for anyone to read for themselves. The man quickly thought better of his next comment and turned back around in his seat.
There was a smattering of applause from the people seated near enough in the section to know what had just happened. The blonde picked up pretty quick that something bigger than her had changed the man's mind and she glanced around to figure out what. She caught sight of Jack taking his seat again, the last of his friends to settle in after he took a moment to grab his plastic cup of beer from the aisle before he sat down. She stared for a moment, apparently not quite sure if the group of imposing men just sitting down was a coincidence or not. A subtle grin pulled back the corner of his mouth and Jack gave her a single nod of assurance. The woman bit the side of her lip and smiled back, before turning her attention to the game again.

When it was all over, the Nationals had a win and Rollins and his buddies decided it had been worth the price of admission. They'd have to come back and see how the season played out. Waiting in their row for the crowd to thin enough for them to step out into the aisle and leave, Jack watched the blonde climb the stairs, from behind his dark lensed sunglasses. She couldn't have known his eyes were following her, but she grinned up at him nonetheless as she got closer. She fell a step or two behind her friends, pausing at Jack's row to tell him, "Thanks."

"What for?" he asked, sounding genuinely curious.

She tittered and shook her head, saying, "For whatever you did to make him shut up."

"Didn't do a thing, ma'am," Jack smiled innocently enough.

She looked down the line of men obviously cut from the same regimental cloth and smiling as politely as a group of cats who swallowed a cageful of canaries could. "Riiight," she nodded. "Guess I'm just naturally persuasive."

"I'd say so," Rollins agreed, with a charming grin, a little distracted by the freckles that crossed her nose from one cheek to the other and the shade of blue the sun gave her eyes.

He was sure he saw her blush, before she ducked and shook her head. Up the stairs, her friends called her by name, begging her along. Her name was Claire.

The section had thinned considerably and Jack motioned for her to continue ahead of him and his friends. While Claire started up the stairs again, Kyle and the others pushed and jabbed at his back to send him up the stairs after her. As they all filed along, Claire shot Jack one more glance over her shoulder before she caught up with her friends and was literally grabbed by the hand and led away.

Rollins endured some cheap shots at his manhood from his friends, for "letting her get away". But Jack hadn't been in DC that long. He was just settling into his position with his STRIKE team and was honestly too busy, between missions and training the last several months, to put in the effort to try and entertain a girl longer than a night. He shrugged off their comments and jokes, saying, "Maybe next time, boys."

He didn't know how fast next time would arrive. He couldn't have calculated the odds that Claire and her friends would be parked just one aisle over from Jack and his. They noticed each other across the way first, attentions distractedly drawn by the simultaneous chirps of car alarms deactivating. And then Kyle and the guys caught on.

"Now's your chance," Brian nudged him.

Jack shook his head and Sean piped up, "Don't be a pussy."

"Hey," Kyle pointed out, "you said next time."
"Shut up," Jack grumbled, with a crooked smirk at the awkwardness of his friends' prodding him.

"Oh, say hey, Kyle, what time is it?" Brian sarcastically wondered.

"Lemme see, Brian." Kyle made a show of checking his watch and answering, "Uhh, yup," he nodded, obnoxiously. "It's next time."

Jack gave a jut his chin at his brothers in arms. "Fuck all of you, so hard."

He saw Claire give him another look, waiting for her friend to climb in the back seat ahead of her. The enthusiastic roar from his friends that followed Jack across the parking lot aisle earned them a middle finger as he turned over his shoulder to shake his head at them. Claire seemed to hesitate, but was bold enough to take a few steps to meet him.

There was a quiet pause between them where they both shared a kind grin, before Jack casually pocketed his hands, saying, "I don't know about you, but I missed some of the game. Some jackass kept running his mouth and I got a little distracted. I thought maybe, if you had the same problem, you might want to catch another game some time when the company'd be better."

"The company would be better, huh?" she mused, quirking up an eyebrow. Jack nodded, and she admitted, "Yeah, that guy was pretty distracting."

"Oh," Jack put up a hand to correct her. "No, I wasn't talking about that guy." He inclined his head to her, smiling, "No, I meant how distracting those blue eyes of yours are."

The pink in her cheeks was undeniable this time and Rollins grinned at her shading her hand over her eyes to hide, in spite of her hat that could do the same for her. "Wwww," she nodded, biting at her lip. "That-" She wagged a finger at him, with a soft giggle. "That was good," Claire admitted.

"Good enough to say "yes"?" Rollins checked.

"Yeah," she agreed, with a titter. "That's good enough." Claire looked down, opening her purse to tear off a corner of a piece of paper and pulling out a pen to write down her number. She handed him the note, offering, "I'm-

"Claire," he finished for her, taking the scrap of paper from her. He put out his free hand, introducing himself, "Jack."

She shook his hand, with a warm grin. "Nice to meet you, Jack." Claire peeked over her shoulder to see her friends watching her out the rear window of their car. She jerked her thumb behind her, figuring, "I better get going." She slinked backwards a couple of steps, pointing at the paper in his hand. "That's my cell. I don't give out my home number or address 'til I know a guy's not a serial killer or something." Jack chuckled, nodding his understanding. A discerning squint came to her eye and she decided, "But you're not one of those, are you?"

"No, ma'am," he swept his head. "Had to give it up. Just don't have the time anymore."

Claire seemed to like his answer and nodded her approval. "If you call and I'm at work, my office is in a part of the building with shitty reception," she warned, "so you better leave me a message, if I don't answer."

"Absolutely," he smiled.

With one last shy grin, Claire turned on her heel to rejoin her friends. Jack's own friends had been standing by outside his truck the whole time. They watched him walk back, with eager and
expectant looks on their faces. Jack held up the piece of paper for them to see, as he got closer, and they broke out into yells of approval, with Kyle beating his hands on the truck in lieu of applauding. Rollins shook his head and told them all to kiss his ass.
July 2005

"It's not broken, but it's still gonna sideline you for two weeks."

"Two we- Come on, Doc," Jack complained. "It's not even my weapon hand. I can-"

"Suck it up and sit at a desk for a couple weeks," the doctor firmly finished for him, typing as he kept his attention on the tablet in his hand. "See me in a week and we'll re-evaluate. In the meantime, light duty, no contact training, and no deployments. I want to keep it immobilized, for now. I'll send a nurse over to fit you for a splint." He looked up, and Jack shook his head when he asked if he had any questions. "You guys have been busy lately," the doctor noted. "It was gonna catch one of you eventually. I suggest you enjoy the break, Sergeant."

"Yeah," Rollins grumbled. "Thanks a-fuckin'-lot, Doc."

The doctor smiled anyway, obviously accustomed to and understanding of the resentment from stubborn operators, like Rollins, who were too gung-ho to tolerate injuries keeping them from their work for even the smallest amount of time. "I'll get you back out there as soon as possible," he assured him. "Give us just a few minutes and you'll be on your way home. Take it easy, Sarge."

Jack nodded, resigning himself to his situation. "Thanks, Doc," he begrudgingly offered.

The doctor left with a nod. Rollins let out an aggravated sigh, looking up at the X-ray of his left wrist and hand illuminated on the wall. Jack turned his hand over and hissed in a short, quiet breath at the shot of pain that went up his forearm from his wrist. He muttered a profanity, for both the discomfort and the asshole he had grappled with to make the arrest for the ICJ in The Hague that caused him this trouble. The target of the raid didn't want to go quietly. And while Jack could respect the man for that, and for his skill as a fighter, he wished now that he'd have taken the opportunity to get in one more shot after he'd overpowered the escaped guerrilla colonel, just so Rollins would be sure he could experience some of the pain Jack was now.

A couple of minutes later, a nurse came to put a splint on his wrist. The nurse nodded for him to go ahead and answer the ringing phone in his pocket, while she ran the Velcro straps through the loop closures of his wrist wrap. Jack took out his phone and answered Claire's call with a tired, "Yeah", before he realized who it was.

"That doesn't sound good," Claire decided. "Not gonna make it for dinner, huh?"

Something about the way she said it put a grin on his face and he apologized, "I'm sorry. Taking a little longer than I thought."

Overhead, the PA requested one of the doctors on duty in the Infirmary answer a call and Claire worried, "Is tha- Are you in a hospital?!"

Jack grimaced, unable to explain the announcement away. "Not exactly."

"What the hell? Why are you in a hospital?" she demanded.

"I'm not in a hospital. It's-" He broke off, needing a different approach. "I'm still at work. Just had to stop by sick call to see about something for a minute. No big deal."
The nurse in front of him quirked up a judgmental brow at him, her expression begging, "Really?" and Rollins cocked his head at her in reply, while Claire questioned, "Are you hurt?"

"No," he lied, nodding to the nurse's whispered question about his comfort as she finished closing the last strap on the splint. "I'm fine."

Claire was headed out of town soon. Her job as an operations consultant for sales and marketing had her on a plane Sunday afternoon to spend a week with a client office. Missing dinner with her tonight meant he had no plans to see her before she left and he, hopefully, wouldn't have to explain the brace on his wrist before she got back, if the doctor released him early enough. He insisted when she asked if he was sure he was okay, but she sounded a little hesitant to believe him.

"If you say so," she relented. Claire paused a beat before suggesting, "Well, if you're running late, how 'bout we skip the movie and just do a late dinner when you're done? I'm starved."

Rollins made what he could of a fist with his hand in the brace, waiting for the nurse to make some final notes in the computer and release him. "I've still got a couple things to do here," he told her, scowling at the splint. Like stopping at the pharmacy for the pain medication the doctor prescribed him that Claire didn't know he needed.

"You just going to grab something on the way home then?" she asked.

"Probably. Hadn't really even thought about it," he admitted. Debating taking his meds or just having a beer when he got home was as close as Jack had come to a plan for dinner.

"Oh." She was obviously disappointed. "Well, maybe tomorrow night then."

"We'll play it by ear," he noncommittally offered, taking the paperwork the nurse gave him and sliding off the side of the examination bed to leave. "The schedule's been a bit heavy lately." A truth he didn't mind using as an excuse to dodge her.

Jack had the time to give her. Claire wasn't aware of the mandatory three days liberty this mission qualified him for. He was just trying to avoid her until he was free of the splint and cleared for full duty again. He and Claire had been dating for barely two months. She knew, in a general way, what he did for SHIELD. But, as a civilian, what he had told her about his job with STRIKE was intentionally pretty diluted. He didn't want her to worry. It wasn't worth the effort for either of them, until they figured out where, if anywhere, the new relationship was going.

"Okay," she quietly accepted. "Well, I won't hold you up. Sounds like you're busy."

"Just a little," he told her, making a mental note to call Rumlow and tell him the bad news about his wrist and operational status. He frowned at the two large, bold print words on the top of his paperwork, as he shouldered open the Infirmary door. 'Restricted Duty'. "I'm sorry, Claire. I know we said-"

"Don't worry about it," she told him, her tone a little lighter again. "You sure you're okay?"

Rollins stopped outside the door for the pharmacy, a little struck by the gentle concern in her question. "Yeah," he promised, with a warm grin in the side of his mouth. "I'm okay."

"Okay," she agreed. "I'll call you later."

Jack said his goodbye and got back to business. He had his prescription filled, while he phoned Brock and let him know he was headed home after the med staff’s diagnosis. His Lieutenant wasn't happy to hear he was out of service for awhile, but wished him a speedy recovery, telling him to
call if he needed anything while they were off the next few days. Rollins stopped off at his locker for his keys and wallet and headed home.

He pulled into the garage of his Columbia Heights apartment building. Rollins cursed himself when he reached to pop the door handle of his truck, like he always did, with his newly injured hand. The pain from his subconscious mistake lingered as he made his way across the lobby to check his mailbox.

"Jack?"

"Shit," he muttered, stopping mid-stride to turn and see Claire rising from her seat in the building's front lobby. Jack smiled, "Hey, Claire. What's in the bag?"

"Fuck the bag," she said, pointing at the black brace on his wrist. "What is that?"

Jack looked down at his hand. "It's nothing," he promised. "Just a sprain."

"That means you're hurt, dummy. You said you weren't hurt," Claire frowned, crossing her arms and raking her eyes up and down him. She flung out a hand, begging, "And what's with your clothes?"

Jack's mouth guiltily tugged to the side for the dirt ground into his pants during his fight earlier in the day. At least the compression tee from under his uniform was clean. His combat shirt had taken all the damage there. "It's a just sprain," he shrugged. "Doesn't count."

"It doesn't count?" she gaped. "You're in a splint, Jack. It counts."

"I think we're using two very different scorecards for "hurt" here," Rollins told her. Her scowl said his observation was nowhere near as funny to her as it was to him and his grin fell, fast. His shoulders dropped a fraction, admitting, "Okay, it hurts a little, but I'll be cleared in a week." He hoped. "Sorry," Jack offered.

A pout came and left Claire's lips and she sighed. "What did you do?" she wondered.

Jack exhaled, with a tip of his head, thinking of how to answer. "I can't tell you," he settled on. "Not really, anyway. And, honestly, you probably don't want to know."

"Know what, exactly?" she carefully pressed, a small furrow coming to her brow.

He thought for a long moment, considering the subtle worry he read in her eyes for arguably one of the most minor injuries a job like his could give. "Claire-" he paused, exhaling with a sweep of his head, seeing they'd hit a decision point. "I like you, Claire," he started again. "I do, but...there's things about me, about what I do, that I'm just not going to be able to tell you. Once in awhile, I might get a little banged up. And I'm not gonna be able to tell you about how that happens either. You should know that upfront. I understand that it's not something a lot of people can put up with.

"So, maybe now's a good time to figure out what you're comfortable with not knowing," he told her. Jack saw the mix of curiosity and deepening concern in her expression and gave her a small, sympathetic nod. "Why don't you give it some thought while you're gone," he suggested. "Give me a call when you get back, if you want to. And no hard feelings if you don't. Okay?"

Seeming a little dumbstruck, Claire nodded and Jack did the same. He lost interest in checking the mail, telling her goodnight and kissing her cheek before he turned to go upstairs to his apartment. Giving her an out was the right thing to do. It was early enough. They'd gone out several times since that first ballgame, fooled around and had some fun, but he reasoned there probably wasn't
too much of an emotional attachment there yet to make a breakup too dramatic, at this point. If she
didn't call, he understood why and he wouldn't hold it against her.

"Indian."

Jack stopped, with a slight cock of his head, pausing for what he just heard to make sense. He
turned around to look back at Claire. She still stood where he'd left her, with her hands in front of
her, picking at her thumbnail. A nervous tick of hers he'd noticed on their second date, just before
they said goodnight and he'd kissed her.

"In the bag," she said, with an awkward flip of her hand toward the bag left at her seat. "It's Indian
food." A meek grin tugged back the corner of her mouth, as she asked, "You're not really going to
make me eat all this by myself, are you?"

A small snort of amusement, at her shy smile, left him and he checked, "You sure you still want to
share?"

With her lower lip bit back, Claire's eyes turned to the ceiling in a moment of consideration.
"Yeah," she nodded. "Everyone’s got secrets, right?" Claire figured, an edge of hesitance and
uncertainty in her voice seeming to be overridden by the hopefulness in her eyes. "One about work
isn’t exactly the worst kind, is it?"

Jack snuffled a laugh, tipping his head back toward the end of the lobby and the elevator upstairs.
"Come on then," he invited, watching her move to go back for the bag of takeout and her purse,
with a fond grin on his lips and an unexpected warmth in his chest.
Mar 2006

“IT was a small class,” he shrugged. “We were able to give them the extra attention. That’s all.”

“Still,” Rumlow insisted, “everybody liked what they saw.”

“Thanks,” Rollins humbly accepted.

“We’re not done yet,” Brock told him, nodding to a chair in front of his desk. “Have a seat.”

Jack took the chair on the Lieutenant’s right, as Brock walked around the back of his desk to sit. Rollins sat up straight, not knowing what to except. He’d just been thoroughly complimented for taking the lead on running most of the scenarios in the SERE training for the latest recruits to the Division. That he was aware, there wasn’t anything in the rumor mills that concerned him or his performance lately.

“What are your aspirations with the Division?” Rumlow invited, gesturing a hand out to him.

“Sir?” Rollins questioned, with a curious cock of his head.

“I’ve got orders,” he told him. “I’m taking over Second Squad at the end of the month, when Booker steps down for his new assignment with SF. I’m going to recommend you for my replacement as Team Leader for the fire team.”

Rollins blinked. He may not have known what to expect, but he certainly didn’t think a new assignment was coming from the conversation.

“Of course,” Rumlow added, with a thoughtful tip of his head, “if you’re going to start running Bravo, you’ll get a bump in rank to Master Sergeant, with the pay and your own office.” He leaned back, relaxing in his chair. “But I wanted to run it by you. See if it’s something you’d be interested in taking.”

Jack gave a tip of his head, considering, “I’ve barely been with the Division a year and a half. There’s a couple of guys in better positions to take over.”

The Lieutenant limply shrugged, agreeing, “True, but you’ve made some favorable impressions, since you got here. I need someone with the balls to make decisions. Yeah, I got some guys that got more time under their belts, but they’re not as tested as you’ve been. These guys are pups compared to the combat experience you have. Whether you know it or not, they look up to you. They trust you.” Brock gave a confident nod, assuring him, “They’ll follow you.”

Rollins was a little taken aback. He’d easily made friends with his teammates. He seemed to be well liked around the Division. Jack had run missions and fire teams through his deployments with the Army, but he was in a different environment now. There were men on his team that he would have considered more than qualified to replace Rumlow. Hearing the Lieutenant say that those guys admired him was humbling.

“When we’re in the shit,” Brock explained, “and it’s time to do work, I need someone who does fuckin’ work without hesitation. I need someone with good instincts who knows when to follow orders and how to bend them to get shit done. You can’t teach that, Jack. It’s something guys gotta learn for themselves. You already know that.” He pointed toward the door. “These other guys,
they’re good guys. I’d go to war with any of ‘em. But they’re young, Jack. Age isn’t a number, it’s experience. War makes guys like you an’ me old.

“You’re a company man, Jack,” Rumlow noted. “You fit in well. Command’s noticed. I told you, when you first got here, I could see bigger things coming for a guy like you. All you have to do is take the opportunity.”

Jack nodded, slowly. “Hell of an opportunity,” he quietly mused.

"Those guys respect you,” Brock reminded him, pointing a finger toward the door to reference his troops. “They trust you. I trust you. It’s time to start stepping up, big guy.”

Jack didn’t need an office. The pay was already good. The largest appeal was the position itself. The peripheries were just that. But he had started thinking ahead. Things were going good with Claire. She hadn’t officially moved in, but she was spending enough time at Jack’s apartment to warrant needing her own keys a couple months ago and there was enough clothing and other things of hers around to make a decent legal argument that cohabitation was already occurring. And, though he probably wouldn’t admit it publicly, the taste of domesticity was kind of nice. They had an airy conversation together about her just straight moving in, a couple weeks ago. A couple nights ago, Jack had the thought he’d just ask her to marry him.

Rollins gave a nod. “I’m ready,” he decided.

Aug 2006

Three. Five seconds, if he was lucky. With the arm flexed around his neck, that was his most optimistic guess for how long he had left to fight. You never consider how easy it is to breathe, until you can’t. But three to five seconds can seem like an hour, when you’re fighting for your life. Time slows. Or maybe it’s the mind that moves so much faster. Either way, there was never a solid explanation for how so much happens in so little time.

He replayed each move of the brawl, how they’d gotten there. He couldn’t find the flaw. The son of a bitch had just been lucky and gotten the drop on him from the inky shadows of the moonless night. Dumb fucking luck, and it pissed Rollins off. He worked too hard to go out like this. He was too good at what he did for a living to let this happen. He was too angry to never even see the face of the bastard who ambushed him.

And somehow, amidst the roar of his blood pumping in his ears, the strain of his left hand pulling against the arm around his neck, and his right looking for a hold or a hit, he felt the sweat on his skin, cooled by the soft breeze of the night air and the firm earth beneath him, as he fell to his knees. In the chaos of it all, of the weight over his shoulders and the pressure on his neck, of the feel of saliva falling on his lips as he hissed, struggling for air and unable to swallow, he remembered plans with Claire tomorrow night. If he was home on schedule, it was her birthday and there was a dinner reservation downtown with some of their friends. If he got home on time, she wouldn’t have to worry why he was late. If he made the exfil home, there wouldn’t be an empty chair beside her tomorrow, or the rest of the nights after that.

Three to five seconds in a fight for your life is an eternity, if you know how to use it. Fighting on the ground was never ideal, but he had leverage now with his center of gravity lower than his attacker’s. He had balance. He worked his hand in and found a fraction of just enough space to get his chin down. He swung his right arm up, trapping the strangling arm around his neck with his shoulder and Jack threw his weight to the side. His enemy fell with him, tumbling awkwardly over
Jack’s left shoulder. It wasn’t enough to break free of the hold, though. Rollins found himself still wrapped up and rolling onto his side.

But Jack had been able to swallow a breath, and his grip on the arm across his throat was still holding it back enough to take another. He drove his elbow into the other man’s side, as he twisted his hips and planted the heels of his boots into the ground. His shoulders laid across the man’s chest and Jack raised himself up to shift his weight there. He could hear the groan of the soldier beneath him, the air harder for him to get against Rollins’ weight pushing him down. Slipped more to the side now, Jack’s elbow found the man’s gut for effect and he turned his shoulder down, wrenching himself onto his side and finally able to free himself.

In three to five seconds, the fight hadn’t ended. In three to five seconds, one of them was going to be dead. Three to five seconds ago, Jack had resolved it wouldn’t be him.

From a knee, Jack saw the pistol being drawn and lunged forward. The sound of the shot was muffled, but only slightly. With the barrel of the gun pressed into his armor, there was little room for the noise to escape, but he felt every pound of force punching into his gut from the fired round, the flash of heat from the muzzle blast, and the sting of the unburned gunpowder stippling his bare forearm. With his hand wrapped over the pistol’s slide, he could feel the searing heat radiating through the thin lining of his glove. With his grip on the slide, body over his attacker’s still pressing his gear into the muzzle, and the end of the slide held back into his enemy’s chest, the gun wouldn’t fire again.

On a knee, Jack could reach his boot and the Ka-bar he kept there. In one fluid movement, he broke the knife from its scabbard and stabbed down. His momentum was broken by the hand that caught his wrist. Fighting on the ground was never ideal, but it sometimes gave an advantage. Jack had position over his opponent. It was a subtle move to lean some of his weight off the pistol wedged between them and put it behind the knife.

With his teeth grit and chest heaving, for the first time, he saw his attacker’s face. He looked in the eyes of the man pushing desperately back against his arm. He saw the realization and panic setting in to his eyes, before his enemy’s gaxe ticked over to watch Jack’s knifepoint press slowly toward his chest. He saw his eyes go wide and crush closed at the pain of the blade sinking in. Jack felt what the man did, as well. The knife skip and scrape down along a bone. He had a moment of clarity to admire his attacker’s strength, as the man growled in his pain and jerked the pistol in his hand free of Jack’s hold, punching upward to strike Rollins in the jaw with the butt of the gun.

He admired his will to keep fighting, even as Jack wrapped his left hand over his right and pressed down on his knife until the blade was sank to its hilt and went no further. The man jerked, his arm falling away and losing its hold of his weapon. Even as Jack leaned back on his heel and gave a twisting yank of his arm to pull his knife free, his enemy reached for him, clawing and grabbing feebly at the air a matter of inches in front of Rollins. In one last reach, he managed to tangle his fingers in a loop of Jack’s MOLLE gear on his chest.

Jack didn’t have to look when he reached to pull the man’s hand off of him. His eyes were set, unblinking, on his enemy’s. He watched the fear grow and the life dim in the man’s eyes, listening to the gargled sound of the man’s last breath, choked by the blood filling his mouth and sputtering over his lips. It occurred to him he’d been holding his own breath, and Jack’s shoulders fell as he exhaled. It was quiet all around him.

Rollins sat back, settling to the ground as he moved his feet from underneath him, one at a time. He dug in his heels and put down his empty palm, pushing himself backward, away from the dead man in front of him and against the wall behind him. Jack pulled up his knees, resting his arms to
Three to five seconds later and the man hadn’t moved. Jack’s fingers fumbled with the clasp on the chin strap of his helmet, with a subtle tremor in them from the adrenaline. When the buckle was undone, he knocked the helmet off, feeling the instant relief of the cool air on his head. He wiped a gloved hand down his face to dry the sweat on his brow. He looked at the knife in his hand, holding it up and turning it over in the dim light to see the shine of the blood sliding down the blade to curl over the hilt and begin soaking in to the glove on his other hand.

Jack’s gaze went back to the body at his feet, his eyes leveling hatefully, as he wiped the sides of the Ka-bar on his pant leg before sheathing it. He inhaled, slow and deep through his nose, trying to reset his breathing and calm his pulse. This was the closest he’d ever been to a kill. Close enough to smell the sweat and breath of his enemy. Everyone else had always been a blurred shape beyond the iron sights of a rifle, a shadow in a lens of a red dot scope. A matter of meters, not inches. He made it personal. He made Jack feel it.

Jack struck out his leg, kicking the man’s body violently in the side. “Fucker,” he growled, through grit teeth.

Ahead of him, his attention snapped up and he drew his pistol from the drop holster on his thigh, taking aim at the sound of the hurried footfall coming through the darkness of the alleyway.

“Ay,” Rumlow called, slowing to barely a shuffle, taking in the scene before him. “You alright?”

Jack lowered his weapon, his hand falling tiredly into his lap. From the shadows behind Rumlow, the rest of his teammates began to appear. They all took in the sight and Brock stepped forward, dipping low to pick up Jack’s rifle out of the dirt. He stepped around the body, holding the rifle out to Rollins.

“You alright?” the Lieutenant repeated, with a cautious look in his eye.

“Yeah,” he croaked. Closing his eyes, as he dropped his head back against the wall, he knew unequivocally what he was capable of. He’d been tested and he passed. Most importantly, he knew he could do it again. Jack cleared his throat, trying to swallow away the pain the fight had put there. “Yeah, I just need a second to breathe.”
May 2007

“You’re in our seats.”

Jack looked up, his expression giving the remark all the what the fuck it deserved. ”What?”

“You’re in our seats,” he repeated, adding a subtle tilt of his head.

Rollins and his friends shared an incredulous look and Jack turned his attention back to the cocky upstart beside him. “I’m sure you can find another table,” he assured him.

“We don’t want to find another table,” the younger man replied. He pointed a finger to circle around the shape of the table. “This is our table. So, why don’t you ladies go fuck off.”

A snuffled laugh lifted and dropped Jack’s shoulders and he shook his head, glancing around at his guys, before he shifted in his seat to size up the asshole testing the limits of his politeness. The kid had to have been all of about 22 years old. The skin close high and tight and the ball chain Rollins could see around the back of his neck told him all he needed to know. The pup was clearly territorial. And obviously didn’t know who he was dealing with.

"Listen, kid,” Jack began.

"I’m not your kid.”

Jack’s brow ticked up at the interruption and his friends at the table put their drinks aside to quietly oo and aw at the unfortunate occurrence. Giving him a discerning once over, Rollins agreed, “No, you’re not. But if you were, I’d beat the shit outta you for interrupting.” He flipped a hand at the young soldier and his friends, who he’d pegged for being from the same squad or team and probably off duty base security, or maybe undeservedly proud, and most likely untested, SF guys stationed there. “Go on now. Get, before you get you feelings hurt.”

The man looking down at him squared up his posture, and his posse behind him did the same. “You know,” he sneered, “I am so fucking tired of you pricks passing through for training coming in here acting like you own the place.”

"Easy, junior,” Rollins warned. “I started out nice enough, but you keep running your mouth and you’re not gonna like the way this ends. Now, take some good advice, and find somewhere else to sit tonight.” He made a gesture of his open hand around. “We’re all on the same team here, alright? I’m sure you’ll get your table tomorrow. But for tonight, me and my guys are going to stay right here and finish our drinks. We’re just trying to relax after a week in the suck, before we head home.”

"Where you from?” the young man asked.

"DC,” Haney spoke up. “Don’t worry. Like he said, we’ll be out ‘a here tomorrow, cupcake.”

Jack and his teammates smirked at Haney’s response. The comment didn’t do much to calm down the impetuous soldier.

“You think you’re funny?” he dared.
"He thinks a lot of things about himself," Dennison quipped into his beer, and the guys chuckled. "...cupcake."

"I’m gonna kick your ass," he seethed.

"Okay," Rollins tiredly groaned, pushing back from the table. He stood up, purposefully slow, not wanting to make the young man twitch. "It was cute for a minute." Jack looked him in the eye, noting, "The cuteness has worn off. For the last time, I’m telling you and your boys to walk away." He grinned confidently. "You don’t want your night to end this way."

"And who the fuck are you to tell me what to do?" he kept arguing, running his eyes down the front of Jack.

Looking to his friends, Jack gave a disappointed sweep of his head. This wasn’t how he wanted to end the week. Desert MOUT training at SHIELD’s Camp Henry in the Mojave was pain in the ass enough for the squad in the record high heat. He couldn’t remember exactly when was the last time he was in a bar fight. Maybe ’03? He wasn't really in the mood for one tonight. But the kid was inching closer to making him muster.

"That’s Jack Rollins, son," Cephas explained, nodding Jack’s way.

"The Jack Rollins," Emery seconded, as if everyone should know the name.

"Master Sergeant Jack Rollins, to you," Dennison corrected. "STRIKE Team Delta."

"STRIKE?" the soldier scoffed. "Figures."

"Why don’t you ask your mom, cupcake," Cephas suggested. "She can tell you about all of us."

For fuck’s sake. They were pushing it. A quick look over his guys and Rollins saw the moment the team had decided this was gonna happen. Jack let out a slow exhale and his head tipped to the side in resignation. Fine. He was ready.

Dennison stood up next, asking the front man, "And who are you?"

“I’m the guy that’s gonna knock your fuckin’ teeth down your throat,” the man threatened, jutting his chin. "You come in with jokes about moms?" he snorted. "If that’s the best you got, this is going to be over faster than I thought."

“Oh, it’s much better than that,” Rollins assured him. Jack thought it was only fair to warn the kid, “I’ve got me some frogmen and MARSOC hitters, some snake eaters for starters.” He looked over the plebes in front of him. “What’d you bring?"

“You think we give a shit about a bunch of broken down SpecOps has-beens?” the soldier snorted, incredulously. “We’ve had enough of bitches like you trying to throw your weight around. This is our base. And this is our bar and our table.”

One more look at his teammates and Jack knew what they all were thinking. These boys needed to be taught some respect. Rollins took up his glass and swallowed the last of his whiskey, as the rest of his guys got to their feet and finished their own. He returned the tumbler to the table, with a subtle nod to himself, before telling the upstart, “Remember, I tried to be nice.”

Jack started with a cross the kid never saw coming.

...
"The fuck?" Rumlow scowled. "I let you out ‘a my sight for one fuckin’ night...” He shook his head, panning his gaze over the seven operators standing at attention and lined against the wall in front of him.

"They started it,” Haney said.

Rumlow took a few quick steps down the line, putting his finger in Haney’s face. “I swear to god,” he growled, “if I hear about you calling one more person cupcake again, I will end you. You got that?"

"Yes, Sir."

"That mouth of yours gets you in more trouble than a monkey with a box of grenades,” Brock shook his head.

Jack smirked, stifling a laugh with the rest of his teammates who’d been in the fight with him. They’d made it out before base security showed up. He’d dropped several bills on the table to pay for their tab and the mess that followed and said “sorry” to the waitress who’d been taking care of the table. The look of aggravation on her face, as she stepped over the groaning young men on the floor to grab the money, made him think this wasn’t the first time that had happened.

But word came around to the barracks, fast, even if charges hadn’t, that base security knew who was involved. They didn’t even make it an hour after Jack threw the first punch that put the upstart on his ass, before Rumlow was pounding on doors and lining up bodies in the hallway.

"Shut. the fuck. up!” Rumlow ordered, raking his eyes over his subordinates. The men instantly straightened their faces, locking their eyes front. Walking down the row of men, Brock pointed out, “It is zero-130 in the god damn morning, and I’m making apologies to base staff for you fuckin’ chuckleheads for getting in a pissing contest over who gets to sit where? Unbe-fuckin’-lievable.” He stopped, turning to look down the row. “If the SPs had gotten you, I’dve left you here. ...We’ve got muster in five hours to go home. In four hours, I wanna see you outside, geared up and ready for a five mile fun run before we go.”

A chorus of defeated groans came and the sound made the Lieutenant smile. “You wanna play stupid games, you win stupid prizes,” he told them. “Now, get outta my sight.”

The line broke and everyone started back to their rooms, except for Jack. Rumlow called his name and he stopped in his tracks, making a crisp about face to see the CO again. He came to attention, inviting, “Sir?”

"At ease,” Brock grumbled, and Rollins complied. “So, tell me, who started it?”

"They did,” he said, with a nod.

Rumlow gave a quiet grunt and swept his head. “And you just had to finish it, huh?”

"To be fair,” Rollins offered, “I gave the kid, like, four or five outs. He just didn’t take any of them.”

Brock cracked, dropping his head with a shake and a smirk. “You broke that kid’s nose on the first hit,” he told him.

Jack’s lips pursed into a thoughtful frown. “Probably,” he shrugged.

"There’s no probably about it,” the Lieutenant informed him. “The kid’s up in sick call, right now,
getting it set.”

“You want me to send him flowers, or something?” Jack quipped, personally a little proud of the fight, despite the tender spot on his jaw.

“No,” Rumlow chuckled. “But I need you to do better about keeping these guys out of trouble. I’m the one that has to explain this to D’Esposito when we get back. ...Do me a favor, alright?” he begged, and Jack nodded, waiting for the request. “I’ve got to get on a plane to two days. You’ll be in charge. Try not to let these idiots do anything stupid, while I’m gone.”

Jack snorted, as he nodded. “Shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Good,” Brock agreed. “Now, get some sleep. You’ve gotta be up in four hours.”

“Fuck,” Rollins complained, under his breath. As Rumlow started down the hall to go, Jack asked after him, “Five miles? C’mon, Bingo. How ‘bout three?”

He didn’t turn around to reply, “You wanna make it seven? Because I think we’ll have time for seven.”

”Nah, I’m good,” Jack accepted. “Dammit.”

May 2007

“And you...”

“The fuck d’I do?” Brock laughed, holding his hands up in surrender, as he walked up to the table.

“What’d you do?” Claire gaped, turning her cheek up to accept the peck of a kiss Brock offered. Jack reached up, shaking his hand across the way, as Rumlow sat down and Claire incredulously continued, “Do you not see his face?”

“Well, I try not to,” Brock shrugged, making a shiver of his shoulders in disgust. “I mean, have you seen him?”

”Watch it, asshole,” Jack playfully warned, pointing at him with his beer bottle in hand.

Claire leaned into Jack’s side, laying her head on his shoulder. “I thought you were supposed to look out for him.”

”I can’t look out for what I can’t see,” Brock explained. “I wasn’t there.”

”If you had been there,” Dennison spoke up, taking an empty seat at the picnic table between Haney and Cephas and his wife, Laney, “you’d have thrown down, too.”

”That’s true,” Rumlow conceded. He turned his head at the hand that moved across the back of his shoulders, looking up to see the bearer of the cold bottle of beer set down in front of him. “Thank you,” he smiled, shifting his leg so he straddled the bench and made room for his girl to sit in front of him. “Evy, you know Jack and everybody,” he reminded her. He tipped his head, adding, “That’s Claire. She goes with Jack.”

”Nice to meet you,” Evy smiled, reaching over the table to shake Claire’s hand. She turned to Jack, her brow knitting down behind her sunglasses, and asked, “What happened to your face?”
"That’s the point I was just making,” Claire said, giving Brock a purposeful look, as Jack chuckled.

"Bar fight,” Rumlow simply explained, taking a pull off his beer.

"You let a guy hit you?” Evy teased, taking a grape from the plate of food she’d brought with her. “You’re slippin’, tough guy.”

“I was being polite,” Jack smiled. “I didn't want the kid to get his ass kicked and feel like a complete failure.”

"Benevolent brawler that you are,” Evy said, popping the grape in her mouth.

"Such a sweetheart,” Dennison agreed.

"You’re all terrible,” Claire decided.

“Why weren’t you in the fight?” Laney asked, looking to her husband.

"Me?” Cephas checked. “Honey, I was in my room, reading a book, just waiting ‘til I could get home to you.”

"Yeah right,” she rolled her eyes.

"Playboy is not a book,” Dennison pointed out.

"I like the articles,” Cephas shrugged.

Laney gave her husband a gentle thump on the chest, noting, “The day you aren’t there when these guys are drinking is the day you’re dead. I know they’re covering for you.”

"Poor thing,” Haney tutted, and Rollins smirked at Laney seeing through their bullshit. “It was too hot for him to go outside, or he’d have been there.”

“Whatever,” Laney sighed.

"I don’t understand how guys your age are still getting in to bar fights,” Claire shook her head, picking up her fork to go back to her macaroni salad.

"They started it,” Dennison explained. “We finished it.”

"Damn right we did,” Haney proudly agreed, putting up a fist for Dennison to hit.

Jack chuckled and Claire nudged her elbow into his side, swallowing before she complained to him, “And that’s how you get a bruised jaw.” She pointed a finger around the table. “That’s it,” she told his teammates. “No more bar fights, shenanigans, or any other kind of bullshit you can get in to together. You’re all grounded.”

"Yes, ma’am,” Haney and Dennison groaned in unison.

"Not me,” Brock shrugged. “I wasn’t even there.” He pointed between Jack and the other three. “I’m not a part of this.”

"Yes, you are,” Claire assured him, stabbing her plastic fork his way. “You’re in charge of all of them.”

"Yeah,” he agreed, before a fiendish smile, “but I can’t be responsible for everything.”
"To be fair," Evy began, “he’s just as bad, or worse.”

"Traitor," Rumlow grumbled into his next drink of beer, smiling when Evy gave his cheek a soft swat.

If anyone could call him out, it’d be Evy. She and Rumlow had been an on and off thing a couple of times over the last three years. She was a spook for the CIA now, but up until a few months ago she had been one for SHIELD. She traded up for a supervisory position with their competitor, but there were no hard feelings.

“You’ve gotten more bloody knuckles in your life than these guys put together,” she told him, before he hooked his arm around her waist to pull her to him and kissed her, looking more than a little proud of the notation.

“It’s a shame you missed it, boss,” Haney said. “It was a hell of a lot of fun.”

"I’m sorry I missed it,” Brock admitted.

"To be fair, Jack here was the guy trying to brush the kid off,” Dennison admitted to Claire. “So, don’t be too mad at him. The bruise is already going away.”

"Thank you,” Rollins seconded, lifting his beer to Dennison’s support.

"Family day picnic,” Claire huffed. “More like “ride or die day picnic”.”

"I’m not hearing the difference,” Cephas quipped, with a confused expression turned to Haney for an explanation.

Claire threw her wadded up napkin at Cephas, saying, “Well, at least you morons stick together.”

Laughing with the others, Jack put his arm around Claire’s shoulders, holding her tightly to him as he planted a kiss to the side of her head. Her lips were puckered, trying her best not to laugh with them. With his forehead bowed in her hair, he quietly promised to her ear, “No more bar fights, okay? I’ll be good.”

Claire couldn’t fight her smile anymore and gave him a halfhearted bump again. “Famous last words,” she rolled her eyes.
Gathered around the table, everyone's attention was on Rumlow. Jack checked his watch. It was just after 9 p.m.

"Everyone's clear on what happens tomorrow?" Brock checked, taking a moment to look at every nodding head. "Muster at 1500 hrs. We're go at 1630. Copy?"

"Yes, Sir," everyone agreed.

Brock looked at Jack. "I'm gonna give you one last chance, big guy," he warned. "Exfil's waiting. You just say the word. We have a safe house ready. I can have a bird on the ground here in six minutes."

Jack snorted, with a sweep of his head. "I'm not leaving Claire at the alter," he dryly promised. "Sorry, Bingo. It's happening."

There was a collection of disappointed groans from his friends and Rumlow picked up his shot of whiskey to toast over the noise, "To our dear friend Jack, a brave man who's stared death in the eye and said "fuck you"...but was felled when he told the lovely Claire "I do". May he rest in peace. May we meet him in Valhalla."

"Hooah!" his groomsmen hoisted their drinks together.

Jack raised his glass, jutting his chin to Brock and smiling, "Fuck you."

He threw back his whiskey and they all shared a good laugh. He'd put up with more than his fair share of ribbing the last few weeks. Rollins must have heard a dozen different plans to get him out of the country, fake his death, and other halfcoocked offers to help him escape his "life sentence". He could admit, he surprised himself, when he first thought about asking Claire to marry him. But, standing in the bar of the restaurant they booked for the rehearsal dinner, Jack had no doubt he'd made the right decision.

Kyle and the rest of the groomsmen broke up, grabbing fresh drinks and heading back to the rest of their party in the dining room. Brock moved to stand beside Jack and the two took in the sight of Claire with her and Jack's friends and family in the room ahead of them. Rumlow tapped his next whiskey to the neck of Jack's beer.

"You're really gonna do it, huh?" Brock teased.

Rollins shrugged, looking at his bride to be, admitting, "I love her."

"Helluva catch, Jack," Brock noted. "Still can't figure out why she said "yes", though."

Rollins chuckled. "Me either."

"It's the eyes, isn't it?" Brock decided. "She's gotta be blind as a fuckin' bat, right?"

Jack took it in stride, nodding into a pull from his bottle of beer. "Looks don't matter when you've got a big dick," he explained, with a confident smirk.

"True," Rumlow agreed, hitting his fist to Jack's. They shared a chuckle, before Brock told him,
"In all seriousness, big guy, congratulations. Claire's fantastic. You lucked out."

"Thanks," he nodded, with a humble grin.

Brock took a look around before taking a sip of his drink. His tone dropped a level to assure their privacy, he wondered, "You gonna read her in?"

Rollins took a moment to inhale and let out a breath. Claire knew everything about him. Except the part about HYDRA. She accepted him for his faults and had made a few changes for the better. They knew how to compromise and hadn't ever had what he'd call a legitimate fight. Claire managed to get him to quit smoking cigarettes, but knew she'd never talk him into giving up his cigars. She knew he was rough around some edges, but never complained that he swore too much, although he knew he did, or claimed he wasn't a gentleman to her.

She doted on him and he spoiled her and they'd spent more than a few nights, with an open bottle of whiskey sitting between them, up 'til the early hours of the morning talking about where they'd been and where they wanted to be. They were young and in the prime of their lives and careers. They just seemed to fit together. A little of Claire's optimism even rubbed off on him.

They had a contract on a house in Annandale. A two bedroom that needed more than a little work on the inside, but that Claire had practically begged for when she saw the backyard. After they'd left the showing, she couldn't stop talking about the gardens she could plant and the parties they could have with the deck and its fire pit in the backyard. Jack spent the week thinking of the list of things he spotted wrong with the place, from the wiring to the outdated kitchen. But none of it dulled her enthusiasm.

The next week, Jack went for another walk through, without Claire. This time he met the realtor with his friend, Kyle, to make sure he hadn't missed any serious problems. The men agreed the house's shortcomings were manageable. Jack low-balled a first offer and went back to his apartment Claire had moved in to last year to tell her what he'd done. She almost cried, and they hadn't even closed a deal. Now, a month later, the wedding had arrived and they were moving into their first house two weeks later.

He gave a subtle shake of his head. "No," he decided. "Can't tell her."

"She's not the kind," the Lieutenant figured, with a nod of understanding.

"She's not," Jack confirmed. A smirk came to him, remembering, "She gets upset over a little bruise from a bar fight and I can't even watch Band of Brothers when it's on TV without her tearing up."

"Seriously?" Brock chuckled.

Jack nodded. "Every damn time." He quirked up a brow, checking, "So, ya think she could handle hearing I work for HYDRA instead of SHIELD?"

"Probably not," Rumlow smirked, nodding into his drink. "That's okay," he told him. "She's still family. Anything happens, we'll take care of her for you, big guy."

"I know," he nodded.

Sept 2007
"What are you doing?"

Claire stopped, startled and turning to give him a sheepish smile, folding her hands behind her back. "Nothing. I just-" She stopped, biting her lower lip into her mouth and pointing a finger at the shelf beside her. "I thought, you know, you have all this stuff from the Army and you never do anything with it, that I'd put it together and..." She trailed off, turning up her open palms to present her work to him. "You weren't supposed to be home this soon."

She was right, but Jack and his squad caught a break because of the weather. A tree limb fell in the storms that had been going through the area and knocked out power to the training grounds, sending them home a couple hours early. He had followed the sound of her iPod playing upstairs to find her in the small office next to their bedroom. The desk and computer in there were mostly for Claire, but Jack made good use of the room as well.

They hadn't done much with the space in the few months they'd lived in the house. Jack spent most of his free time hanging drywall to redo the small walk-in closet in the master bedroom, setting new cabinets and laying new counters in the kitchen, and planning the update of the downstairs bathroom. The den was probably the place that needed the least work and it'd been left alone for the most part because of it. But he'd watched her for a minute from the doorway, grinning at her fussing with the two picture frames she stood up on the bookshelf; amused by her setting them and then switching their places when she didn't seem to like the way they sat, only to put them back where they started moments ago, before he made himself known.

"You never put any of this out," she noted. "Shouldn't you want people to see all this good stuff you did?"

Jack stepped in to the room, eyes wondering over the bookcase. There was a box of things Rollins had never unpacked since he left Georgia. A box of mementos from his time with the Army he'd just never found a space for. But Claire had. He had a flag that had flown with him on every sortie and been packed on every patrol he had made on his last deployment. She had found a small case to display it in and it was now the centerpiece of her decorating. There were a few photos on display now of Jack's basic training class with their guidon at graduation, his squad in country and kitted out at Haditha Dam, and a formal portrait of his Ranger team that was taken after the last promotions before Jack left the service for HYDRA.

She'd pinned his stripes, patches, collar devices, and nametape into a shadow box with his rack of ribbons, on the shelf below. The challenge coins he'd collected were laid along the shelf in front of the open medal boxes she'd set out to display the awards he'd earned and she'd framed the letter that accompanied his Bronze Star to sit beside it all. His citations hung on the wall, in an offset but pleasing collection of simple black frames, above the desk and with a copy of "the Instructions For Sergeants" from Von Steuben's Blue Book; pages his CO had given him as gift for his last promotion with the unit that she'd hung in a three panel frame in the middle of the collage.

"What do you think?" she hesitantly asked, picking at her thumbnail like she always did when she was anxious or worried.

Jack gave her work a thoughtful pout and nod of approval, struck dumb for a moment in appreciation of the care she'd taken with it all. "It looks good," he told her, taking her hand in his so she'd stop fidgeting and he'd stop her worrying. He gave her a warm grin. "Looks real good." He leaned over to kiss the side of her head, quietly telling her, "Thank you, sweetheart."

"You never talk about the Army," she noted.

He gave a small shrug of indifference. "What's to say?"
Claire giggled. “What, it’s so secret you’d have to kill me?”


She beamed, proudly, for a moment, before looking over her handiwork again. “Well, you did it long enough, figured you’d have something to say,” she shrugged, before cheekily asking, “So...ever kill a guy?”

Rollins watched her adjust a frame on the shelf, taking a beat before simply answering, “Yeah.”

Claire stopped, appearing a little surprised. She turned to see him “Really?”

He nodded. It was the truth. When she asked him how many, her voice had taken on a meeker tone, more concerned than curious. Jack considered his next answer before admitting, “A few.”

Claire nodded, slowly, to herself, biting on her lip. “Wow,” she breathed out. “I nev- I guess I never thought about it.” The worried crease in her brow softened, and she told him, “Well, at least you don’t have to do that anymore.”

"Yeah," he agreed, quietly.

As far as Claire knew, STRIKE was just another police force for the world. He spared her the details of the counterterrorism work, about the questionable interrogation techniques and the raids that ended in gunfire. He never told her about the men he’d killed for STRIKE. Partly because he wasn’t sure how many there were, but mostly because it would upset her to hear regardless. He couldn’t really tell her about the kills no one got credit for when targets were eliminated en masse by explosion or how many he may have shot that couldn’t be confirmed because of conditions of the mission. But he could certainly never tell her about the ones he was absolutely certain of, that he did with his own hands. The man who ambushed him or the two men in Morocco last month.

Claire gave him a gentle grin and reached out to give his hand a squeeze. Her bare arm touched his jacket's sleeve and she glanced down, moving a couple inches away to look him over. "You're soaking wet," she pointed out what was obvious to him.

"It's a fuckin' monsoon out there," he chuckled, happy for the change in topic. "We were outside all day. What d'ya expect?"

She ran her free hand down to dry her arm, saying, "Well, don't wipe it off on me. Go change." Claire pointed a finger at him to send him out of the room, adding, "And I know you left your shit at the bottom of the stairs. It better not be soaking my rug."

"It's just water," he reminded her, giving her a tug that caught her off guard and sent her fumbling into his side. She yelped, finding herself wrapped up in his arms and hugged against his rain soaked uniform. She squealed in protest, trying to wiggle away, but he tightened his hold of her and laughed, "A little rain never hurt anyone."

She managed to work her hands up and push away from his chest, crying foul. "John William! You son of a bitch!" She looked down at herself, frowning at the transferred water turning her t-shirt a sheerer shade of gray. She smacked a hand at his arm for his cocky smirk. "Now look," she whined, waving a helpless hand down the front of her.

"Looks alright to me," he smiled, wagging up his brow.

Claire huffed, meaning to be mad at him but letting a grin flinch in the corner of her mouth. "Jerk," she muttered.
Jack smiled, amused by how quickly she seemed to have forgotten his confession of having killed before. But then, Claire’s sweetness and hopefulness had always been endearing. It was a cliché to call her a ray of sunshine, but he appreciated that about her, more than he could ever explain to her, for the balance it gave him at home. He needed it, after what he saw and did on a regular basis, for both HYDRA and SHIELD.

"Here, let me help," he offered, holding out his hand, but she twisted away from his reach, swatting his hand away.

"No," she firmly said, holding up a finger in warning, but already losing to a smile. “No no no, sir. Don’t you dare.”

Jack lunged forward, hooking one arm around her waist and grabbing the hand that tried to keep him away. He dipped down, bending to put Claire over his shoulder before she could slip his hold. She let out the most defeated cry of "nnooo" he’d ever heard and smacked a hand at his back, as she hung with his arm belted over her legs and he turned for the door.

"You are in so much trouble," she promised, trying her best to sound mean, but failing, as he walked them the few steps through the hall to their bedroom.

"Fine," he shrugged, tipping forward to drop her onto her back on the bed. "But we should probably get you out of these clothes first. You're all wet."
Chapter 9

Apr 2008

"God dammi-" Jack muttered, scowling, looking around for a towel and finding none. *Fucking laundry day,* he thought. "Claire!"

"What?" she called back, her bare footsteps padding down the hardwood hall.

"Get my phone for me, hon," he frowned, jutting his chin toward the device on the counter, mentally counting down how many rings he had left before it went to voicemail and hurrying to finish washing the grease off his hands.

Claire scooted across the kitchen to grab his cellphone and checked the screen. Clutching it to her chest, she reminded him, "You're off this weekend."

"Answer the damn phone, Claire," he pleaded, and she giggled at his worry.

"It's Brock," she quietly noted, tapping the screen and holding the phone up to Jack's ear.

"Yeah," he answered, pinching the phone between his shoulder and ear, scrubbing the grime off his hands in the sink. Jack mouthed his thanks to Claire, smiling, gratefully, when she set a roll of paper towels beside the sink for him before she left the kitchen.

"Hey. What're you doing?" Brock asked.

Jack flung his hands down into the sink, shaking off some of the water. "Makin' a fuckin' mess," Rollins said, tearing off a couple towels to dry his hands and wipe the edge of the sink dry. Rumlow laughed and Jack explained, "Replacing the oil pump on the truck."

"That's what mechanics are paid for, or you just buy a new truck," Brock told him. "Either way, you're not pissing away a perfectly good Friday afternoon."

"Or be a man and replace it yourself on your day off," Jack countered.

"Yeah yeah," he grumbled. "You're always doing something to it. If it were a horse, we'd 'ave shot it by now. Must be nice to have that kind 'a time on your hands."

"It's a labor of love," he corrected. "That truck's seen me through hell."

"Does your wife know you're cheating on her?" Brock chuckled.

"You didn't call to talk about the truck," Jack snorted, picking at some grease still stuck under his nails. "What's up?"

"It's getting a little late in the day," he pointed out. "I know you're off, but I know you couldn't have forgotten."

Rollins drew in a deep breath. "No, I haven't forgotten."

Jack stepped aside, opening up the path between the counters and through the kitchen to the back door for Claire to pass by. She lovingly trailed her hand along his arm as she went by and stopped at the door, pointing at the phone. Whispering, she asked if he was getting called in. He shook his head and Claire gave him a thumbs up and a smile, before turning to go back outside. Jack leaned
back against the counter and watched her through the glass door. While Claire went back to potting plants on the deck, Rumlow was expounding on the reason for his call.

"No pressure or anything," Brock excused, "but D'Esposito called me asking if I knew what you were planning to do. And so late in the day, I was starting to wonder myself. You've only got a couple more hours."

"Yeah," he agreed. "I was just going to finish cleaning up and head in."

"Good," Rumlow approved. "You're gonna do it, right?"

The delay in the answer was probably enough to speak for him, but, watching Claire carefully adding dirt over the roots of her new hydrangeas and seeing her lips move along to sing with the radio she had on outside, Jack shook his head. "He'll have to move down the list," he told him.

"Move down the- Are you shitting me?" he balked.

Rollins let out a heavy exhale and swept his head again. "I'm not."

Brock seemed to take a moment to process the reply, before he came back with, "That's not the answer I was expecting."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Jack snorted.

"You earned this, big guy," Rumlow insisted. "And you earned it fast. You've been a top performer since you got here. All you needed was an opening and it was yours. You've wanted this for a long time. This position is made for you." He paused. "I gotta ask, why the hell not?"

"I don't know a guy like you'd understand," Jack considered.

Brock waited a beat, before saying, "I'm gonna give you an opportunity to explain that, before I decide if I should be insulted, you prick."

Rollins chuckled, telling him, "Don't be insulted. I'm just sayin', things have changed."

"The wife," he figured.

"Claire," he nodded.

"So you told her about it and she told you not to?" Brock wondered.

"No," Jack said. "I didn't tell her."

He couldn't quite figure out how to explain the job offer to his wife. Jack imagined anyone telling their significant other that their official job title was technically one of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse probably didn't go over well too often. It was a discussion he decided not to have with Claire in the first place.

Claire knew what he did for SHIELD. She understood what being a part of STRIKE meant. Before they got married, Jack had sat her down to be sure she knew exactly what she was in for; to give her one more chance to get out. She always had put on a brave face when he'd tell her his squad had been activated and he was leaving for a couple days, or weeks as the case may be. Always proud and supportive. But he heard from her mom about how Claire worried about him not coming home sometimes, when the missions ran long or she didn't hear from him for days on end, even when he was just out of town for a few days of training.
An assignment to the Horsemen was prestigious. Only the apex operators were even considered. Only the most lethal and exceptional members of STRIKE made the cut. Horsemen rarely willingly retired from their position. Their bodies gave out first or they were killed in the line of duty, meaning the opportunities for the assignment were scarce and coveted. There was one vacancy in the team and, this time, the opportunity was Jack's.

A year or so ago, it wouldn't even have been a question. With a $15,000 bump to the operator's annual pay, additional hazard pay bonuses for successfully completing missions in more volatile regions, access to new and specialized tech and weaponry, and an accompanying promotion in rank and automatic increase in security clearance to Level 9, the job had some incredible perks. Jack didn't have to work hard to qualify for the Horsemen. His invitation essentially came from his inherent efficiency and skill. He was just damn good at what he did. It was evident when he was recruited and proven as soon as he went operational for STRIKE. For Jack and his supervisors, it was just the next expected step in his career with SHIELD, and technically HYDRA.

Rollins could probably accept the appointment to the Horsemen and never tell Claire about it. But he didn't like the idea of hiding it from her either. It gnawed at him sometimes, keeping his secret about HYDRA from her, but she was a little too innocent and naïve, maybe hopeful, about the world to understand why he would work for them. So he kept that one thing to himself.

But mostly, Jack knew how the risks increased when you were a Horseman. Some assignments were unsupported, sending an operator into the field alone and sometimes with nothing more than an objective and a SatPhone to advise when the mission was complete and call for extraction. Claire would never tolerate it. As much as she'd try, the worry and stress would get the better of her, he knew. Claire came from a big family. She wanted one of her own some day. They had just had their first real discussion about the matter only a couple of weeks ago. On the drive home last night, after getting the offer and having a deadline to give his decision in 24 hours, it occurred to Jack that taking the assignment significantly increased the chances of him widowing Claire, and possibly leaving her to care for whatever family they might have alone. Jack was surprised how quickly the decision to decline the position came to him, but it didn't stop him from taking the better part of the day to debate with himself over whether it was the decision he really wanted to make.

"You think she'd say "no"?" Brock wondered. "Is that it?"

"No," Jack shook his head, pushing off the counter to walk to the door and let out the six month old Yorkie looking outside and whining at the back door. "It's not. But she wouldn't like it, anyway."

"I'm not gonna lie," Rumlow told him, "I'm a little disappointed."

"Me, too," he agreed. "But I'm declining the assignment."

"Think about this long and hard, Jack," Brock urged. "These assignments don't come around often. Think about the opportunity; what you're giving up."

Rollins settled back against the counter again. He watched Claire smiling and talking to the puppy circling and pawing at her legs, while she dusted the potting soil from her hands. She wiped her palms on the back of her shorts, before crouching down to the deck to play with the tiny dog. "I am," Jack assured him.

"So, that's it then," Rumlow accepted.

"Things have changed," Jack admitted, a bit reluctantly. Rollins knew he might never get this chance again, but, "Priorities have changed."
"Understood," Brock said. "D'Esposito was calling from the Hill, but he said he'll be back in his office by 1630." Rollins checked the clock on the wall. "Get your paperwork in and then meet me at Barny's," he told him. "You can try and make me understand what changed your mind."

Jack snuffled a laugh, nodding to himself. "1700," he agreed.

Off the phone, Jack tucked the device into the pocket of his jeans and tossed his damp paper towels in the trash. He grabbed his keys and wallet off the counter and headed out to the backyard and his truck in the driveway. Claire grinned, looking up from where she sat on the deck, scratching the puppy's belly turned up in her lap. Rollins bent down to kiss the top of her head, smoothing his hand back over her hair. Still bent low, he scratched a finger on the dog's cheek before straightening up.

"I need to go sign some paperwork," he casually told her. "I'm gonna meet Bingo for a little bit, after that. Be back in a couple hours."

"Everything okay?" she worried, squinting up at him in the sunshine, before she shaded her face with one hand.

"Fine," Jack promised, with a warm grin and small nod. "Just a little paperwork. Nothing important."

Sep 2008

“Good afternoon, ladies,” D’Esposito called over the chatter in the room.

"Good afternoon, Sir," Jack joined the chorus greeting.

Rollins shifted in his seat, turning to face the front of the small briefing room. The Commander made his way to the head of the room, dropping his tablet and paperwork on the podium before he made it around to stand behind it. D'Esposito folded his arms to lean on the edge of the podium, taking a moment to pan his gaze over the room, while the leadership for the five STRIKE teams settled in for the meeting.

"I'll be honest with you,” the Commander began. “My vacation starts tomorrow and I have no interest in being here until 1700 today.” The officers chuckled and D'Esposito went on, “So, keep the commentary to yourselves and we can get out of here in about twenty minutes.”

There were a few quiet “hooahs” of approval and the Commander turned his attention to the papers he brought in with him. The meeting moved along quickly, as promised. The team leaders all took notes, as D’Esposito updated a couple of teams on training schedules and warned others of pending assignments for while he was out of town. He gave some praise to a few officers for some recent work their teams or squads had done and gave a few procedural reminders for evaluations due at the end of the month.

"Last item on the agenda,” D’Esposito announced, shuffling his paperwork and notes back in to a neat stack. “Promotions and other bullshit. I’m sure it won’t come as a surprise to any of you to hear that Pittman will be going out on medical for his hip. He gave his notice this morning and his separation date from the Division will be the 19th. Until then, he’ll be burning up some of the leave time SHIELD won’t be paying out for.

"So,” he continued, “as of now, we are officially missing a platoon leader for Delta. And as much as I’ve pretended to enjoy mothering those little shits, while we’ve been waiting on a decision
about Pittman, I can confidently say I have had enough and am unequivocally ready to wash my hands of them.” The room laughed and D’Esposito flatly promised, “I am not kidding.”

The Commander gave in to a smirk of amusement at his own joke, before he waved a hand down in the air to bring the room to order again. He planted his hands on the sides of the podium, saying, “Please take note of the following promotions, effective immediately.” D’Esposito turned his gaze down to his notes, reading, “Delta Platoon Leader- Brock Rumlow, with promotion to 1st Lieutenant. Second Squad, Squad Leader- Jack Rollins, with promotion to 2nd Lieutenant. Fire Team and Squad assignments remain unchanged. Gentlemen, congratulations. Try not to disappoint me anymore than you already do on a daily basis.”

The others around him laughed at the sarcastic jab and Jack clicked his pen shut, looking up from his notes to see the Commander, wondering if he’d misheard his announcement, as D’Esposito wrapped up his rundown of promotions, advising, “Additional Delta promotions, for team leaders to note- Will Dennison, Master Sergeant. Mark Haney, Master Sergeant. And promotions due to Alpha and Bravo- Jeremy Woodson, Master Sergeant. Jill Fender, Sergeant.” D’Esposito looked out over the room again, concluding, “I’ll be out of town until the 8th. Lt. Commander Brandt is Acting Division Commander in my absence. Please direct any crisis, personal or national, to him, as I will be entirely too shitfaced to give a damn. That's all, gentlemen. Dismissed.”

The room came to life again. Beside him, Rumlow smacked the back of his hand into Jack’s arm. Jack blinked, clearing away the disbelief, as Brock offered his congratulations. The promotion wasn’t something that Jack had expected, or even considered. He knew Pittman wasn’t coming back. He’d heard it straight from the man himself almost two weeks ago. Jack figured Brock was going to take over the platoon. Rumlow had unofficially been in the position, while Pittman had his surgery and tried to work through rehab, for almost three months, helping D’Esposito keep the team running like the well oiled machine that it was.

The other squad and team leaders gathered around, giving handshakes and congratulations to Rollins and Rumlow. D’Esposito stopped on his way out of the room to do the same. He gave them both a confident grin and nod, telling them he was sure Delta was in good hands. Jack was still a little dumbfounded, when the officers began to break up and head out.

“You believe that shit?” Brock marveled.

“Not really,” Jack admitted.

“This is it, big guy,” Rumlow grinned. “This is the start of something. We’re gonna whip Delta into shape. You and me? We’re gonna get this team up to its full potential.”

“You’re already lovin’ this,” Jack smirked.

“God damn right I am,” he nodded. “Aren’t you?”

“Still trying to get over the surprise,” he admitted, with a humble grin, stashing his notebook in the cargo pocket on his pant leg.

Jack wasn’t opposed to the promotion, by any means. The title gave him a little more weight to throw around in training. He’d been designated and certified as a master instructor in several competencies and had worked his way into one of the senior roles for training with the Division. Occasionally, he even traveled to consult and train operators with agencies and governments outside of the US. A task he enjoyed, but had been taking less and less advantage of lately, trying to keep a balance between his work and home life. He had a moment of concern, wondering how the promotion might effect the latter. Claire was always supportive, but he had always tried to
mindful how much they saw each other, since she traveled for work sometimes as well.

But Jack also realized, “This is a hell of an opportunity.”

For him and his friend, and their team.
Chapter 10

Dec 2008

It had been six hours since the jet went down. The casualties were wrapped and stacked near the nose of the downed plane. The walking wounded took two hours shifts, convalescing or keeping watch. The shit weather was good cover, but it also cut down on visibility for anyone coming up the mountain to investigate or to try and finish them off, and it made it hard for those not on post to try and rest. If Jack could get his hands on the lucky son of a bitch who got off that shot with the RPG, he'd tear him in two. So much for a simple exfil for the Asset from his diplomat assassination assignment. Stuck about 5,500 feet up on the side of Galdhopiggen, in the blinding snow and dark of night, it was a crap shoot to see if HYDRA had gotten their mayday and coordinates to execute a recovery or if the Norwegian soldiers in Lom below had any real indication that the damaged jet didn't make it past the mountain.

Jack flipped the emptied pouch from his chicken and rice MRE into the small fire started by the bulkhead. The broken fuselage vented the smoke, but sheltered the light from any eyes scoping the mountainside in the night. The small fire did little to take any of the cold out of the mangled cabin, but the soft light was at least psychologically warming. Maybe if he were closer, he'd feel a difference. As it was, he didn't need to be. They had to prioritize the Asset's health.

Rollins watched the Soldier. Brock had done a hell of a job of keeping him alive. A normal man would have been dead by now, with the cuts he took when the fuselage beside him erupted. It was a bit of luck that the gash in the Asset's arm managed to slow itself to a relatively quick stop, after Dennison tied off the tourniquet. They actually removed it after only about ten minutes, once the quickclot had set. It was the wound in his leg that had them scrambling. Without any tools to cut the flayed metal of the bulkhead away, their only resort was to pull the Soldier's leg off of it.

The sound of absolute agony that had come from the Asset was enough to curdle anyone's blood. But no one had time to acknowledge it. The damage was immediately evident, as the Asset was laid flat on the deck and restrained by the surviving able bodied operators. When Rumlow was finally free from helping Cephas, who'd taken a good blow to the head, he got down and gave the trigger, sending the Asset into unconsciousness and letting the tiring men back off and open enough room to see what exactly the problem was. With flashlights cutting through the smoke in the cabin, the arterial bleeds in the Asset's limbs were obvious.

The first tourniquet on his leg failed, when the internal band snapped. Blood pumped out from underneath Jack's hands holding down the Soldier's leg and trying to keep pressure on the wound. Pressure at the femoral triangle had little effect, and it was quickly realized that the Asset didn't have long. While a new tourniquet was called for, Jack set his jaw, against his own discomfort at the idea, and had dug into the gaping wound to pinch off the nicked artery, holding it closed between his thumb and forefinger until the band above the gouge was locked tight and the rushing blood slowed to a stop.

Turning over his hands now in the firelight, Jack noticed the dried blood still under his fingernails and in some of the lines of his joints and palm. He frowned, disappointed that he hadn't gotten as much off of him as he'd hoped by dipping and scrubbing his hands in and out of the snow and letting it melt around them. He swept his head once and, now that he was done eating, pulled his cold weather gloves back on. He looked up from the other side of the Quinjet's fuselage, when the Asset mumbled something Rollins couldn't quite make out. He shook away his curiosity, when he didn't hear anything else.
For the serum in him, and the Hextand that Rumlow pumped into his veins for almost three hours, the Asset looked to be making a slow, but acceptable, recovery. After the bleeding was controlled, Brock had pushed everyone back and given the Soldier the command word to wake him. Rumlow quickly, but quietly, added the code to keep him compliant, needing him conscious to help him identify any other injuries. What else there was was minor in comparison to what had already been dealt with. Brock had barked out a list of orders for the remainder of the squad, from putting out the small fires in the cabin to gathering the dead by the cockpit and setting a rotating perimeter watch, and, subtly, something had started to come back to the Soldier.

Jack had been dumbstruck, when he first heard it. It was like watching someone talk on the phone, only hearing one half of a conversation. In some kind of pain-induced haze, the Soldier wasn't the Soldier anymore. He was Sgt. Barnes again, talking, it seemed, to Capt. Rogers. It was hard to make out at first, but Rollins picked out phrases when he could. He had helped Rumlow set the IV. While the fluids ran, replacing the blood that was frozen now on the deck, Rumlow and Rollins had exchanged a look that said yeah, neither of them was imagining it.

Jack had just stared, watching Barnes' lips move vaguely, when he mumbled too low to be understood. The best that he could put together was he was eavesdropping on a conversation that happened in 1944 in Bastogne, and the first time he heard the Asset say 'Steve' it fucking creeped him out. The tourniquet on the Asset's leg was removed after an hour or so, and a successful trial that the wound wouldn't bleed without it. They banked on the regenerative properties of the serum correcting any tissue damage in the limb while it had been belted. They stoked the controlled fire set up against the bulkhead and moved the Soldier to lie propped up against the row of twisted jump seats beside it. Rumlow gave the Asset an MRE, telling him to eat, before dropping with an exhausted sigh onto the deck next to Jack for his own meal. While the Soldier ate, his babbling stopped.

"That's the most he's ever said about him," Jack noted, not taking his eyes off of the Asset, watching him slowly feed himself and scrutinizing the stiffness and discomfort he noted in his posture. Jack looked over at Brock. "You gonna write it up?"

Rumlow seemed to think for a moment, before he shook his head, slowly. "No."

"Why not?" Rollins asked, his eyes closing a little in curiosity and against the cold gust of air that pushed into the damaged cabin from up the mountainside.

"What's the point?" Brock shrugged. "He keeps his mouth shut when he's back on base. They're gonna wipe him and dump him back into cryo, after this little disaster." He gave a subtle jut of his chin toward the Soldier. "He doesn't know what to do with what he’s said, anyway."

Rollins turned his gaze back over to the wounded man propped up in the torn open fuselage. "What do you think makes him remember?"

"I don't know," Rumlow considered. "Today? Probably a knock on the head from the crash. The other times?" He shrugged. "Beats the hell out ‘a me. The way somebody says somethin’. Maybe someone looks like someone he used to know. Could just be those eggheads aren't as smart as they think they are and they actually can't control him at all, or anyone else for that matter."

Jack nodded, slowly, to himself, thinking over what Rumlow said. "That's fucked up, man," he decided.

"Can you imagine," Brock mused, "losing everything like that? Over and over and over again."

"Just shoot me in the fuckin' head," Rollins told him. "Put me in the ground."
"Right?" the Lieutenant agreed, with a shake of his head. "So, no, I'm not gonna write it up. Let him have it, while he can. Doesn’t hurt anybody, anyway."

Feb 2009

“This is a god damn joke,” Rollins muttered.

"What’d you say?"

From his seat, slouched in the folding chair in the shadows of the far corner of the room, Jack took his hand away from his mouth and answered, “I said this is fucking ridiculous.”

With his legs stretched out and booted feet crossed at the ankles, Rollins gave a narrow shake of his head, his gaze set on the scene at the end of the long room. He pulled the cap off his head and scratched impatiently at his scruffy jaw, before checking his watch. It’d been three hours since his fire team had linked up with their CS counterparts. Once again, STRIKE had done the hard part, spending days tracking down and taking the bombmaker into custody. He was transported to the edge of town to a small, disused manufacturing building where a trio of agents was waiting to question the man about his latest piece of work for hire.

“You got someplace else you need to be?” the agent asked.

"Yeah," Jack flatly said, cocking his head to glare at the man sweating in his polo shirt and khaki BDU pants, thinking about his plans with Claire that night. “I do. So, if you ladies could quit pussyfooting around and do your fucking job, we-“

"Ay," Rumlow said, walking into the room from the hall. “What’s going on?”

"Not a god damn thing," Emery complained under his breath, from his lean against the wall.

"You better put your dogs on a leash, Rumlow," the agent warned.

Brock quirked up a brow at the man over his shoulder, before turning his attention back to his team. “The fuck happened? I go take a piss and all ‘a sudden I got smartass over here telling me to get you guys in line?”

"I can hear you,” the man groused from his chair behind the table, as he watched the interrogation at the other end of the room by camera.

“Yeah, no shit," Brock agreed, turning over his shoulder to the man again. “You’re like five feet behind me.”

"Jack’s getting mouthy,” Dennison explained, “because he hasn’t had his snack and a nap today.”

Without bothering to look, Rollins struck his leg out to the side, clipping Dennison, in the nearby chair, in the knee with the heel of his boot. “Shut the fuck up.”

"Cranky motherfucker," Dennison grumbled, dusting off the side of his knee.

"It’s hot as balls in here,” Cephas pointed out, “and these guys are getting nowhere fast.” He waved a hand toward the prisoner and the agents talking to him down the way. “By the time they get anything out of him, the bomb’ll have gone off and Jack’s still won’t have been able to get his juice box and cookie.”
“Knock it off, both of you,” Brock said, pointing a finger between Cephas and Dennison. He turned around to the agent, wondering, “Any idea how much longer this is gonna be?”

The Agent gestured to the equipment monitoring the interrogation and the men involved beyond it. “These things take time.”

“You’ve got a credible threat that puts this asshole’s next bomb in play in anywhere from 6 hours to a week,” Rollins noted, sitting up to rest his rifle on the floor and elbows on his knees, lifting a hand to point accusingly at the bombmaker sitting in the chair ahead of them. “And you’re telling us this takes time?” He let his hand fall, leveling his eyes at the agent. “You pricks are really going to sit here and go at this with kid gloves, banking on the long end of that window? That’s funny,” he snorted, derisively, “because seeing you sit there all comfortable like that, you wouldn’t think you had such big balls.”

“What’d I tell you?” the agent growled at Rumlow. “Get your people-”

“Easy,” Brock frowned, holding his hand up to the agent. “Everyone just calm down. Same team, alright?”

“That piece of shit is enjoying this,” Rollins decided, jutting his chin toward their prisoner. “Look at him. He knows he’s winning. He knows you’re not gonna do a damn thing to him, and his bomb’s gonna go off anyway.”

“That’s enough out of you,” the agent scowled.

Dennison nodded. “He’s right,” he seconded. “That’s a confident man. He’s not scared. He’s just waiting.”

“You guys are on the short end. You have hours, not days,” Jack insisted. “That bomb’s going to go off and he’ll have never even broken a sweat.”

“And what the hell do you know about interrogation?” the agent balked.

“Say I don’t know a damn thing about interrogation,” Jack allowed, “but I know animals.” He pointed back at the bombmaker. “And that one? That one’s not afraid of you guys, or anything you tell him is gonna happen to him.”

“He’s holding all the cards,” Emery noted, watching the agents at the end of the room talking to the suspect. “If he gives it up,” he shook his head with a thoughtful frown, “it won’t be with enough time to stop it.”

“Be honest,” Dennison invited the agent, “is this your team’s first time?”

“That’s it,” the agent said, standing up from his chair and taking a step in. “I want you guys out of here.”

Rumlow stepped in his way, putting his hands up and calmly saying, “Alright. We’re just trying to help. Nobody wants that bomb to go off, wherever it is. Okay?”

“Five minutes,” Jack calmly offered. “Give me five minutes.”

“Are you fuckin’ kidding me?” the agent questioned, his expression completely incredulous.

“It’s a good offer,” Haney shrugged.
"He’s right," Brock agreed, shifting to catch the agent’s attention again. “Just five minutes. You’re not authorized to do what you need to do to get this fuck to talk. Let us do it.” He nodded toward the table. “You just turn off those cameras and write up a technical problem with the equipment. We’ll get you the bomb and you get the credit, huh?”

The agent paused, taking a moment to pan his gaze across the determined faces of the operators sitting and standing around in the corner. He looked at his watch. Jack hoped he was considering how little time they had to wait, if the threat was meant for the next few hours instead of days. The agent gave Jack a hard once over, before looking away to his partners still talking at the end of the room and finally consenting, “Five minutes.”

Jack stood up, as Rumlow was telling the agent he’d made the right decision. Rollins hit Dennison in the shoulder to come with him and motioned for Cephas and Emery to follow. As the operators crossed the length of the room, the agent called his partners back to join him. They gave wary looks to the desert camoed men that passed them tugging their black balaclavas back over their faces again.

Jack told his teammates to secure the prisoner to the chair and the men split a pair of zip tie cuffs to lash the man’s ankles to the legs of his chair. His hands were already handcuffed to the arms. On the way, Jack had fallen behind a step to grab a jerry can from along the wall and a handful of rags off a shelf. At an agent’s warning that “That’s not water”, Jack nodded. “I know.”

With the prisoner bound, Jack set down the metal canister, guessing it to feel like it had the better part of its 20 liters of fuel still in it. Rollins tossed the towels to Dennison who took the rags, layering them together, as he walked behind the chair and out of the prisoner’s view. Cephas and Emery stood on either side of the chair, waiting, as Jack began speaking to the man. In perfectly accented Castilian, Rollins didn’t bother introducing himself or making a deal.

"The ETA has promised another attack on the leadership of the Guardian Civil,” he told him. “We know you've made them another bomb. Tell me where it is, the target, the means of delivery, and when it will go off.”

The prisoner chuckled, responding in Spanish to Jack’s request by telling him to go fuck his own mother. The man launched into a mocking speech of loyalty to his Basque separatist employers and the futility of Jack’s attempt to find out the information on the bomb, while Jack ignored him, turning his back on the man to take up the jerry can again. Once he turned back, Cephas and Emery grabbed hold of the man’s chair, tilting him backward to balance on only two legs of the chair, as Dennison slung the rags to pull back over his face and hold his head down.

Rollins stepped up, twisting off the gas can’s cap and dropping it on the floor. He tipped the canister, letting a little of the fuel trickle onto the man’s face. The prisoner struggled under their firm control, as Jack repeated himself to the man, insisting he tell them what they wanted to know. The man sputtered and coughed, but didn’t answer. Jack lifted the can again, pouring the gasoline over the shape of the man’s mouth and nose under the cloth covering his face. Rollins stopped, fluently demanding his answers again.

The bombmaker choked and gagged, flexing and wriggling against his restraints, trying to right himself in the chair. Cephas and Emery kept him firmly in place. Dennison held the towels tight over the man’s face, doing his best not to let any of the fuel splash onto his own clothes as Jack poured the gasoline over the prisoner’s face again. This time the man cried out, desperately begging them to stop, as his head jerked and he coughed. Jack nodded and Dennison pulled the rags away, as the man began to throw up. Emery and Cephas set the chair back on the floor, each taking a step away to avoid the vomit and gasoline coming from the man as he shook his hanging
"Tell me," Rollins seethed, purposefully setting the jerry can down with a loud thud in front of the man’s burning red eyes.

The bombmaker sobbed, shaking his head as he told them the location and time of the car bomb meant to kill the Chief of the Spanish police agency and his family. While the prisoner begged for water, Jack and his men walked away. The two agents who had been running the interrogation before they intervened, watched slack jawed as they passed the four operators on their way back to their prisoner.

“Probably want to clean him up, before we take him in,” Jack suggested to the agent behind the table. “Might be hard to explain why he smells like gasoline.”

"What the fuck is wrong with you people?” the agent marveled.

"Hey,” Rumlow said. “You got your target.” He looked at his watch. “And you got about 2 hours to get the Chief and his family out of harm’s way. I wouldn’t worry about what’s wrong with us, when you should be worrying about what would’a happened if we weren’t here. I suggest you make a phone call.” He nodded to the broken down man at the end of the room, still crying for water in between bouts of throwing up and spitting. “You’re fucking welcome, by the way. You boys are gonna be heroes. ...Now, get ‘im cleaned up. We’ll get the jet ready to take him back to DC.”

The agent just stared, as Jack, Brock, and the rest of the fire team inside walked out of the room to meet up with their teammates on post outside. On the way out, Rumlow smacked his hand into Jack’s arm, saying, “Hey. What’s got you so pissy, anyway?”

"We were supposed to be home yesterday,” Jack grumblingly reminded him. “It was Valentine’s Day. I’m supposed to be taking Claire out to make it up to her, tonight.”

Rumlow chuckled, shaking his head, as they stepped out into the sunlight. “Better call and reschedule...again,” he quipped.

“Yeah,” Jack unhappily agreed, digging his cell phone out of his pocket. *Fuck.*

"This is what I like about you,” Brock noted, as he started off toward the Quinjet.

"What’s that?” Jack asked after him, looking up from dialing and putting the phone to his ear.

"That you’re always ready to get your hands dirty,” Rumlow smirked, over his shoulder. “You don’t have to be told when to do work.” He pointed back at Jack, as he kept walking. “And you do some fuckin’ work, my friend. Helluva job in there.”

Rollins nodded his acceptance of the compliment, as the phone rang. His shoulders fell, when Claire answered, waiting for the inevitable disappointment in her voice.
There was a subtle ache in his head. A long day and a few drinks was wearing him down. It wouldn’t have been an issue, if PT assessments weren’t run yesterday and he hadn’t been on an assignment the two days before that. Sleep was a luxury he had put off for a few days and was looking forward to now.

Snapping on the light to the bedroom, Jack pulled his t-shirt off overhead as he walked to the dresser. He balled up the shirt, tossing it into the laundry hamper by the closet and turning to empty his pockets of his wallet and keys. Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he stopped. Every muscle in him locked. He looked down at the black screen in his palm. It wasn’t his ringtone, but he had to look anyway. More disconcerting, it wasn’t Claire’s, either.

Jack turned around, his eyes scanning the room as he zeroed in on the source of the muffled ringing. He stepped slowly, following the sound, until he took a knee to reach down between the side of the bed and the nightstand. He read the display, just before the last ring came through and the screen blacked out. He didn’t recognize the number and the name on the screen read “Home”.

Standing back up, Jack pressed the unlock button on the phone, to wake the device. He scoffed to himself, muttering, “Amateur.” when the phone opened without the use of a password. Rollins tapped on the missed call icon to see the recent contacts in the phone, already having his suspicions of what he might find. When he saw Claire’s cell phone number in the history, he didn’t bother looking any further. But being a man of absolutes, Jack redialed the last call in.

Jack didn’t have to wait long. The line only rang once, before a man hurriedly said, “Oh, thank god, Claire. You found it before he-“

Jack hung up. He didn’t have to hear any more. His pulse was already racing and he felt a heat rising up the back of his neck. His jaw worked against itself, as he marched out of the bedroom and downstairs. In his hand, the phone began to ring again. Obviously, the owner was confused or insulted about having been hung up on. Claire was still sitting at the end of the couch in the living room, working on her laptop. She looked up, at his coming in the room and hearing the ringing follow him in.

Jack dropped the phone on the couch cushion near her feet, telling her, through a tight jaw, “It’s for you.”

The fall of the phone startled the dog, curled up at her feet, sending the Yorkie jumping down from the couch. Claire stared at the phone, her lips slightly parted. Rollins waited, standing at the end of the couch, his attention shifting between her and the phone and back again, until the ringing stopped. In the silence, they stared at each other for a long moment.

“This is the part where you give some kind of bullshit explanation,” he prompted, turning over his hand to coax her along, “about how some guy has your number in his phone in my house.”

Claire’s cell phone began to ring on the coffee table, and Rollins shot it a hard look. ”Jack,” she began, putting on a pleasant grin. She leaned over to silence her phone and let the call go to voicemail. ”It’s not what you think. Jeffrey-.“

”That little shit from the office?” he balked, instantly thinking of his hands around the bastard’s
neck squeezing the life out of him.

"Jack, be nice," Claire told him, reaching down to pet the dog, who’d stood up on the side of the couch for her attention.

“I’m way past being nice, Claire,” he scowled.

Shaking her head, she dismissively told him, “He dropped his phone in the lot at work. I was going to give it back to him on Monday. That’s probably just him calling to check his voicemail, or something. Honestly, Jack...”

"The last time he called your phone was 10 hours ago," Rollins flatly pointed out, “not even an hour after I left to meet up with Kyle and the guys.”

"Yeah," she shrugged, “to-“

"From his cell phone, Claire,” he growled, losing what little patience he had left. “How fucking stupid do you think I am? Even if I didn’t see his call history-“

"You got into his phone?" Claire cut in.

"That’s the wrong fuckin’ thing for you to be worrying about, right now, sweetheart,” Jack shook his head. “I’m not the one to try this with. You want me to start counting off the deception cues I can read from you, right now?” With his head cocked in annoyance, he told her, “Don’t fuckin’ lie to me anymore, Claire.”

A small breath escaped her and Claire’s shoulders dropped a fraction. “I didn’t mean for anything to happen,” she swept her downturned head.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Rollins breathed out, raking his hands back over his head, feeling the gut punch he mistakenly thought he was ready for, finally hearing the truth. The blow made him feel sick, and, for a moment, everything stopped- the world turning, his heart beating.

"It was just a one time thing,” she feebly said. “A couple weeks ago, in Tucson, we-“

Just as quickly, everything came back to him and he had the clarity to incredulously correct, "Three weeks ago. Three. ...You're out fucking some other guy, while I'm getting fuckin' cut in-“

Rollins stopped himself, even as pissed as he was, still mindful of OpSec. But he knew exactly when it was. He had the scar to prove it, after a target they had tracked down for The Hague had pulled a punch knife on Jack and the new guy, Fuentes, as they moved in to go hands on and put the restraints on him. Rollins had shoved the plebe aside, sparing the young Specialist any damage. But Jack caught the back half of the target’s swipe on the underside of his forearm. Superficial as it was, the gash still took eight stitches to close and put him on light duty for a week and a half. His eyes flicked over to the fresh scar in his periphery, before he let his hand fall from where it had been hooked at the back of his head.

Claire looked at the mark, too. Her eyes dropping quickly, and shamefully, away when he asked her, “How many times?” She shook her head, slowly, apparently not wanting to say. But silence wasn’t an answer he was willing to accept tonight. “How many times, Claire?!”

She flinched, at the sudden anger in his voice, and the dog shrank back down to the floor to back away under the table, with a small whimper. “It was just a one time-“

"A one time thing doesn’t lose its god damn cell phone in my house, Claire,” he snapped, pointing
down at Jeffrey's phone on the couch.

“A few,” Claire reluctantly admitted. “I- I don’t know.” She put aside her laptop on the coffee table beside her, folding her feet under her to scoot down the cushion on her knee to be closer to him standing at the end of the couch. Claire looked up at him, earnestly, as she offered a soft, “Jack, I’m so sorry.”

"You’re sorry?” he checked, his eyes leveled at her flushed cheeks and reddening eyes. “Jesus Christ-“ Jack threw up his hand. “You’re sneaking around, letting that piece of shit into our house-into our bed... And you’re sorry?”

"I don’t know what else to say,” Claire sniffled, tears welling in her eyes.

He looked down at her, disgusted at the thought of her and some asshole from the office in his bed, or anywhere else, who knew how many times, while he was deployed or working in the last few weeks. Rollins swept his head and turned on his heel, walking out of the living room to go back upstairs, before he lost what little control he had left. He was fuming, but he had heard and seen all he needed to. Honestly, it was all he could bare to hear. He went straight to the den, grabbing his old duffel, from his days with the Rangers, from the closet to take into the bedroom.

Rounding out of the den and into the hallway, he saw Claire tiptoeing up the stairs, peeking over and clinging to the railing as she came up the last few stairs to the hall. He ignored her, going straight to the bedroom closet and throwing his bag on the bed as he passed. Grabbing a fresh pair of uniforms off their hangars, Jack hastily folded them over on themselves to drop on the bed. He grabbed his boots off the floor and shoved them into the bottom of his duffel. He put the uniforms in next, making a sharp turn toward the dresser to start taking things from the drawers.

He was aware of her standing in the doorway, almost hiding in it, as she watched and the dog obliviously wagged its tail at her feet. Rollins was surprisingly indifferent to the lines he saw drawn down her cheeks by her tears, feeling his rage turn to conviction. Claire sniffled, quietly, and called his name. Rollins didn’t respond, yanking a fresh t-shirt on and continuing to pull a few essentials from the drawers, knowing he had to go, before he did anything he’d regret.

"John,” she insisted, immediately shrinking into her shoulders when his hard gaze snapped over to her. Claire visibly swallowed, seeming to need to find the nerve to ask, “What are you doing?”

He stopped, straightening up to hold his hands out wide. “The fuck does it look like?” he dared.

"Don’t go,” Rollins sneered, shaking his head, as he grabbed the small pile of clothes he’d stacked up on the dresser. Packing them in his bag, he wondered, “Why the fuck would I stay?”

She moved into the room, her hands wringing in front of her as she told him, “Jack, just wait a minute.” She followed him as he made a trip to and from the bathroom for a few more things. “We need to talk about this.” He scoffed, but she persisted. “Please, listen to- ...Jack, I’m sorry. It doesn’t mean anything. We were all out at the hotel bar, having a few drinks, and-“

He held up a warning finger. “I’m not in the mood for piss poor excuses,” Jack told her.

"It’s over,” she assured him, clutching her hands to her chest, as if she were cold, looking quite distressed. He found a little satisfaction in seeing her unhappiness, continuing to pack as she
begged, “Jack? Do you hear me? It’s over. It was a fling.” Claire shook her head. “I was lonely. You—You’ve been gone so much lately and I...”

"Bullshit,” he growled, glaring at her as he stood up from tucking away his things.

That she had the nerve to try and somehow blame him was infuriating all over again. There were no warning signs of any trouble between them. They went out regularly with friends and still had date nights on their own. They still fucked, more than a few times a week, when neither of them was away for work, and even flirted, like they always had. Jack was happy and Claire never said a word that she wasn’t.

Maybe she was right and she could blame the first time on the alcohol. But the second time, and the third, or however many more after that, she did on her own. Maybe chasing the thrill of it. But Jack never played games with her. He wasn’t the type.

“You’ve got all the clichés ready, don’t you?” Rollins shook his head, tugging his bag up on its end to close.

“Don’t go,” Claire repeated, sounding a little more desperate. “We can get through this. We’ll figure it out. We just—Let’s go away together,” she pleaded. “Just you and me. We’ll go someplace warm and...”

Jack stepped around her to get back to the dresser, picking up his wallet and phone and putting them in his pockets. She turned to keep seeing him as he moved. While she suggested going to couple’s therapy, or anything else he wanted her to do, Rollins took another look over the closet to see if there was anything else he should grab. He figured he had everything he would need, if he were recalled to work.

Rollins punched in the code to the safe cut in to set in the closet wall. Behind him, Claire was still offering solutions and promises too late. The little dog had come over to see what he was doing, circling Jack’s feet, as he took his issued sidearm out of the safe and clipped it in its holster into the back of his jeans. He grabbed some of the cash he kept in there, folding it into his pocket with one hand while the other grabbed his loaded extra magazines. He’d tuned out Claire, by the time he shut the safe and closet door, slipping the magazines into the top of his duffel.

Still working around Claire, he grabbed his keys off the dresser and went back to the bed, picking up and shouldering his duffel. The dog yipped, probably excited by the keys in Jack’s hand and thinking she was going for a ride in the car. Jack stepped carefully over the dog and out of the bedroom. The dog and Claire followed at his heels.

“Jack,” she carefully called after him, “You’re scaring me. Say something...please.”

His jaw set, firmly, all he could do was disappointedly shake his head, as he dropped his duffel on the floor and took his coat off the rack in the foyer at the bottom of the stairs. Rollins didn’t know what else to say or what she expected to hear. He rolled his shoulders, shrugging his coat on.

"John, where are you going?” she worried, fresh tears choking her voice.

He didn’t answer. As much for his not knowing the answer as for her not deserving to know right now. Reaching down for his bag again, Jack gave the little Yorkie wiggling in front of him a good scratch on the head, before he swung his duffel up to his shoulder.

"Try not to invite that asshole over while I’m gone,” he dryly told her, as he opened the door, carefully shooing the dog back with his foot. “I’ll be back for the rest of my things later.”
"No," she shook her head. "John, no. Please."

Jack pulled the door shut behind him. He paused on the porch, taking in a deep breath of the cold, damp air. He cocked his head, his ears pricking to the sound of Claire’s sob from the other side of the door. Rollins looked over his shoulder at the closed door to their home. Something pulled at his chest, at hearing the sound of her crying, and his weight shifted to turn him a fraction of the way around. But the anger and insult he felt at what she had done was stronger and reared its head again, giving him the resolve to walk off the porch and around to the driveway.

He didn’t know where he was going to go. There was always room in the barracks, but he didn’t want to go to work and see a bunch of people right now. Maybe he’d just stop at the first hotel he came across. All he knew was the more steps he took from the house, the madder he got.

Rollins threw his duffel across the front seat of his truck, climbing in after it, just as the rain started to dot the windshield. Jack slammed the door shut behind him, his temper near boiling over at the reason he was leaving his home and wife in the middle of the night. Jack hit his hand against the steering wheel, letting out a profanity harsh enough to make even the bravest person cower.

Stabbing the key into the ignition, Jack started the truck and threw it into gear. He backed out of the driveway, the tires making a small chirp for traction as he put the truck into drive and headed anywhere else but there.
Chapter 12

Mar 2009

Jack waited, on the front stoop of the DC brownstone, with his beat up olive drab duffel slung over his shoulder. He knocked again, with his free hand, while he palmed his keys in his left, feeling them slide and scrape across each other under the pressure of his fist. There was an exaggerated annoyance in the voice that was coming closer to the other side of the door, telling him to hold on. Rollins twisted his chin upward and to the side, cracking a small relief into his tension-filled neck. He had calmed down some, while he drove aimlessly around, but he still didn’t understand. How did he fucking end up here?

"God damn it," he muttered, dropping his head with a narrow shake.

It couldn’t have been more than a minute or two since he finally mustered the nerve to get out of his truck and walk up to the door, but the misting rain was enough to start soaking in to the wool of his coat and it wasn't helping his mood. If he'd waited a few more minutes, maybe the rain would've stopped. But then, a few more minutes with his thoughts wouldn't have helped either. Rollins’ head and attention snapped up, when the last lock clicked free and the door opened. Instead of the door opening wide to invite him in, his host paused, eyes dragging down him and up again, with a disapproving crease in his brow.

"Aren't you the sad sack 'a shit tonight," Rumlow observed, with a grin in the side of his mouth at Jack's expense. He pushed the door away from him and stepped aside. "C'mon, before the neighbor's call the cops about a suicidal man on my stoop."

Rollins couldn't help the unamused grunt that escaped him, giving his head a shake and his boss a disdainful click of his tongue. "Homicidal is more like it," Jack corrected.

"She really did it, huh?" Brock teased, reaching over to pull the front door shut and throw the locks. "Finally traded up and kicked ya out."

"Oh?" Jack blinked, obnoxiously shifting his weight toward Brock to listen closely, pointing limply at Rumlow. "Are you sleepin' with her, too?"

The dumbfounded look on his lieutenant's face was worth enough for a smirk from Jack, while Brock tried to recover. The misplaced grin didn't last long, though. He was by no means actually amused by the situation. What guy would be, after finding another man's cell phone in the bedroom of his house?

"No shi- Are you serious?" Brock gaped. Rollins nodded and the air left his friend, his shoulders dropping as he fell into his immediate apology. "Fuck, Jack," Brock shook his head, taking a moment to wipe his hand down over his mouth. "Listen, big guy, I'm sorry. When you called and said you needed a place to stay, I had no idea she-"

"Yeah, me either," Rollins sarcastically admitted, dropping the duffel bag off his arm to the floor.

"You know who it is?" Brock checked.

Rollins nodded, working the buttons of his peacoat. "Some pencil dick from the office," he griped. "Found his phone in my bedroom. Apparently, it's been going on since that conference she went to in Tucson."
"Are you fuckin' kiddin' me?" Rumlow barked. "Three weeks ago Tucson? While you're getting stitched up in Yemin, she's-"

"Yep," Jack nodded, catching a glimpse of the pink line that ran for a few inches along the inside of his left forearm, highlighting where the new scar was still healing, before passing his coat off to Brock to put in the foyer closet. "Hey, listen, Bingo," he offered, "I appreciate you letting me crash here. It's just for the night, 'til I-"

"Nah. Listen, don't worry about it," Brock waved him off. "We're just getting out of rotation. The couch is more comfortable than it looks. Take your time and figure it out. No rush, alright?"

"Thanks, man," Rollins accepted, with a quick flinch of as strong a smile as he could manage in the side of his mouth.

"You look like you could use a drink," Rumlow decided. He motioned for Jack to follow him down the hall to the kitchen. "How long was it?"

"Four years," he grumbled. "Married, two."

Brock let out an impressed whistle. "S'prised you made it that long."

"The fuck's that supposed to mean?" Jack scowled, stopping at the end of the counter, watching him take down a pair of tumblers from the cupboard.

"Come on," he begged, cocking up an incredulous eyebrow. "Two years, to a piece of ass like that?"

Rollins pointed a warning finger at his alleged friend. "Hey, she's still my wife," he strongly cautioned.

Because she was. And pissed and wounded as he was, he still loved her. It hadn't been much more than an hour since he blew up, stalking downstairs to confront her. He was tired; just come home from a day visiting with friends for an old Army buddy up in Langley's birthday. Jack wasn't looking for a fight. In fact, they never fought. But it took just one ring from a cell phone that wasn't his or hers, sounding in their bedroom, to start the first and last one.

"I'm just sayin', we both know she's a beautiful woman, Jack," he explained. "How long you think that was gonna last with you dipping outta the country every few weeks on assignment?"

"I know," Rollins begrudgingly agreed, taking the generously filled glass of Jameson Brock slid down the counter to him. "Four years was a good run."

"Not bad...for the first one," he quipped.

Jack paused, with the edge of his glass just shy of his lips, to firmly correct, "The only one."

Rumlow chuckled and Rollins took a large swallow of whiskey. Brock lifted his glass to his friend, with a decided, "Fuck her."

With a nod and tip of his cup, knowing in his gut that there was no forgiveness for this betrayal, Rollins threw back the rest of his drink, seconding, "Lying bitch."

It was quiet for a moment, before Brock asked, "You know the guy?"

"Not really," Jack shook his head. "Seen 'im two or three times. That’s all."
Rumlow nodded, thoughtfully. “You know we gotta walk this up the chain,” he carefully reminded him.

Jack nodded. “Yeah, I know.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about,” he told him.

Jack took a deep breath, inhaling slowly through his nose and closing his eyes for a moment. On the other side of the door, he heard the dog scratching and barking. *Fuck*, he thought to himself, opening his eyes. He put his key in the lock and opened the door. The swing of the door brushed the dog back and Jack stepped in, shutting it behind him to keep the chilly morning air out. He stopped, listening. The only sounds in the house came from the little Yorkie’s toes tapping on the hardwood, as she fussed eagerly at his feet.

Jack dipped down, scooping up the dog in one hand to hold. He scratched her head, quietly wondering, “Your mom go to work today?”

The dog stretched and wiggled, trying to reach his face to lick, but he put her down before she could. Jack took a surveying walk through the house and back to the kitchen. Along the way, he looked for any signs of anyone new in his house. In the kitchen, he turned off the coffee maker, shaking his head at Claire forgetting again, as usual. He glanced at the dishes left in the sink after breakfast, noting they were for one. At least she didn’t have him over last night.

Rollins thumbed through the mail on the counter from the last couple days. He pulled the pieces that were for him and stashed them in his coat pocket for later. Upstairs, it looked like Claire’s side of the bed was the only one that had been used. He didn’t realize he’d stopped, staring distractedly at the bed, until the dog walked across the mattress and circled once before laying down to watch Jack.

He shook his head clear, turning for the closet. He opened the closet door, punching in his code for the safe recessed in the wall. He grabbed his go bag from the back of the closet and unzipped it to look inside. The bag was still packed and he started unloading the contents of the safe into it. He tucked away his passports for work and the rest of the cash he’d left behind the other night. There was an unregistered handgun, with extra magazines and ammunition, he kept just in case. He was just moving to close the safe again, when he heard the front door open and watched the dog jump off the bed to run downstairs.

His jaw set and Jack pushed the safe shut. He grabbed a couple shirts off their hangers in the closet and stuffed them into the bag, as well. Rollins closed the closet and turned to the dresser for a few more things. From downstairs, Claire called his name. He heard footsteps coming up the stairs next, followed by the scrape of the dog scurrying after her in the hall. A moment later, Claire peeked around the doorway into the room.

"Jack,” she breathed, grinning but a little wary. “You’re back. I went to the gym and, when I came home, I saw your truck and I—“

"I’m not back,” he disagreed. “I just came to take care of a few things.”

For security reasons, Jack wouldn’t have left the things in the safe for long. For operational reasons, he wouldn’t have gone another day without his bailout bag. He’d taken advantage of Rumlow’s hospitality for a couple of nights, before he checked into a hotel, until he figured out his next move.
Claire seemed a little thrown by his reply and blinked, giving a small shake of her head. “I thought maybe you’d-

"Nope," he flatly told her.

"Jack," she began, with an awkward, but hopeful, grin, “babe, we need to talk about this.” When he didn’t say anything right away, she reminded him, “I’m your wife.”

"Are you Claire?" he checked. “Because it sure as hell doesn’t sound like you have been for awhile.”

The comment seemed to take her aback. She recovered, looking a little insulted as she told him, “That’s not fair, Jack.”

"It’s not?" he asked. “Because I seem to recall finding some other guy’s phone in my house,” he pointed behind him, “not ten feet from where we’re standing now, in our bedroom, Claire. Who is that not fair to?”

"I said I was sorry," she earnestly reminded him.

“Sorry’s not cutting it,” he told her, putting his backpack on his shoulder and watching the dog at his feet, as he stepped around Claire to get to the door.

She reached out a hand to grab his coat sleeve to stop him, wrapping her other hand around his arm to hold him when he did. “John, please,” she gently insisted. “You don’t answer my calls or messages. It’s been three days. I’ve been worried sick, not knowing where you’ve been. ...Is this what you really want to do? Do you want to leave?” Jack let out an aggravated sigh and Claire went on, “We need to talk about this. We can fix this...together.”

"Fix what, Claire?" he pressed, shifting his weight to turn and loosing his arm from her grasp at the same time. “How do you think this gets fixed?”

“We'll talk,” she suggested. “Go to counseling. Go away together. Jack, we haven’t had a trip together since last summer.”

"Yeah," he conceded, “well, we’ve been busy.”

He knew what he should have said was he was busy. Between Delta being the Asset’s support team and more than the usual bullshit going on lately with SHIELD, Jack was feeling a little bit of a strain. The turn around between deployments, even for just a day’s worth of work, was getting shorter and shorter. But SHIELD had been on a run lately, tracking and bagging parts of a terrorist cell they’d been dismantling for the last few months. Progress was consistent and they’d never had this kind of success before. It was unprecedented, but taxing on the Division, which had other operations for its resources to see to, as well. Maybe he hadn’t been around as much, like she said, but it was still no excuse.

"Remember Lord Howe Island?" she asked, hopefully, taking a step closer to take his hand. “Why don’t we go back there, stay for a week or two, and just...just be by ourselves again? What do you say?”

It was an incredible trip. They started talking about going back almost as soon as they left. But Jack shook his head, and he watched Claire’s expression slowly fall.

"Claire," he sighed, “it’s like you don’t even see what you did.”
“Jack, I know what I did was wrong—”

“Trust, Claire,” he snapped. “Trust. ...I can’t trust you anymore.” She shrank into her shoulders, her hands falling away from his. “My job- I have to be able to trust the people around me, and I can’t trust you anymore.”

”You can trust me, Jack,” she promised, moving up the few inches she’d recoiled from him.

He shook his head, disappointed when he assured her, “No, I can’t.” Rollins wiped a hand over his mouth, his eyes flicking up to the ceiling in irritation, before he told her, “I had to report this. Do you have any idea how that makes me look? To Command? To my teammates? The scrutiny I’m under right now?”

”Report this?” she wondered. “Report what? This is private...between us. We- Why would you do that? We haven’t even had a chance to see if-“

”Because of my clearance,” he explained, agitation still heavily underlining his words. “Because of who I work for and the shit I do. For fuck’s sake, Claire. Did you even think about someone using you to get to me? Blackmail? Coercion? It happens, Claire.” The look on her face told him she hadn’t. “The odds of that prick being a part of anything like that aside,” he allowed, “I still have to report any risks to OpSec. He was in my home, Claire, and I didn’t know it. The weapons and gear I keep here, the computer and tablet that can link to the SHIELD servers if someone got ahold of my credentials.

“They’ve been backgrounding and mining his shit since the other night, following him and tapping his phones to be sure. They’ve got a fuckin’ tech team on the way to sweep the house,” he told her. “That’s why I’m here. All this bullshit I gotta go through, now... Living’ in a fuckin’ hotel and suspended from duty till they clear the house and conclude their threat assessment.”

”Suspended...?” Claire blinked, giving a sweep of her head. “Jack, I’m sorry. I had no idea y- Where are you staying? Let’s go there and ta-“

”I can’t tell you, Claire,” it pained him to say. “You can’t come over. It’d compromise me, having you there. I’m under investigation.”

”Please, let’s just go away, like I said,” she begged. “When this is over and you can come home. I’ll call and make the reservations.”

”Australia sounds great,” he admitted. “But maybe you should have suggested it before you slept with some guy from the office and fucked everything up, instead of telling me there was something wrong between you and me.”

A little fight finally came to her and she argued, “How could I, when you’re never here?”

“You think I wouldn’t have listened?” Rollins dared her, regretting his previous remark, to a degree, but feeling better for saying it out loud. “You think I wouldn’t have made the time?”

”When, Jack?” she bit back. “When you’re always walking out the door, or calling to say you’re gonna miss another dinner, or whatever the hell you’re skipping out on this week?”

”It’s my job, Claire,” he reminded her. “They call and I go. You knew that was the deal. I made sure of it. And I always made it up to you.”

”I don’t deserve to be in second place,” Claire said, a subtle tremor to her voice and lower lip beginning to show.
“You’ve never been second place,” Rollins assured her, reaching out himself this time to cup his hand to her cheek. “Everything I’ve ever done has been for you. I’ve fixed this house, for you. Got that little dog, because you wanted it. The car, the trips, everything you ever said you wanted or wanted to do. All of it, for you; to make you happy, because that’s all I wanted, was to see you happy, Claire.” He withdrew, with a heavy heart, explaining, “I turned things down for you. I let opportunities at work go by me, things I wanted to do with my career, because of worrying about what would happen to you if something happened to me. You’re always in my head. You’re the reason; what I see in my head when it goes sideways, my motivation to survive. So, when was it not enough for you to know that you were always first?”

It was quiet for a moment, before she noted, “You never told me about giving up things at work.”

“Because it wasn’t worth it. Because you worry yourself to tears when I’m just in another state doing training and don’t have time or a phone to call,” he pointed out. “How could I possibly expect you to hear about assignments that’d probably triple the risk for me? I didn’t want to do that to you, Claire, because you can’t take it and because you said you wanted a family. Because you’ve always been that important to me. You always came first.”

There was a knock on the front door and Claire’s startled attention went to the open bedroom door to the hall. “That’s them,” he sighed, carding a hand down the side of his short cropped hair to rub at the ache in his neck. “Put the dog outside, for now. They’ll check your purse and car first, but you’ll have to leave the house for a few hours, while they work.”

“This is insane,” she murmured, looking back to Jack.

“Yeah,” he agreed, “but this is how it has to be. So I don’t lose my fuckin’ clearance and job and they know that prick wasn’t working you. It’s procedure.”
May 2009

"The fuck's your problem?" Rumlow asked, jutting his chin toward Jack and letting the office door swing shut behind him. The question with a subtle undercurrent of actual concern.

Rollins looked up from the papers on his desk, more than a little lost in his thought. Angled in his chair, his elbow rested on the desk, the ball of his pen pointed down into the paperwork and balanced straight under the tip of his middle finger. He uncrossed his ankles, dropping his booted feet from the corner of his desk back to the floor. He probably did look a little pathetic. Jack clicked the pen closed, setting it aside before he shuffled the papers back into the legal size manila envelope.

"Nothing," he answered. Jack looked up at the Lieutenant, asking, "What's up?"

Brock tossed a folder onto the desk to land in front of Jack. "Copy of the approved requisitions for the Armory and Motor Pool," he told him, slouching comfortably into one of the chairs in front of Rollins' desk. "I need you to run point on second squad's training session tomorrow. I gotta go to Dover for some bullshit, in the morning. Should be able to catch up before noon, though."

"No problem," Jack nodded, sliding the large envelope to his left and opening the folder from his CO.

"What's that?" Rumlow asked.

Rollins' eyes ticked up from his reading to see Brock through his brow. "What’s what?"

Brock looked down his pointed finger at the desk and Jack's gaze followed his line of sight. "That. What is *that*?"

"Oh," Jack nodded once. The plain envelope did stick out amidst the rest of the SHIELD letterheaded and stamped paperwork and files on the desk. "It’s the, uh, revised division of property settlement," he said, plainly disinterested and a little aggravated at the same time.

"No shit," Rumlow frowned. "What's she asking for this time?"

"Nothing," Jack shook his head. "She's getting everything already."

"I can't believe you're giving her the house," Brock complained.

"She can have it," Rollins grumbled. "That's the one she wanted. Let her fuckin’ boyfriend finish all the updates it needs."

"And let her have the rest of the years of mortgage payments," the Lieutenant smirked. "That place is a money pit."

"Not my money anymore," Rollins shook his head.

"She gets the house," Brock noted. "What'd you get?"

"Basically the shit I went in with," Jack shrugged.

"You get your balls back?" Rumlow chuckled.
Rollins flipped him off and followed it up with an amused smirk. He closed the requisitions folder and pushed it away for tomorrow, telling him, "She gets the house, her car, the dog."

"That dog," Brock muttered, resting his jaw comfortably on his fist, as he leaned into the arm of the chair. "It's not a dog. It's an appetizer for a real dog."

"But it's the one she wanted," Jack shrugged. Not that he had an actual problem with the dog, except that it was much smaller than the ones he'd grown up with and preferred. He would have chosen a dog from a working breed; something that could have protected the house and Claire while he was gone. But Claire was happy with the little Yorkie and it was kind of cute. "The jewelry, half of the sale for the Beamer, and six months spousal support, so she has time to refinance the house."

"Six mon-" Rumlow balked, dropping his hand from under his chin. "Are you shittin' me?"

Jack shook his head. "Keeps her snake of a lawyer from going after my pension," he noted.

"That greedy bitch," Brock shook his head. "What are you selling the car for?"

"Don't need it," Rollins figured, with an indifferent cock of his head. He'd bought the car for Claire, but she decided later she needed something a little more practical for road trips for work. "I got my truck. Don't really know why we kept it after she got the other one."

"It's a nice car, that's why." Brock reasoned. Rumlow’s face lit up and he sat a little taller in his seat, suggesting, "Hey, sell me the car for a dollar. Give her her damned fifty cents and we'll take it out to the bomb range and blow the fucker up."

They both laughed and Rollins gave the idea some serious consideration. "Tempting."

"Cah'mon," Brock egged him on. "She's getting enough money and shit outta you already."

"I'd have to see the money upfront," Jack warned, with a smirk.

"Psh," Rumlow waved him away. "You know I'm good for it." He sat forward, leaning his elbows into his knees, looking eager. "We'll get the EOD guys some practice and send her the pieces in a box with her half of the sale. What'dya say?"

He had to admit, the mental picture he had of demo-ing the shit out of the car made him smile. He knew he was giving her way too much already, but the truth was, he wasn't looking for a fight. Jack just wanted it to be done with. The sooner he didn't have to listen to her voicemails or see her in an attorney's office, the better. He realized fast, the less he gave a shit about the assets to divide, the quicker the process would be over.

Truthfully, he'd been catering to Claire since they met. She had a good job, but, when Claire and Jack started dating, she figured out pretty quick that she had him wrapped around her little finger. The tax free money Rollins had earned from his Army deployments gathered interest in savings and HYDRA paid well for his skill sets. Claire didn't take advantage of the security he provided, but Jack made sure she wanted for nothing. He liked spoiling her; seeing her light up and those moments when she'd get a little teary eyed. And that the laid back nights at a Nationals game or watching a movie on the couch were just as fine to her as anything else was just as good to him.

Giving her the house and other things she asked for didn't so much let her win as it let him out. Dealing with Claire and her attorney was salt in a deep wound that he was having a surprising amount of trouble healing. At work he was squared away and had his bearing. Rumlow was a good friend, helping him move into his new apartment, checking up on him, and keeping him distracted.
when he needed to be. But out of rotation, unpacking into a new place and adjusting to the new quiet, Jack sometimes had trouble sleeping. He'd dropped a couple pounds, according to the last PT weigh-in, but it wasn't muscle. He was spending too much extra time in the gym and adding distance to his morning run for that.

When he thought about it, he could still hear Claire’s voice as clearly as he had that night when she had pleaded for him to stay; suggesting couples therapy or a trip away together, but the broken trust between them was irreparable. Jack never cared for being lied to. He'd walked out almost three months ago. But eleven weeks later, that night still crept into his head at the damnedest times. Sometimes, he even missed the dog.

Looking back at the shit eating grin on his friend's face made him chuckle. Jack swept his head, settling on, "We'll see."

Brock sat back, still smiling and nodding confidently, like he knew Rollins would set the charges himself if Rumlow threw in another dollar to sweeten the deal. Brock's smile slipped a little, before he asked, "So, this is done now? It's over?"

Rollins' own grin fell, as he considered the envelope beside him for a moment. "Almost," he nodded. "Just gotta sign it and one appearance in front of the judge. Then she's gone."

"Sign it," Rumlow told him.

The encouraging confidence behind it almost sounded like an order and it drew Jack's attention up again. He nodded, saying, a bit reluctantly, "I will."

“Let her go,” he pressed, “and maybe I can get you to get back to work. It’s been a long time since you stepped up for any collaborative training or assignments outside of the missions the squad draws.”

Jack nodded his agreement. He’d made several passes on opportunities to train and train with forces around the world that were partnering with SHIELD for one reason or another.

"She did it to herself, big guy," Brock sympathized. "Give her up and move on. You don't need to do this to yourself anymore."

He wanted to tell him it was easier said than done, but it didn't matter. Rumlow was right. Jack didn't need to keep torturing himself over whether or not he made the right decision. She had made it for him, the first time she fucked that prick from the office. What he needed to do was get his head right and figure out how to sleep again.

Jack didn't need a long, drawn out divorce with lawyers poking around for hidden assets or anything else that might expose any connections to HYDRA. Even if he imagined a way he could forgive her and try again, she wasn't trustworthy anymore and it would be an OpSec risk, if he ever decided to tell her about his cover. Regardless of how the hurt was still lingering or how a part of him still wanted and loved her, Jack needed Claire to go away and do it quietly.

Jack sat a little straighter, taking up his pen and pulling the envelope back in front of him. He slipped the paperwork out onto the desk, thumbing up the corners to curl away from the last page. Jack clicked his pen open and signed.

July 2009
"Hey. You’re Jack, right?"

Rollins looked up from his drink, checking the mirror behind the bar to see who was asking. He shifted on his barstool to see the man just behind his shoulder. The man wasn’t alone. He had a couple of friends hanging a few steps back, holding drinks and looking around for a place to sit on the outdoor patio while they waited. Next to him, Evy turned on her stool, curiously looking between Jack and the stranger, while she sipped her cocktail.

"Do I know you?" Rollins checked, sensing something familiar but not able to say why.

The man shrugged, admitting, “I guess not really, no. But I thought that was you.” He held out his hand, offering, “Jeff Conway? I wanted to say I’m sorry for—”

It was only a fraction of a second for the connection to click. “Are you fucking kidding me?” he begged, leveling his eyes to rake up and down the man.

"Jack..." Evy warily wondered, putting her drink aside and resting a hand on his arm.

"Hey, look, I know it’s awkward," Jeff conceded, “but I just really wanted to apologize for the whole thing with Claire.”

The casual way he talked about his affair with Jack’s wife and the resulting divorce was infuriating. Rollins’ pulse was up. His eyes flicked down, feeling Evy’s hand glide down his arm to cover the fist he’d made. He glanced at Evy, who was slowly shaking her head, her soft expression saying she knew what he was thinking about doing and begging him not to.

Jeff had been talking, but Rollins’ anger had tuned him out. When he gave him his attention again, he realized Jeff had made a gesture toward Evy, grinning politely as he told Jack, “But I guess things look like they’re working out for you already.”

“The fuck d’you just say to me?” Jack balked, standing and putting a shove into Jeff’s shoulder.

“Shit,” Evy muttered, hopping off her stool and siding in between the two men squaring up to each other. She put her palms on Jack’s chest, soothing, “Jack, he didn’t mean anything by it.”

“No,” Rollins insisted, eyes fixed on Jeff. “I wanna hear more about how this prick thinks he knows a fucking thing about me.”

“What?” Jeff scowled. “Hey, I’m just sayin’, good for you moving—“

"We’re just friends,” Evy cut in. “Maybe you sh-“

"I’m sorry,” he apologized, gesturing at Evy and Jack, “I just saw—“

"You just thought you’d come over and apologize for sleeping with my wife?" Jack incredulously corrected.

Jeff frowned. “Hey, we’re all adults here. You and Claire were obviously having some kind of trouble, and I—“

"Dammit, Jack," Evy complained, after he’d struck past her and landed a jab on Jeff’s cheek before Jeff could finish the next sentence coming out of his mouth.

Jeff’s friends looked back, seeing him in trouble. They reached down to steady their friend who was bent over toward the floor. Evy was back in Rollins’ way, putting a hand on his chin to pull
his gaze off of the man who’d ruined his marriage and down to her.

"Don’t do it," she told him, with a warning, almost maternal, cock of her head.

But Jeff stepped back up and one of his friends came along. Jack turned, putting an arm up to take Evy with him and move her out of harm’s way, catching the glancing blow with his shoulder instead of in the face. With Evy safely behind him, Jack spun back around, throwing up an arm to block the next swing from the unnamed man, before responding with a hook into the man’s gut. Jeff and his other friend rushed up. He got Jeff with an elbow across his jaw, leaning back, but not fast enough, before the friend’s fist grazed past Jack’s mouth.

“Son of a bitch,” Evy groused, throwing a knee up into the groin of the first guy to swing on Jack and grabbing behind his head to twist him into a hip toss away from them.

Rollins grabbed Jeff by the front of his shirt, jerking him closer and into a jab of his free hand. “Bet you’re sorry about everything now, you piece of shit,” Jack growled, before he shoved Jeff backward to open up room to address the third man, who wasn’t nearly as off balance as Jeff was.

Jack blinked, stunned for a second by whatever hit him in the back of the head. He turned to look over his shoulder, seeing the bartender had come around and cut Evy off from the fight, yelling for everyone to leave or he’d call the cops. Behind him, Jack realized it was a bottle in Jeff’s hand that had hit him. Jeff lunged and Rollins caught him, dropping his hip to turn and take him to the ground with him. From behind, an arm cinched around Jack’s neck. The hold was pretty ineffective. The man clearly didn’t know what he was doing. Rollins grabbed to yank the arm down, just as he felt the weight over top of him jerked back.

“That’s enough!” Brock yelled, releasing the man from the properly applied choke he’d put on him to pull him off of Jack and shove him away.

Evy had slipped the bartender’s hold and hooked her arm under Jack’s to back him off of Jeff. “Let him go,” she quietly urged.

Stumbling as they were, Jeff’s friends were still trying to square up, even as they helped Jeff to his feet. Beside him, Jack hadn’t even broken a sweat and was ready to dole out another beating to the bruised men, but Rumlow put a hand out, warning them, ”Back the fuck up.” He swept his head once. “He’s havin’ a bad day. Just walk away, while you still can.”

Behind the Lieutenant’s other hand, firmly flattened against Jack’s chest to keep him back, Rollins stared, jaw set, teeth and fists clenched, and chest heaving. He wiped the side of his thumb across his bleeding lip and hit Rumlow’s arm, knocking it down, as Jeff was being pulled away by his friends. Brock turned on him, giving him a shove in the shoulder.

"The fuck’s ‘a matter with you, huh?’” he demanded.

Still eyeing the backs of the group walking away, Jack gave a sweep of his head. “Nothing.”

"Ay!’” Rumlow snapped, to get his attention. “The fuck you lookin’ at? It’s over.” He wiped a hand down over his mouth. “Now, what the hell was that about?”

Rollins shifted his gaze to Rumlow, inhaling, deep and slow, to get his pulse back under control, as Evy insisted, “Later.” She grabbed her clutch off the bar, suggesting, “Let’s get out of here, before the cops show up.”

Rumlow gave Jack a push toward the door. Evy grabbed Jack by the hand and pulled him along behind her. The bartender made a reach for Jack, saying something about paying for the damages.
Brock fell behind, hastily thumbing a few bills out of his wallet to throw at the man and telling him to “fuck off”. Outside, Rollins waited by the front door with Evy. Brock stopped in front of them, an irritated and expectant look on his face, as he held up his hands, inviting an explanation.

“That was Jeff,” Evy simply said.

The aggravation fell from Brock’s face and frame. “Shit,” he muttered. He shook his head, saying, “Hell, if I’dve known, I’d have let you go.”

”Yeah,” Rollins quietly scoffed.

”You alright?” Brock worried over Evy, as she smoothed her hair.

She nodded, with a smile. “Mhm. Fine.”

Shaking his head, Brock turned back to Jack. “Well, I hope you feel better.”

“Little bit,” Jack conceded, with a small shrug, touching his thumb to his lip again to wipe at the blood.

“You big, dumb animal,” Evy sighed, hugging her arms around Rollins.

Evy held on to him, for a long minute, while Jack hung his arms around her and Rumlow offered, “Happy anniversary, huh, big guy?”

Jack gave a snort of amusement at the comment. It made Evy snicker, as she straightened up. He had to laugh. What were the odds he’d go out with some friends to forget it would have been his third wedding anniversary only to have the man his wife had an affair with be at the same bar and have the nerve to offer him some kind of apology? He had to admit, finally getting his hands on Jeff was pretty satisfying. His only regret was not having the time to finish the fight.

Evy stretched out, curling her hand into the crook of Brock’s arm to pull him to her, as she turned them to walk down the sidewalk. She hooked her other arm with Jack’s, leading them from the middle, as she smiled, “I’ve haven’t been in a fight in ages! You fellas sure know how to show a girl a good time. ...not that I’ll ever be allowed back in there again.”

”Sorry, Evy.”

”Sorry, babe.”

”That’s okay,” she shrugged. “Totally worth it. I think Jeff was crying.”
Chapter 14

Aug 2009

"What are you doing?"

"Hm?" Jack was pulled back to the moment by the point of Brock’s elbow into his arm. Rollins straightened up a little, telling him, “Nothing.”

“Who you staring at?” he asked.

“I wasn’t staring at anyone,” Rollins casually maintained, turning over the mashed potatoes on his plate to mix in the pepper he added.

”Alright,” Greer announced, pushing back to stand up from the table. “I’m out. I’ll see you guys for PLO in an hour.”

”Ay,” Rumlow piped up, around his mouthful of food. “Slide over to SIGINT for me. I want to see any updates on chatter that might effect the SALUTE, before we ship out.”

Greer nodded, taking up his tray. “No problem.”

Jack gave a nod for his goodbye, as he ate, watching Greer head out of the cafeteria. He speared a steamed carrot from his vegetables, his gaze wandering back across the large room. Next to him, Rumlow nudged his arm.

”You’re doing it again,” he pointed out.

”Doing what?” Jack frowned, going back to his food.

”You’re looking at somebody,” Brock insisted.

”I’m not,” he swept his head.

”Who is it?” Rumlow pressed.

Jack quietly sighed, rolling his eyes at knowing his friend wouldn’t let this go. Despite his promise of, “Nobody.”, Rumlow seemed to take his dismissal as some kind of personal challenge to identify the object of his distraction. Brock scanned the cafeteria ahead of them, before suggesting, “The blonde. 2 o’clock.”

Rollins looked, quirking up an interested brow, as he considered, “Not bad...but, no.”

A few moments later, Brock confidently said, “I got it. Brunette, 11 o’clock, navy blue pinstripes.”

Jack didn’t have to look up to know who he was talking about. Rumlow had figured it out. Rollins kept busy with his meal.

”No wonder you were staring,” Brock conceded.

”I wasn’t staring,” he argued.

”Really?” Rumlow checked. “Because I can’t stop.”
A smirk came to the corner of Jack’s mouth and his head bobbed in amusement of Brock’s comment. He couldn’t really be coy anymore, after Brock’s approval. He knew he was looking a little long, but the brunette hadn’t noticed, so he didn’t see any harm. His only regret was Brock catching on, waiting to see how Brock played this out. He was relieved when Brock seemed to have decided not to give him any shit over the brunette. He’d been a little protective since Claire, not that Jack was unappreciative of the concern.

“Who is she?” Brock wondered.

Jack wished he had an answer. He spotted her several minutes ago, his gaze drawn over to the mess hall’s entrance and her arrival as he watched Cephas and Whitfield pass by her on the way out. It was her smile that struck him and held his attention, as she and her friend got in line for their meals. The pair had taken seats at a small table only about 20 feet away. Too far to hear if her friend had used her name in conversation in the noisy cafeteria, though. But her tailored suit, while professional, accentuated her fit figure and Jack liked the way the corners of her blue eyes crinkled when he saw her laugh. She was beautiful.

"I saw her first," Jack playfully reminded him.

"I’m just sayin’,” Rumlow harmlessly excused.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “Never seen her before.”

An unfortunate fact that wasn’t all that surprising. It was rare Jack, or any of his teammates, took time to sit for a meal in the cafeteria. With STRIKE’s usually busy, and often times unpredictable, schedule, sitting at a table for lunch was a luxury. He and his fellow operators were more likely to grab a quick meal to go than to take their time and shoot the shit. Maybe with a less hectic and demanding job, he’d have seen her before today.

"Can’t be new,” Brock decided. “She’s too confident in here and she’s got a friend.” Rollins nodded his agreement of the assessment, as Rumlow corrected, “Make that two.”

“Must work in one of the other towers,” Jack reasoned, his eyes tracking the woman approaching the brunette to join her and her other friend at her table. “Too far away to see the badge.”

“Gotta admit,” Brock said, “I’m curious.”

"You don’t have the balls to go over and ask,” Jack told him.

"And cut in to my lunch?” Rumlow incredulously scoffed, and Jack chuckled. “But I got an idea how to clock that badge.”

Jack was intrigued, quirking up a brow to ask, “How?”

"Wait and see,” Brock grinned.

Jack snuffled a laugh and shook his head, getting back to his lunch. They had just under an hour before their mission briefing, but there was no telling how long the stunning brunette might take for her meal. Rollins and Rumlow took their time, casually keeping watch for any sign she may be ready to leave. When she and her friends finally started to gather their trays and stand, Brock smacked the back of his hand on Jack’s arm.

"You comin’?” Rumlow asked, scooting his chair back from the table to stand.

"Oh, no,” Rollins grinned. “I’ll watch from here. I want to make sure I don't miss anything.”
Brock flashed a confident grin, picking up his tray and starting for the garbage cans at the end of the large room when the mystery woman and her friends did. Jack sat back to watch, pushing in Rumlows’s chair for him to comfortably stretch and lay his arm over the back of. Jack had to give him credit. It was clever. No one else but Jack caught the lift, and Rollins literally applauded the move, although no one in the bustling cafeteria paid attention to the sound, when Brock gave a man next him a bump.

It was just enough to send him off balance and stumble a step into the brunette. The unwitting pawn and Rumlows’s mark fumbled for an awkward second, trying not to drop the contents of their trays and appearing to smile through apologies to each other. Brock made a play at picking up the badge he’d swiped in the orchestrated chaos, offering it to the man as if he’d dropped it. The man took the ID and checked his lapel, before realizing the badge wasn’t his and passing it to the woman. She paused to pin her badge back on her suit jacket and continued with her friends to the tray return area.

With the show over, Jack stood up, chuckling to himself. He gathered his tray and deposited his trash on his way out. Waiting in the hallway was Rumlows. Brock straightened up from his lean on the wall, when he saw Rollins approaching.

"Well?” Jack expectantly wondered.

Brock shook his head, saying, “No name. But she works in CS. Give me five minutes and one phone call, and I’ll give you a name.”

Jack waved a hand to move him along, telling him, “Go on, then. Your five minutes is ticking.”

Back in Rumlows’s office, he made a call. According to his friend in Clandestine Services, her name was Allison Addams. She’d been with SHIELD for a few years and was currently working as an asset recruiter and handler for the department. She was well liked and, according to Brock’s source, seeing someone outside the agency.

“Tough break, big guy,” Brock sympathized, giving him a clap on the back, as he walked around from behind his desk to fall into to step with Jack and get to their briefing. “Maybe next one.”

”Yeah,” Jack nodded, more than a little disappointed. If there was one rule that was sacred, it was never messing with another man’s girl.

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Dec 2009

The Triskelion was a ghost town. Down to minimum staffing for the holiday, Rollins scarcely passed a soul in the hallways. From the flightline to the Armory in Tower C, he’d probably only seen a dozen or so people on the long walk. It hadn’t really occurred to him until then that it was Christmas night. But then, two weeks freezing his balls off training the guys of Joint Task Force 2 in the frozen middle of nowhere Canada would throw off anyone’s mental calendar. With the winter weather up there grounding flights, the day and a half delay to get home had pretty much soured his interest in the holiday anyway.

“Merry Christmas, LT.”

"Is it still?” Jack wondered.

"Made it back with a few minutes to spare, I think,” he chuckled.
"Couple hours," Jack conceded, with a grin, checking the clock on the wall as he stood the rolling hard cases of gear on their ends. “Merry Christmas, Chuck.”

Rollins was a little surprised to see the older man running the armory for the day, when there was no doubt a list of subordinates seniority could have delegated to the position. Stepping over to the table along the wall, Jack pulled a pen from the slim pocket on his jacket sleeve to fill out the form for the items he was returning. He’d signed out a couple weapons and some gear from the regular S.H.I.E.L.D armory for his trip. It wasn’t uncommon for S.T.R.I.K.E to use equipment from the other armory for additional assignments, like Jack’s. That way S.T.R.I.K.E was never short on their own inventory, if they needed it. But the practice required more documentation than if he’d just used his own gear, to justify one division using another’s resources.

“You didn’t break anything, did you?”

Jack snorted, as he filled out his form. “No,” he promised.

Focused on his work, he barely afforded the opening door a glance from the side of his eye. Until he heard Chuck’s bright greeting, “Ms. Addams! As I live and breath. This is truly a Christmas blessing. What can I do for you?”

Jack looked over from his paperwork to see her slow to a stop in the middle of the room, her attention down on the open folder in her hands, until she found her requisition form. “The usual, good sir. Just a-“ She stopped, looking up and noticing Rollins in the otherwise empty queue. “Oh, sorry. Didn’t mean to cut in line.”

"Ladies first,” Jack offered, with a small gesture of his hand.

"I can wait,” she smiled at him, and it pulled a small grin into the side of Jack’s mouth to see it.

"Come on up,” Chuck assured her, with a looping wave of his hand. “He’s got some paperwork to do.”

Rollins gave her a nod, when she looked to him to double check. She flashed him an appreciative grin and walked past him. At the counter, he watched for a moment, as she handed over her paperwork for Chuck to read. He realized he was staring and quickly put his gaze down on his form, before anyone else noticed, and got back to work. Jack had tuned out the friendly chit chat of holiday greetings Addams and Chuck shared, giving his paperwork a final check before signing it, otherwise he’d have heard what she said the first time.

"Hm?” he hummed, realizing she had said something to him. Looking up and toward the counter, he saw Chuck had gone to pull gear for her request.

"I said, are you going out or coming in?” she repeated, with a pleasant expression and a nod of her head toward the cases behind him.

His gaze followed hers, before he gave a nod of understanding. “Oh, uh. Coming in,” he answered, clicking his pen shut and stashing it in his sleeve’s pocket.

She smiled again, noting, “Just in time for Christmas.”

He tipped his head toward the clock on the wall. At 2218hrs, he figured, “I think I missed it.”

“Well, I'm sure you had a good reason,” she said, comfortably crossing her arms, as she leaned back against the counter. “Where’d you go? If you don’t mind me asking.”
Jack shook his head to say he didn’t. “Canada,” he told her.

Eying the cases, Addams chuckled, asking, “What, did you stage a one man invasion?” She wagged her brow up to tease, “Because with hardware like that, I’m sure you had no trouble.”

Rollins chuckled. “No,” he swept his head. “Was just doing some instructing up there.”

“Oh, no shit,” she mused. “Who for?” Addams put up a hand, laughing as she apologized, “Sorry. I’m being nosey as fuck.”

He grinned at her slight embarrassment. “It’s okay,” he assured her. They’d never spoken before, and he wasn’t going to stop her now. Besides, it was a collaborative training request that took him up north. It wasn’t a matter of national security that she couldn’t know, “JTF2.”

She let out an impressed whistle and Jack snuffled a laugh. Her brow knit down, curious to know, “Who the hell do you work for to be going up to train JTF2?”

“STRIKE,” Rollins said, giving a subtle raise of his chin to get her to look behind her.

Addams looked like she had another question, but she took his cue and glanced behind her to see Chuck returning to the counter for her. She turned away from Jack and he took his form off the clipboard to wait his turn. While Addams and Chuck spoke, he listened in this time, hearing the old man ask her where she was off to so late at night. She told him she had gotten word that an asset she was developing in Mumbai was ready to play ball, and she barely had an hour’s notice that she would be on a Quinjet to meet him and make everything official.

“Well, at least you got your holiday in,” Chuck smiled. “You can always sleep on the plane, right?”

“Like a rock,” she winked, stepping aside to return her paperwork to its folder. “Thanks, Chuck.”

Chuck nodded her welcome, with a grin, and looked to Rollins. “All set then, LT? Two weeks away is too long for Christmas, heh? Let’s get you home.”

Rollins wheeled the cases up to the counter and handed over his form. He lifted up one of the large containers to pass back through the gate and Chuck took it down to wheel away back into the inventory. Beside him, Addams tucked her folder under her arm.

“Two weeks out of the country at Christmas,” she smirked, as she took up the case she’d been issued. “Who’d you piss off?”

Jack chuckled, shaking his head, knowing he volunteered. It was either him or Dennison, and Will had a wife and kid to spend the time with. He didn’t mind. “No one,” he told her.

“Well, I’m sure whoever’s waiting under the mistletoe, anyway.” She started for the door. “Merry Christmas, Lieutenant,” she smiled.

“Merry Christmas,” he gave a nod and a grin, turning his head over his shoulder to watch her leave, charmed by the view of her in slouchy sweater boots and skinny jeans that her late night call out treated him to. The door closed behind her and Jack gave up looking after her, still wearing his grin. He heard the armorer’s footsteps coming back and turned to lift the second case on to the counter, ready to go home, maybe have a drink, and call it a night.
Chapter 15

Apr 2010

"Back ‘im off," Rumlow growled, again, his arms crossed tightly across his chest.

"Continue,” Yates said, ignoring or indifferent to Brock’s command.

Jack’s eyes ticked over to see Brock intensely watching the action in front of them. He felt his jaw working against itself, as his attention went back to the training session that was getting out of hand. The exercise had gone beyond the standardized safety restrictions. The tension building in his frame was broken, when Rumlow stepped forward, drawing his pistol from his side and locking his arm out. He pressed the end of the barrel directly to the temple of the soldier, ordering him to “Stand down!” But not before the soldier had rotated the arm bar he held the Asset in and everyone in the room had heard the unmistakable sound of bone snapping and the immediate roar of agony from the Asset on his knees.

"Stand down!” Rumlow ordered again.

The security team in the room sprang to life. Two of the officers drew their weapons and trained them on Brock, yelling over each other as they and Dr. Yates barked at him to put his gun down. From his periphery, Jack saw the third officer crossing from the far side of the room to intervene. Rollins turned on him, driving his hand up into the man’s throat, dropping his leg in behind the surprised guard, and following through to throw the man down to the ground on his back. Jack sent a boot across his jaw, rendering the guard unconscious, before he spun back around, pulling his own pistol and putting it to the head of the nearest officer threatening Rumlow.

A brief standoff ensued, as Rollins held his man at gunpoint, silently staring him down, with his jaw set, and Rumlow ordered the security officers to remove the soldier from the room. Yates begged them all not to shoot. The rest of the staff in the room was frozen in fear, helpless to do anything but watch. At Rumlow’s feet, the Asset groaned through grit teeth, clutching at his shoulder. His opponent had let him go, but the soldier had not backed away. Brock kicked his boot into his chest, sending the soldier to fall backward, and adjusted his aim, stepping up to put the gun between the soldier’s eyes.

"This exercise is over,” he firmly told them, turning his gaze to Yates. “Lock him up, or I’ll put him down.”

Yates turned up his hands in surrender. “Don’t!” he pleaded. The doctor waved a hand, shooing the guards to turn their attention to the soldier and off of Rumlow. Jack kept his pistol in his hand at his side, as Yates told the security forces, “Get him out of here. Return him to his room. Now!”

In front of him, the soldier defiantly stared back up at Rumlow. When the soldier didn’t respond to the officers’ directions to get to his feet, Brock pressed the gun into his forehead again, seething as he reminded him, “I got four more ‘a you. There’s nothing about you that can’t be replaced.”

The soldier sat back, putting his hands on the floor to push himself up to his feet. He kept his eyes on Rumlow the whole time. One of the guards gestured with his rifle to direct the soldier out of the room. With a shove from the other guard, the soldier finally began to move. Rollins let out an even breath, relaxing as the soldier disappeared into the hallway under armed escort. Jack followed them with his eyes, wondering how many holes he would have had to put in him to drop the soldier before he would have been able to kill Rumlow.
Behind Rollins, a couple of technicians were helping up the other guard, who was just coming to. Jack holstered his weapon, when Brock did. He watched as the Lieutenant gave orders to get the Asset to Medical and then stalked over to where Yates had gone to make his notes on the session. Yates had turned his back to them. Rumlow grabbed him by the shoulders and spun him around.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" Rumlow demanded. He looked away for only a second, his eyes following to where he pointed down at the Asset on the floor being helped up by another doctor and a tech, before he put his glare back on Yates. “Do you have any idea what almost happened? The Asset is not a toy for your lab rats to break. You’ve been warned before.” Rumlow gave Yates’ shirt a tug, viciously telling him, “I won’t warn you again.”

Yates put his hands into the Lieutenant’s chest, giving him a shove to try and move him toward the door. Rumlow drew back, sending a jab across the doctor’s jaw before grabbing fistfuls of his shirt and tie and shoving him backward into the wall.

"You stupid fuck,” Rumlow growled. “Try me.”

“Get out of here,” Yates told him, trying to knock Rumlow’s hands away, as Jack stepped in.

"Bingo…” Rollins calmly warned.

“You’re through using the Asset,” Brock promised the doctor, as Rollins put a hand on his shoulder to pull him off of Yates. Rumlow pointed a finger in the doctor’s face. “You’re compromising operational readiness, and I’m done having you run your little tests behind my back. You fucked up for the last time.” He gestured around the room. “This…is over.”

Jack gave Brock’s arm a tug to move him along. Rollins kept an eye on the security officer he’d laid out, as he walked Rumlow out of the room. In the hallway, they still got nervous looks from people outside. They’d raised quite a commotion in the lab and Brock was still visibly pissed. It took a minute to put enough distance between them and any wary onlookers, before Jack could check in.

"You alright?”

Rumlow was still fuming, the muscles of his jaw, neck, and shoulders flexed. “That son of a bitch,” he seethed.

Jack couldn’t tell if he was responding to his question or if it was tunnel vision, so he pressed, “Ay. You alright?”

Brock made eye contact, tightly nodding. “Yeah. Fine.”

"The fuck was that back there?” he asked.

“He’d have let him kill ‘im,” Rumlow angrily complained. He pointed back down the hall. “You saw that shit. He’s out of control.”

"I think he’d argue you are,” Jack considered. Brock glared at him, but Jack insisted, “Come on. You pulled your weapon on-“

"He broke his fuckin’ arm,” he hotly argued. “What d’ya think he was gonna break next? Huh?” Jack nodded, conceding the point. “What else was I supposed to do? Yates wasn’t gonna stop it.”

"I know,” Rollins agreed.
“Let’s get over to Medical,” Brock said, inclining his head down the hall. “I wanna see how bad it is.”

May 2010

Jack stopped in the doorway, his head turning to track the mug that flew into the wall to his right. His eyes ticked down to the broken pieces of ceramic on the floor. He turned, calmly closing the door behind him.

“ ‘Morning,” he said, as if nothing had just happened, pulling the file folder with the morning briefing notes out from where it was tucked under his arm. Ahead of him, Brock leaned on his fists pressed in to the top of his desk. Rollins jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the coffee dripping down the wall, wondering, “The fuck’s that about?”

Rumlow looked up, his face flush with anger. “That piece of shit, Yates,” he growled.

Jack sat down in one of the open chairs in front of the desk, smoothing the front of his BDU jacket as he made himself comfortable. “Now what?” he casually asked, his mood still unaffected by whatever was happening in the office.

“We’re off the Asset’s detail,” Brock flatly answered.

Rollins’ brow knit down, instantly suspicious and angered. “What?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, tightly, straightening up from his lean. “Sonuvabitch got us pulled. They’re replacing us with the standby team from Special Forces.”

“Those guys?” he balked. “They’re the fuckin’ B team for a reason.”

“Doesn’t fuckin’ matter,” Rumlow swept his head, putting a hand to his hip as the other rubbed at the back of his neck. “They closed the inquiry, deciding in Yates’ favor. The report seconded his recommendation for my removal from the Program as the Asset’s handler,” he groused. “They don’t want anymore disruptions, so they pulled the whole team, in case I tried to influence anyone else’s actions.”

For a moment, Jack didn’t know what to say. Brock had been a handler for nearly a decade. From what Rollins had seen in the last six years, there wasn’t anyone better or more qualified for the position. He was insulted for his friend, and he was disappointed for himself. It had taken awhile to get over the unnerving part of working with the Program, but Jack had grown to appreciate the missions as the Asset’s support team. He liked the challenge, and he admired the Soldier’s work. Rollins considered the assignment an honor, and to be so casually discarded was a disgrace.

Yates was a pampered egomaniac. He had no business making recommendations that effected operational readiness and security. The SpecOps team from HYDRA SF wasn’t anywhere near as qualified to run missions with the Asset as Delta was. Without them, Jack considered the Asset was at greater risk for loss or failure. At best, it’d take months to get another handler and team, as experienced and efficient as Rumlow and Delta were, into a position where the Asset trusted them as much as he did Jack and his teammates. As tightly controlled as the Asset was, there was still enough human inside the machine that he recognized who he was working with. Yates obviously didn’t know as much about his subject as he purported to.

“They’re gonna get him killed,” Jack figured, wiping a hand over his mouth to rub at his chin. “Or he’s going to kill them.”
“It’d serve them right,” Brock muttered. He shook his head, complaining, “They don’t know what the fuck they’re doing.”

"There’s no appeal?” Rollins checked.

Rumlow shook his head. “Nothing. It’s done.”

"Jesus Christ,” Jack grumbled.

Brock paused for a moment, before his tone dropped, seeming a little hesitant to say, “They’ve found me guilty of insubordination.” Jack’s hand dropped from his chin, in complete disbelief. With a subtle nod and a misplaced grin, Brock confirmed, “They took my job and they’re suspending me for five days, effective immediately. You believe that shit?”

Jack leaned onto his elbows on his knees to scrub his hands up his face and over the back of his head. “For fuck’s sake,” he muttered. His hands dropped to fall over his knees, as he argued, “How the hell is it insubordination? We don’t answer to that cocksucker. He’s not in the chain of command. There has to be an appeal.”

Brock was silent, as he took his seat behind his desk. He shook his head, telling Jack, “They’ve made it very clear, there’s no overturning this.” His shoulders fell and his brow rose, apologizing, “Sorry, Jack.” He swept his head, his eyes drifting down to his desk. “I ruined it for all of us. I fucked up.”

"No, you didn’t,” Rollins disagreed. “Any of us would’ve done the same.”

Rumlow shook his head, his hand covering his mouth as he leaned back in his chair. “I’m not done, though,” he promised, his eyes set on the ceiling. “These fuckers...” he angrily trailed off. Brock folded his hands in his lap, rocking his chair back once. “D’Esposito’s stepping down,” he noted.

"What?” Jack asked, his brow wrinkled in a mix of confusion and surprise.

Brock nodded, turning his gaze back to Rollins. “Cancer,” he simply explained. “Just found out. It’s operable, but he’s put his time in. He’s retiring at the end of the month.”

"No shit,” he quietly mused, with a sympathetic sweep of his head.

"I’m gonna take his job,” Rumlow said, as if it were a certainty.

But Jack knew, “That’s a hell of a leap to make.”

There were more senior officers between Rumlow and the position. For starters, D’Esposito’s current Lt. Commander was the most likely to take over. Until a candidate was selected, Brandt would be the Acting Commander, anyway. Traditionally, he would be presumed to take command. It was unheard of not to promote up through the ranks, for something like this.

“Yeah,” Brock conceded. “But it’s doable.”

“You’ve already got a plan,” Rollins surmised, a mischievous smirk coming to the corner of his mouth.

The Lieutenant nodded and sat up to lean onto his arms folded on the edge of his desk. “D’Esposito and I were talking, last night,” he explained. “There’s more changes than just D’Esposito’s retirement coming. They’re going to announce the new Secretary to the World Security Council at the end of the week.”
"Who’s that?” Rollins asked, knowing Brock wouldn’t have brought it up if he didn’t already know who.

"Pierce."

"Figures,” he nodded.

“Brandt may be next in line,” Brock acknowledged, “but Pierce doesn’t want him. There’s only a couple guys, besides Brandt, qualified to apply.”

"Your time in service and rank puts you on the short list,” Jack considered.

Rumlow nodded, adding, “And with Pierce upstairs…”

"He’ll be looking for a company man,” Jack understood.

"What am I up against?” Brock invited. “Setter has 2 years on me, Coleman ain’t HYDRA, and Orville has the time in service but less time as an officer. The weight I can throw around coming off the Winter Soldier Program, Pierce’s baby? My name’s practically on the office door already.”

Jack thought for a moment, before agreeing, “It’s doable.”

"Watch,” Rumlow confidently said.

And Jack believed him.
Chapter 16

July 2010

Setting down the two boxes stacked in his arms, Rollins stepped back from the table. At the desk, Brock was just taking the lid off a banker box to unpack folders into the two drawer file cabinet behind his new desk. It was dark out, but, across the Potomac, DC glowed and reflected in the water.

"Remind me again," Jack turned to his friend and newly appointed Division Commander, giving him a curious squint from one eye, "who'd you blow to get this view?"

"The list is short," Brock nodded, "but distinguished."

They shared a laugh and Rollins unfolded the top open on one of the boxes he'd helped move. "I can tell," he told Brock, "this is gonna go straight to your head."

"Which part?" Rumlow wondered. "The part where I take orders from only four people, or the one where you have to do everything I say, like a bitch?"

"I'm not helping you move your office again," Jack promised, "when they shitcan your ass."

Brock smirked proudly, with a confident bob of his head. "With Pierce in charge, now?" he scoffed. "Fat chance."

"At least you're somebody's bitch," Rollins smirked.

"When are you gonna get your shit together and try to move up ranks?" the Commander checked. "Long time since you applied for anything. You turned down the Horsemen because of the wife, but she hasn't been the problem for a while."

"Nothing wrong with where I'm at," Jack shrugged, transferring a handful of binders from the box to the tabletop.

"You gonna sit at Lieutenant 'til you retire or get killed?" Brock teased.

He laughed, pointing out, "Hell, every time you get a promotion, I just take over your spot, eventually. Why put in the effort?" Rollins shrugged again, pushing away the empty box to open the next. "I've got rank; got a squad," he considered. "Pay's good. I've got no complaints. Besides, never cared for all the bureaucracy and paperwork."

"That's why you'd be good at it," the new Commander pointed out. "This division needs leadership, not another pencil pusher. It needs discipline. These guys are soft around the middle. They need someone to put a boot in their ass."

Jack chuckled, nodding along. "Isn't that what they promoted you for?"

"There's a lot 'a work to do, Jack," Brock conceded. He dropped the empty banker box on the floor and eyed Rollins. "A lot of changes coming fast," Rumlow noted. "Could use a guy like you."

Rollins scoffed, his head ticking back and expression skeptically furrowed. "You're just full of jokes today, aren't you?"

"No joke," Brock swept his head, nudging the file cabinet drawer closed with his knee. There was a
folder on his desk and he flipped it open, turning it for Jack to see the letterhead. "It's all ready to go," he told him. "You just have to accept the commission."

Jack stepped over to the desk. He pulled the folder closer, with a pair of fingertips. He looked down to read it, leaving the paperwork where it lay. When he was done, his gaze ticked up to the Commander, eyeing him for a moment through his brow. "Still sounds like a joke," he told him.

"It's legit, big guy," Brock nodded. "There's some projects coming down the line, things we need to have complete control over. They'll be giving Brandt a new assignment at the start of next month; moving him out of STRIKE to make room for a company man. That company man is you, Jack."

He couldn't say it was a joke anymore. Rollins stared at Rumlow for a moment, before his eyes ticked down to the paperwork in the folder. He could admit, his ambition was stirred at the idea. Jack hadn't given much consideration to such an opportunity coming in to his career path. At his core, he was a grunt. He did the hard work and he liked it. He was good at it. But he had a moment of realization that being an operator was a young man's game. The demands on his body would catch up with him, one day. It caught them all, eventually. Taking a commission like this early gave him shelter down the road, if he lived long enough to need it.

"Playing favorites?" Jack stalled.

Rumlow nodded, with a snort. "Favorites? Who said I even like you?" he quipped. "I need someone who knows what the hell is going on and how to get shit done. The fuck am I gonna dick around for, training somebody to do the job, when I already got you?" Brock gestured out a hand toward the paperwork on his desk. "So, are ya just gonna stand there looking stupid, or are you gonna sign the fuckin' paper, oh favored one?"

A smug smile pulled back the side of Jack's mouth, nodding to himself while he read the commission line by line. "Lieutenant Commander," he muttered, as he went.

"Admit it," Brock smirked, "you just got a little hard sayin' that. Felt good, didn't it?" Jack shook his head, with a snort. "Take a day to think it over," Rumlow told him, with a casual wave away for Jack to take the folder. "Let me know tomorrow what you decide. But don't be a pussy, alright? I'm gonna need ya, buddy."

Jack rolled his eyes at the new Division Commander. Brock came out from behind his desk to grab a stack of binders for the bookshelf. Rollins pulled a pen from his sleeve, clicked it open, and signed on the line at the bottom of the page. He closed the cover of the folder and pushed it away.

Aug 2010

"Don't you even fuckin' think about lighting that up in here," Rumlow warned, pointing a finger at Jack, without ever taking his eyes off the background packet he was perusing.

"I'm not," Jack dismissively assured him, despite placing the cigar into the side of his mouth.

"I mean it," Brock insisted, still pointing and still not looking. "I'll cut you."

Rollins stopped, his fingers dipped into the pocket of his shirt draped over the side of the next chair for his phone. "I'm not," he repeated, with an unmistakable attitude behind the promise.

"How do you even chew on those things?" he frowned.
"I don't chew on them."

Sitting in the Commander’s office at just shy of two in the morning, Jack gave the prospect of actually lighting up the last of the Cubans he’d brought back from a black bag op in their namesake’s homeland two months ago a moment’s consideration, just to see Brock lose his shit. He had stashed it in the front pocket of his BDU shirt before they stepped out on this most resent sortie a couple of days ago. The outer shirt was left behind on account of the humid weather they'd be operating in. In all honesty, he'd forgotten the brushed aluminum case was in there. But hearing his phone buzz in a message from its pocket on the shirt now, Jack was pleasantly surprised to find it and content to just enjoy the taste on his lips as a little pick me up to get through these files. The flavor went well with the glass of aged whiskey he and Brock figured they'd earned after the first two hours of marathon applicant ranking.

They should have been home yesterday. That would have left them plenty of time to finish assessing and scoring the applications for the recruit class to fill the soon to be vacant slots on Echo team. Notifications of acceptance to the class would be issued first thing Monday. At 1:53 a.m. Sunday morning, and having touched down from a four hour flight back to the Triskelion at just after 11 o'clock, they had a lot of work to do to get the list of agents who would receive an invitation to join the recruit class to Director Fury for final review by 1200 hours.

With one last side eye of halfhearted annoyance at Brock, Jack produced the phone from his pocket and tapped the screen to life. He slumped back into his chair again, rolling the unlit cigar in his mouth, just to piss off the boss. From the top of his vision, he saw Rumlow give a small shake of his head. Under his breath, Brock called him a prick.

Jack acknowledged the jab with a subtle nod, replying with a muttered, "Whiny bitch."

Brock snorted, a crooked smile instantly appearing, as he sat up to put the folder in his hand into the dismissal pile. "Ernshaw," he said, "91. Declined." He typed the notation into his computer, before grabbing the next folder and settling into a deep recline in his chair and, with a smirk, observing, "You're still here, so I know it's not work. Got a booty call?"

Rollins chuckled, watching the ellipses move on his screen. "No, she's in LA for that gala award thing with her friend." He shrugged off the late hour for the message hello. "Time zones."

"Can't believe you picked another girl like Claire," Rumlow shook his head, taking up his tumbler of whiskey for a sip.

Jack bristled at the name of his ex-wife, a deep scowl setting in to his expression. "And the reason you're bringing her up is..."

Brock caught a glimpse of Jack's disapproval and closed the folder in his hand, as he politely explained, "I'm just saying," waving an open hand to the left, "Marisa does a lot of traveling for work." His hand moved to the right. "Claire did a lot of traveling for work. You got a type, or you setting yourself up for failure again?"

Jack read the sweet "goodnight" message from Marisa and locked his phone, tucking it into the cargo pocket on his right pant leg. Tossing his folder onto the pile at the front of the Commander's desk, Jack gruffly noted, "Ruwe, 92. Declined."

"Alright," Brock relented, slowly nodding his understanding that his comment was unappreciated, making the marks in the computer to remove Ruwe's name from the candidate list. "Easy, big guy. I'm just making an observation."
"It's a coincidence," Rollins flatly corrected. "We both know the other travels for work a lot. It's not serious enough for either of us to care, okay?"

And, truthfully, it wasn’t. Jack had met her mid-May while he was working, wearing a suit and tie for an ambassador’s protection detail at an event in the Marriott’s Grand Ballroom, instead of in BDUs looking down the sights of a gun. Some poorly worded directions from a new member of the hotel staff had sent her into a secured hallway, instead of a press area, and put her directly in front of Rollins, who was posted by the elevator. After a brief check of her credentials, she was escorted by his partner to where she needed to be. A week later, and off duty, he recognized her take a seat just down the bar from him and a friend after a Capitals game. He mentioned why he knew her to Kyle and couldn’t resist Kyle’s dare to go over and ask if she was lost again. A few minutes later, their two small groups took over a booth together. He took her invitation to follow her home at the end of the night.

Marisa was smart and pretty. With a degree from American University, she was a freelance writer who’d regularly appeared in big name publications for her investigative and political writings. She was confident and independent, traveling frequently to research her stories and taking advantage of her successes to wander with friends and experience the world for herself when she could. For their lifestyles, neither of them really had the time to develop a legitimate relationship, but what they did worked for them, seeing each other for the last few months whenever they had time and not pressuring the other to label it.

"Okay," Rumlow shrugged. "I'm not judging."

"Anyway," Rollins began, eyeing his friend a bit skeptically, "shouldn't you be checking in with Renee?"

"Nah," Brock swept his head, seeming quite indifferent. "Broke it off before we left. Too clingy, lately."

"Dump the girl then flee the country?" Jack quipped, with a snort and nod of his head.

Brock's mouth fell open, no doubt some friendly dig disguised as an excuse at the tip of his tongue, but cut off by the unannounced opening of his office door. Brock shut his mouth, giving a jut of his chin in greeting, as Rollins twisted over his shoulder to see who was coming in.

"Gentlemen," the Director nodded.

"Mornin'," Brock replied.

"Good morning, Sir," Jack said, reaching to take another application packet off the stack in the chair to his left. He passed off the paperwork to his free hand, leaving the other to hover over the unread pile. "Need a seat?" He inclined his head toward the bottle on the corner of the desk. "Drink?"

Fury waved a hand, with a quick grin of appreciation of the offer. "No, thanks. Won't be here that long."

"What brings you down at this ungodly hour?" the Commander asked. "Bit early for brunch in the cafeteria."

"Haven't been on hand on a Sunday morning to have the brunch in years," Fury chuckled. "Don't plan on being here for it today, either."

The men shared a short laugh and Rollins opened the latest folder for review, while Brock pressed,
"Well, if it ain't the brunch, what's got you gracing us with your presence? AAR's already been submitted for the last sortie. No complaints, concerns, or casualties."

"I'm not here about your mission, Commander," the Director shook his head. "But I will say, good work." The Delta operators nodded their acceptance of the compliment, as Fury went on. "I'm here about Agent Addams."

A furrow of concentration came to Rumlow's brow. "Addams? Why do I know that name?"

"She's one of our best agents in Clandestine Services," Fury elaborated. He inclined his head toward Brock. "And she's one of your applicants for Echo."

Rollins was already shuffling through the stack of files beside him to check if the name was among his half of the packets. He pulled one from the middle of the pile and folded back the cover to read the highlights, summarizing, "28 years old. Current assignment- CS Language Officer. Fluent in five languages and recruited out of the CIA candidate pool in February '06, after four years Army Human Intelligence. Completed Agent Training Program in '08. Top of her ATP class, regular top out scores on all quals, including PT. First time applicant to STRIKE."

Rumlow flicked his fingers, motioning for the file. "Lemme see."

"That's the one," Fury told them, as Jack passed the paperwork across the desk to Brock. "Put her at the top of your list."

Brock quirked up a brow, warily looking up at the Director. "It's not alphabetical. We've got a lot of apps to get through," he tiredly pointed out. "What's so special about her?"

With a point to the file in Rumlow's hand, Fury confidently said, "She has potential."

"They all got potential, Nick," Brock rolled his eyes, still not bothering to have even glanced at the background information on Fury's pick, "that's why I've got 112 applications littering my fuckin' desk."

Jack snorted, quietly, continuing to read through the folder in his hand and making marks on the file's score sheet, as the Director agreed, "I know, but trust me, this one will surprise you." Rollins' gaze turned up, seeing Fury move to leave in his periphery. "Good luck with the rest of the candidates, gentlemen," he said, reaching out for the door. "I look forward to your recommendations for the class, later today."

The door shut behind the Director and latched. Jack looked over at Rumlow, who was staring at the door. Rollins went back to his work, scoring another category on the paperwork in his lap.

"You believe that shit?" Rumlow scoffed.

"What?" Jack distractedly asked, focused on tallying up the application's overall score.

"Him comin' in here like that," he smirked, "telling me to put this kid at the top of the list, blind."

"Ashford, 92. Declined," Jack announced, discarding the file to the refusal pile and grabbing a new one. He glanced up to see Brock apparently waiting for some kind of reply. "He's still got one eye," he smirked and Rumlow chuckled, moving to take Ashford off the list. Rollins gestured to Addams' file, suggesting, "Run the numbers. See where she lands."

Rumlow turned his attention to the paperwork in his hand, reading the application and starting to make his marks. Jack kept to his own work and it was quiet for a couple of minutes. It was the soft
"huh" from the Commander that made him look up again. Rumlow was just closing the folder to see the 4x6 copy of the Agency ID photo paperclipped to the cover.

Tipping the folder to show Jack the picture, Brock checked, "You know who this is?"

"Yeah."

Of course, he knew who it was. Allison Addams had been on his radar for a little over a year. He was actually a little surprised Rumlow had missed the connection. Rumlow was the one, after all, who dug up and shared her name after the first time they clocked the stunning brunette in the cafeteria. To be fair, the times they had noticed her when they were together they usually referred to her as 'she' rather than by her name. Then again, maybe the moment hadn't stuck with him the way it had Jack. But they both were in agreement, she was one of the best looking pieces of scenery in the Triskelion, whenever they were lucky enough to catch a glimpse in the cafeteria.

STRIKE kept them busy, both with operations and training, and having the division to oversee didn't always afford time for the Commander and his Lieutenant to mingle with the rest of the operators on a regular meal schedule. Her own work, as an asset recruiter and handler, put Addams in the field semi-regularly and out of sight sometimes. But once every few weeks or so, Jack had the fortune of seeing her at lunch or leaving a briefing or meeting room, and, of course, last Christmas Eve. They had only spoken once in all that time, but Jack liked the sound of her voice and was always a little struck by her smile, whenever he saw it. Maybe Brock didn't see her as much, or maybe he was too distracted to notice those infrequent moments she was nearby. There'd been a few women passing through their personal lives as distractions for both of them anyway. But Jack always noticed, and those few fleeting seconds or savored minutes he saw Addams were the highlights of those days.

"How'd she rate?" Jack wondered, trying not to come off as too interested and going back to his assessment.

"Not done yet," Brock admitted, "but Nick might be right."

Jack put his work aside, clicking his pen closed, as he straightened up a bit to better see the screen on Rumlow's desk. He watched, while the Commander recalled the SHIELD and Army service records for Agent Addams. He was curious to see what Rumlow thought. Rollins didn't realize she had applied for the team. From what he'd heard about her though, he wasn't necessarily surprised. Addams had a stellar reputation in her division. She hadn't been with the Agency long, but her name was mentioned approvingly in certain intelligence circles. In four years, she'd earned several citations and commendations for her work, most notably making the approach on a key asset and cultivating the intel that identified and captured a nuclear materials smuggler in the Middle East. She was establishing herself quite well in CS and could make a hell of a career there for herself, if she didn't make it into STRIKE.

"Huh," Rumlow mused again, leaning back into his chair and kicking a boot up onto his desk. He rubbed the side of his finger back and forth across his stubbled chin, considering the packet.

Rollins quirked up a brow, checking, "You gonna finish scoring that, or are you just gonna stare at the picture all damn morning?"

Brock snuffled a laugh. "Yeah," he distractedly nodded, taking up his pen from the desk again.

Rumlow went back to work. A few minutes later, Jack was ready for the next candidate's application. He moved the folder in his hand to the short pile on the edge of the desk.
"Mickelson, 96," Jack said, taking the next file from the chair beside him. "Accepted."

"Good," Brock agreed, his attention turned down to the tally he was adding up. Rollins watched the Commander drop the folder on top of the pile of applications that would get the offer, looking over at Jack and noting, "Addams, 97. ...Accepted."
"You passed all their tests. You represent the 15th percentile of all SHIELD agents. Experts at strategy, tactics, spycraft, foreign languages, how to survive, how to kill, and how to get away with it all. ...So, you impressed somebody."

The Commander was pacing, slow and measured, up and down the lines and between the ranks, hands folded at rest behind his back. From the side of the room, Jack stood, rigid, his arms folded across his chest. He watched with the other members of Rumlow's senior training staff. Brock stopped, eyes roaming over the agents in front of him and looking a little bored.

"Big. fucking. deal," he said, decidedly apathetic and unaffected. "You have not impressed me."

The methodical pace resumed across the front of the formation, and Jack allowed a small smirk into the corner of his mouth. The other trainers chuckled among themselves, arrogantly. Brock's voice got louder, more insistent and unquestionably commanding. Jack's expression hardened, as he panned his gaze across the candidates for Echo Team, sizing them up for himself.

"You wanna be on this team?" Rumlow continued. "...You have to earn it. ...You will be pushed, challenged, hurt- physically and mentally. You will hit the rack at night begging for mercy," he promised. "I'm not here to hold your hand and tell you 'good job'. I will not break you down and build you back up. Leave that cuddly, spirit de corps shit at home." He stopped at the front of the room, centered to the formation and staring them down. "You think you're tough? That you've been an agent for who-gives-a-fuck many years and this is just another promotion? ...SEALS, MARSOC, SAS- 75 to 90% attrition. STRIKE? 95%. If you survive this process, you will find yourself in the top 1% of all SHIELD agents. ...Look around you. Don't bother learning names or remembering faces. Half of you fuckwits won't be here next week. And another half of that next week. And the week after that until I have culled the weak and unworthy out of you and I find my 1%. ...You better be fuckin' indestructible."

"How many was that?" Greer asked, quietly, from the side of his mouth.

Jack tipped his hand up from his arm for a moment, raising four fingers to answer, quietly deciding, "I'll give him four, so far."

"Generous," Greer smiled. "Dropping the 'g' at the end just strikes me as lazy."

Rollins snorted and tuned back into the Commander's speech, mentally adding another fuck-based phrase to his running tally. There was a pool to see how many different versions of the favored four letter sentence enhancer Rumlow could drop into his speech without being obvious or repeating himself. So far, he was using his Navy-trained vocabulary for effect.

"Well, shit," Cephas grumbled. "I'm out."

"I told you," Jack bragged, "you went too low. Double or nothing, he makes ten, easy, before he wraps it up."

"I'm in," Greer nodded.

"Cash only," Rollins smirked.
Brock continued circling the recruits, like a shark. Rollins smirked at hearing "fuckless wonder", when the CO picked out a susceptible looking recruit to stare down, while reiterating the emphasis on academic performances for the class. He could almost give Brock double points for using that.

"He's reaching," Greer decided, with a small shake of his head. "He can't do it."

"Watch and learn, junior," Jack assured him, with a confident nod, notching number seven for the list.

A few minutes later, the official tally stood at eleven different manipulations and variations of the root "fuck", even if they didn't count "fuckin'". Jack smugly turned his hand over from his arm, waiting for Greer to pay up. Greer muttered to himself as he turned away from the class to thumb out $100 from the fold of cash in his pocket. He stuffed the money into Rollins' palm just as the Commander dismissed the recruit class to the locker room.

With the candidates hurrying off to change into their PT uniforms, Rumlow rejoined his staff. He jutted his chin, asking, "What'd we get?"

"Eleven," Jack answered, turning to pick up the class roster. "Twelve, if we let you drop the 'g'."

Brock looked pleased with himself. "Not bad." He looked over his shoulder, seeing the door shut behind the last recruit. "So, what do we think?"

"They look pretty decent," Cephas shrugged.

"Which one was Fury's pick?" Greer wondered.

"The taller girl," Rumlow said.

"She's hot," Cephas noted.

Rumlow pointed a stern finger at Cephas in silent warning against any inappropriate conduct with a cadet, as Jack specified, "Addams. She's a handler from Clandestine Services. Prior Army; four years, Human Intelligence Gatherer, Purple Heart from an IED. Rated fifth overall, for applicant ranking."

There was a collective nod of acceptance from the seven men gathered in front of Rumlow for the morning introductions and first training session and Dennison checked, "We taking bets?"

Brock chuckled, shaking his head. "Fury seems confident. You guys might wanna hold on to your wallets."

"She's got a chance," Rollins seconded, with a small shrug of indifference, trying to downplay his interest in how it would all turn out.

There had been a total of nine women over the last few years who were selected as candidates for Echo, before this class. None of them made it through. Jack had been part of the training staff for two of those classes and seen all four women at the time eliminated. The standards were admittedly high for everyone who tried to join Echo, but they needed to be. It wasn't that women weren't accepted for the team, it was just none of the previous applicants had been able to overcome the competition to finish and earn a place there. Comparatively speaking, Addams didn't look much better on paper, but Fury made his recommendation and Brock and Rollins agreed, her records said she looked like she was worth a shot. His personal interest in Allison he kept to himself.

"They'll be back in here in four minutes," Brock noted, glancing down at his watch. He jutted his
chin toward Jack. "Get ’em started. I want to see them crawl out of here tonight."

The Devil himself was in Rollins’ grin at the honor of being the first instructor to show them just how hard this was going to be. "Yes, Sir."

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Nov 2010

He’d be lying if Jack, and the rest of the instructors, didn’t get a little sadistic joy out of watching the recruits gasp and stiffen at sliding into the water. The senior officers all knew the hurt. They’d survived it. Some, more than once in their careers between the military and STRIKE. They’d make sure the candidates for Echo did, too. But it didn’t stop the fiendish smirks the officers wore.

"Welcome to your first exercise from the Winter Warfare Course,” Jack grinned, folding his arms, comfortably. “The point of this exercise is for you to experience the physiological process your body goes through with exposure to cold water…and prove that you can survive it.” He walked a few steps along the water’s edge, eyeing the class as he moved. “...You have approximately 9 minutes remaining before you will be permitted out of the water and instructed to move on to your second task- field stripping and reassembling your rifle. ...Performing a successful function test of the weapon will move you on to the third task of building a fire to warm yourself.

"What you’re experiencing is Cold Shock Phenomenon,” Rollins explained, loud enough to be heard as the recruits spread out, after Whitfield’s instruction, at least an arm’s length away from their closest buddy in the water. “It’s your body’s way of saying, “What the fuck am I doing in 34° water up to my fuckin’ neck?” ...Hyperventilating is normal. ...You will experience this, typically, for 1-3 minutes. It’s not a problem...unless you do it while you’re under water.”

The other instructors chuckled and Jack smirked. “Cold shock will pass,” he firmly promised. “Get over it and get your breathing under control. ...At this temperature, you have 2-5 useful minutes of your full strength to try and get yourself out of this situation...if we actually let you out.” Rollins paced back along the edge of the small lake, looking at each of the miserable faces of the recruits in the near freezing water from behind his black lensed sunglasses.

"Cold water robs your body of its heat,” the Lt. Commander went on, “32 times faster than cold air. ...At best, you may have 1-2 hours before you die of hypothermia. ...But you may only have about 15 minutes before losing consciousness and drowning.”

Dennison came over to pass Rollins a cup of coffee, the steam curling off the drink in the wind. Jack nodded his thanks, barely pausing for the welcome interruption.

"Your body temperature will drop,"Jack reminded them. “The faster you complete the following exercises, the faster you get dry clothes and a seat by the fire. I suggest you get your bearing quick, once you get out of the water.”

As expected, facts and reassurances of them appeared to give no comfort to the candidates. Jack didn’t remember them giving him any either. Not the first time he did the exercise with the Rangers nor the next time when he joined STRIKE. No matter what anyone could tell or promise you, the cold water sucked and it hurt.

"Sgt. Dennison,” Rollins loudly invited, drawing the man’s attention up from his coffee. “Come and wax poetic to our young recruits. Inspire them."

Dennison chuckled, shaking his head as he walked over to the edge of the water, the snow
crunching under his boots. “Okay,” he nodded, taking a moment to think. “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit. Aristotle.”

"Classic,” Cephas toasted, lifting his steaming mug. “But I don’t think it’s keeping them warm.”

"Something to distract them from their inevitable, cold, watery death,” Jack suggested, with a smirk.

The instructors chuckled, standing and watching over the recruits in the water. On the edge of the hole in the ice, in the comfort of his drysuit, Whitfield checked his watch. The casual swinging of his legs hanging in the water kept little waves and ripples lapping up the necks of the recruits.

“My dad always says,” Greer began, “He who loses money, loses much. He who loses a friend, loses more. He who loses faith, loses all.”

"Fuck. That’s deep, son,” Dennison approved.

"My dad always said,” Emery chimed in, “fight like you're the third monkey on the ramp to Noah’s Ark...and it just started raining.”

"Never share a foxhole with a man braver than you are,” Dennison pointed out.

"Words of wisdom,” Greer announced. “All five-second grenade fuses will burn down in three seconds.”

"Words to live by,” Emery seconded.

"I always liked, “Death is what gives life meaning. To know your days are numbered. Your time is short.””, Whitfield added, from the waterside.

"That’s pretty dark, Doc,” Greer noted, pointing a finger his way. “Especially for a man in your position.”

"Ay,” Jack corrected. “Never look down on a medic. Because one day you may be looking up at one.”

They all laughed again and even the recruits managed a smile over their chattering teeth, as Whitfield wondered, “How ‘bout you, Commander? Any thoughts on life, death, and the in between to keep these guys afloat?”

"I’ve stared Death in the face,” Jack shrugged. “He always blinked first. I’ve never had a need for inspirational quotes or “hang in there” cat posters.”

"Yeah,” Emery agreed. “He just runs on caffeine and hate.”

Jack raised his mug in a silent salute of Emery’s assessment, adding, “Whiskey helps.”

Dennison insisted, “There’s gotta be something to give them.” He piteously gestured the mug in his hand out toward the shivering recruits. “Look at ‘em.”

Jack gave it a moment’s thought, before reciting, “Wer mit Ungeheuern kämpft, mag zusehn, dass er nicht dabei zum Ungeheuer wird. Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein.”

“W-w-what did he just ssssay?” Mickelson managed to get out.
“I said,” Jack explained, “He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.”

“You’ve read Friedrich Nietzsche?” Whitfield marveled from his perch on the lip of the ice.

Ahead of a sip of his coffee, Rollins quirked up a brow and questioned, “You savages haven’t?”

“Now that’s deep,” Dennison decided, nodding to Rollins.

“My favorite Gunny used to say,” Cephas began.

”Nobody has a favorite Gunny,” Greer argued, to everyone’s amusement.

Undaunted, Cephas finished his thought. “He used to say, “The key to getting through hard times is: left foot, right foot, repeat. Never quit. It’s that simple. Never fucking quit.” Simple as that.”

Jack nodded, along with the other instructors’ approval. “A monster lies in wait for me,” he said, “a stew of wounds and misery. But much fiercer still, in life and limb, is me that lies in wait for him.”

“Hooah, boss,” Dennison confidently nodded.

With a thumbs up, Greer added, “There comes a time when a man must spit on his hands, hoist the black flag, and begin to slit throats.”

“What doesn’t kill me, better fucking run,” Emery laughed.

”Never shoot a large caliber man with a small caliber bullet,” Whitfield advised.

”Sometimes,” Rollins shrugged, with a wicked smirk, “you just have to knock a motherfucker’s teeth out.”

”I think we’ve slipped from philosophical into barroom brawl advice,” Whitfield chuckled.

”Time?” Jack checked, looking over the faces of the shivering recruits, pleased to see they seemed to have been distracted from their circumstances for a couple minute and were smiling as best they could.

”Time,” Whitfield called.

”Out of the pool,” Rollins ordered.

Jack stepped aside, carefully watching the recruits fumble their way up out of the near freezing water, onto the edge of the ice, and over to the bank of the lake. They stumbled, dropping ungracefully to their knees on the ground at the area set up for them to perform their dexterity exercise. Rollins and Whitfield had elected to keep a closer eye on Addams during this session, worried her comparatively small size to the remaining men in her class might work against her in the current conditions. The air temperature was barely holding at 40° in the midday sun.

It was a struggle, but the 11 recruits managed to break down and reassemble their rifles, despite the uncontrollable shivering and cramped muscles. The relief was evident on the recruits’ face, when Rollins called for his officers to go ahead and light the fires. It was always the plan that the instructors would start the fires, a reward for the recruits getting through the exercise. But the goal of getting past the exercise to be able to light a fire was part of the motivation, to help drive the recruits on. While five large fires were quickly lit, the recruits helped each other out of their
soaking wet uniforms and into dry clothes, with assistance from the instructors as needed.

The recruits were wrapped up in poncho liners and wool blankets and tucked into sleeping bags inside the ring of fires. Whitfield moved about, checking body temperatures and heart rates. The instructors shared the hot coffee and approval for everyone completing the exercise, and for no one making them do the paperwork for one of them dying.

An hour later, Addams was the only one still giving a shiver here and there. Jack caught on and tipped his head for Whitfield to see her. “Give her another look, Doc.”

She answered all of the medic’s questions and was still enough while he took her temperature again. She shrugged off their concern, saying she was just a little shorter than the other guys, but she’d catch up. Rollins smirked at her humor, while Whitfield pushed back the poncho liner hugged over her head to get at her neck for her pulse. Jack crouched down beside her, balancing on the balls of his feet with his hands hanging over his knees, eyeing Allison in her bundle of blankets and sleeping bag to see where she might be losing heat from. Whitfield leaned back, saying her temp was still a bit off, but rising. As Addams reached up to cover her head again, Rollins saw the problem.

"Hold on,” he told her, pulling off his glove and shifting down to a knee to reach around behind her head.

Rollins touched the back of her head, feeling the dampness on her watch cap. He frowned, realizing no one, especially her in her numbed state, noticed her hair had gotten wet, although it had been braided up and pinned to stay above her collar. The knit hat had pulled most of the water out of her hair, but the cold air wasn’t doing anything to help it, or the rest of her hair, to dry.

"Well, there’s your problem,” Whitfield quipped, shaking his head. “Good eye, boss.”

"Here,” Jack said, pulling his own watch cap off to hand to her. There was a subtle stammer in her “thank you, Sir” that Rollins grinned at, as Addams unfolded her arms from her covers to pull off her damp cap and trade it for his dry one. He stayed there, kneeling at her side and waiting to help tuck her back into her layers. “How’s that, Addams?” he checked.


He gave her a nod, getting back to his feet. Rollins slipped his glove back on and dropped the knit cap next to one of the fires to dry. He and Whitfield made another round of the other recruits, for good measure, making sure everyone else was recovering well enough. If it had been anyone else, he wasn’t sure if he’d have given up the warmth of his own watch cap. But there was something about the way she hadn’t made a fuss to complain that she was any colder than the rest of her classmates, even though she had every right to, that Jack admired.

Jack threw another look over his shoulder, glancing at Allison, while he spoke with the other instructors. The sun had gotten low and he was pleased to see the color back in her cheeks. He kept an eye on her through dinner, as well. Addams and the remainder of her recruit class had warmed enough to shed some layers and were talkative again, by then. Rollins’ watch ended, satisfied that she was alright, when she and the other recruits were on their feet and collecting wood for the remaining lit fires and shoring up the snow caves and trenches they’d made that morning.

While Jack and the other staff officers gathered around to review the itinerary for tomorrow’s exercises, the recruits went to bed. Rollins stayed up awhile, keeping an eye on the candidate who’d drawn the short straw for the first watch of the night. When Rollins finally retired to the comfort of one of the tents for the instructors, he let out a slow breath to clear his head.
He’d been a little distracted, after worrying over Addams, once he realized that checking her hat and hair was the first time he’d touched her with any kindness or concern. There were several times in the last couple months that he’d taken a swing at her, made some kind of throw, landed a blow, or applied a technique to her meant as part of the defensive tactics and other training. It wasn’t anything more, or less, than any of the other instructors did or the other recruits experienced. But still, it made him pause, thinking of the cool, soft skin his fingertips had brushed over. Wiping a hand down his face, Rollins settled in to his sleeping bag, mentally reviewing the schedule for the next few days to occupy his mind until sleep came to him.
Chapter 18

Dec 2010

At the end of the four month course, only six candidates remained to run "The Gauntlet" for the four vacancies and the privilege of becoming a Specialist and no longer an Agent. A seven day long series of tests to evaluate and eliminate. Agents were dropped in the field with three days rations and water. Over the course of the hellish week, they were exposed to the elements and sleep deprived while they responded to mental and physical challenges, obstacles alone and as a team, combat assault courses, and crossed 85 miles of wooded and semi-mountainous terrain on foot. Cuts from concertina wire, blisters in wet boots, bruises and sprains from ambushes and conducting raids, and hypothermia were the least of their worries. If an instructor or member from Alpha or Charlie Teams captured or "killed" a candidate, they were immediately disqualified. At the end of the week, only three agents made it through.

Just before sunset, Echo Team, their commanding officers, and the training staff gathered at the last checkpoint of The Gauntlet. The three new members stood in a row at attention with a slight hint of a sway, muscles fatigued, minds exhausted, and uniforms and bodies stained with mud and blood. They were running on the last drops of adrenalin, spurred on by well deserved pride at their accomplishment. Director Fury gave a short but stirring congratulatory speech, welcoming them to the worst job they'll ever love. He personally shook their hands as the Commander followed beside him. Fury gave the last cadidate in line an extra look and a single, approving nod of his head. From his place at the front of the gathering of officers and operators attending the ceremony, Jack kept his eye on Addams, as she received her hard earned praise.

"Congratulations, Spc. Addams," the Director told her. "First woman in SHIELD to qualify for Echo. Make us proud."

With permission from his smile, she broke from eyes front to meet his gaze and smile back. "Yes, Sir."

The Director moved aside and her eyes snapped forward and expression hardened again. Rumlow stopped in front of her and she held her left palm open. He pressed the Echo Team unit tab into her hand and she folded her fingers over it tightly, as their right hands met to shake. The Commander eyed her up and down, with a smug smile.

"Congratulations, Spc. Addams," he nodded. "Everybody's gonna have their eye on you."

"Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir."

He stepped back, sizing her up again. He scoffed at her, as he nodded his head looking down the line of new members. He straightened himself to attention and barked orders. "Load out your personal effects from the barracks. See Sgt. Henry for the Quartermaster schedule. You three are on 72 hours leave. You will be given your squad assignments upon your return. See Medical before you depart. Echo, fall out!"

The newly promoted operators relaxed and turned behind them to shoulder their gear from the field. Most of the members of Echo made a round of welcoming them to the team and introducing themselves. The senior staff milled among themselves and mostly parted ways when Director Fury left. As the new team members made their way to their ride back to the Triskelion for their medical assessments, the Commander's voice boomed from behind.

She stopped with a quick about-face and stood at attention. "Sir."

Rollins watched, as he walked to stand in front of her and looked down his nose at her, crossing his arms tightly enough to flex his muscles and strain the fabric of his coat. "Don't think for a minute that we're gonna give you a break or do all the lifting for you because you're a woman. You pull your own weight. You better impress me every day or I'll bust you down to polishing my boots and makin' me fuckin' sandwiches all goddamned day. You got that?"

"Yes, Sir. Looking forward to it, Sir."

"That's it," he said, with a dismissive wave. "Get outta my sight."

"Yes, Sir."

Rollins walked over to stand next to Brock and shook his head. “Still giving her shit?” Jack checked, watching Addams hurry to catch up with her classmates.

Brock turned to see Rollins over his shoulder and smirked. “Don’t want her to think the hard part is over.”

Jack gave a raise of his chin in understanding. “You didn’t think she’d make it, did you?”

"Actually,” Rumlow admitted, “I had some doubts."

"When did you change your mind?” Jack asked. He cocked up a brow, wondering, “Or have you?”

"I changed my mind after she made it through Hell Week,” Brock nodded, turning to walk back to the other officers. Jack fell into step, as Rumlow went on. “But training and the real thing are two different animals. We’ll see how she does with a few deployments under her belt.”

“She made Fury proud,” he casually noted, electing to keep his own pride in her accomplishment and his role in it to himself.

The Commander nodded. “S’pose we should all be a little proud ‘a what she did,” he admitted, although he didn’t sound entirely convinced.

"It was going to happen,” Rollins conceded. “A woman was going to qualify, eventually.”

"And you’re not complaining that it was her,” Brock concluded, with a mischievous grin in the side of his mouth.

If it weren’t for his sunglasses, Brock would have seen Jack’s eyes roll over, hard. “Whatever,” he muttered, giving a shake of his head, as they rejoined the rest of the instructors.

"Gentlemen,” Brock began, “congratulations on another successful recruit class. They look good.” The men nodded and grinned their thanks for the Commander’s praise. “Let’s get out of here. I’ll buy the first round.”

No one would argue with the boss’ generosity. The training staff members piled into the SHIELD SUVs that they’d carpooled out to the finish line in, heading back to the Triskelion for everyone to pick up their POVs and head out for the night. In the motor pool garage, the recruits were only a couple minutes ahead of them, unloading their gear. A few of the instructors offered their congratulations and welcome again, as the senior officers made their way past. Jack kept to
himself, silently passing by with Rumlow, not wanting to give Brock any more ammunition than he already had when it came to his thoughts on Addams. If Brock hadn’t been there, he probably would have shook her hand with the others. She deserved it. She had done what plenty of people had thought was impossible and Jack felt a sense of pride, not just for her in her accomplishment, but for himself for having been involved in her success.

Feb 2011

"What d'ya got for me?"

Jack closed the door to the Commander's office behind him. He held up a pair of file folders in his hand, when Rumlow glanced up from the paperwork in his own and Jack crossed to one of the chairs in front of the desk. He sat, without invitation. At 2130 hours, after a long day of testing the limits of the newest STRIKE operators in SERE training, formality could be damned.

"Not a bad day," Rollins summarized. "Doc says they're all fit enough to continue." He sat up a bit, tossing one of the folders onto the desk for Brock to look at at his leisure, before slumping comfortably into the chair back. "Got some notes on Smith. Looked a little shaky today. Other than that, we're on track for the next evolution to begin on Wednesday."

Brock looked up from his work. He dropped his booted feet off the corner of his desk, putting aside his report and picking up the one Jack had brought him. He thumbed open the cover, pulling away the summary page to get to the details of the assessment.

"Good," the Commander nodded, scanning over the file. He flipped to the next page, distractedly asking, "How's the girl holding up?"

"Solid so far," Jack said, with a small pout of approval. "She's got a pretty decent threshold for pain. Kind of surprising, but..."

Rumlow watched him shrug and hummed his consideration of Jack's abbreviated opinion. "Hm. Guess we'll find out what she's made of, with the next evolution."

Jack shifted in his seat, leaning his weight over onto his forearm on the arm of the chair. He gave a silent nod and nothing else. Brock apparently noticed and lowered the folder.

"Somethin' bothering you?" the Commander asked, with a pull down in his brow that was somewhere between suspicious and concerned.

Jack considered his answer a moment. As the master instructor, he had run new operators through this course seven times in the last three years. He was exceptionally familiar with the program, the techniques, and all the tricks. He'd pushed agents to the edge of human tolerance, breaking down bodies and mind fucking them within an inch of insanity and self-doubt, weeding out the ones who wouldn't make it if they were captured and could put them all at risk if they failed in the field. He never had a problem with it. Doling out and evaluating the results of the agency approved torture never bothered him. It was all for the greater good. STRIKE team members had to be counted on not to break under any pressure; to resist in captivity and protect the agency, at all costs. But this time, the standards were being raised. Or lowered, as the case may be.

"The next evolution," Rollins admitted.

"We all went through it," Brock reminded him, with a small, casual wave of his hand.
"I know."

"But…” Rumlow led him on, closing the folder in his hand and tossing it onto his desk.

Jack shook his head. "Something about doing it to the women. I don’t like it."

More specifically, the thought of doing it to her; to Allison. Instructors administering the course were masked, but you didn't get in to STRIKE without being clever and perceptive. Anyone who thought the subjects they ran through the training didn't pick up on ticks or mannerisms to identify the operator behind the mask was a fool. Addams probably already knew the sessions he was actively involved in and the times he was just an observer controlling the room. The idea that she'd know it was him executing the new protocols and directives Command had in mind made him, frankly, uncomfortable. It was one thing if she took away from the course he was a hard ass or mean. But he didn’t want her to think of him as a monster.

"What kind of sick fuck does?" Brock agreed. "But you're the biggest asshole I got. This isn’t the evolution to go soft on. Not now."

"I’m an asshole, yeah," Jack didn't argue, "but not a rapist."

There was a subtle disapproval in the look Rumlow gave Jack. "It's not rape. We don’t do this, somebody else will," he coolly reminded him. "We send these guys out for the worst the world has to offer. We owe it to them to show them they can survive it." His eyes ran over the Lieutenant. "You disagree now?"

"No," Jack shook his head. "I know. ...I’m just thinking, what if we break Fury’s favorite?"

"I don’t think we will," the Commander shook his head, tapping a finger on Jack's notes on Smith. "If we lose anyone, it’ll be Smith. How’d that guy get through?"

"I’ve got Greer going back through the assessments and backgrounding to see where they might have missed something," Rollins assured him. "The cracks we’re seeing, Smith’s not gonna make the week."

"I need you to try and break Addams, Jack," he reiterated, a level of sympathy underlining the order.

Rollins nodded, slowly, his gaze blankly set on the front of Rumlow's desk. "I know."

"If she can fall apart, it’ll be in this evolution," Brock figured.

"I know," he repeated, a little more firmly.

"You need to shut down the humanity and be the worst of us again," Rumlow coaxed.

"Have you seen this outline from Command?" he questioned, holding up the file still in his hand.

"I have," Rumlow nodded once.

"And you don’t see a problem with the way they ramped this up?" Rollins pressed, his frustration starting to show as he dropped his copy of the orders for the next evolution's exercises on the empty seat to his right. "We're pushing it here, Bingo."

The Commander sighed, wiping a hand down over his mouth and leaning back, far, in his chair. "It is ramped up," he conceded. "It looks bad. I won't argue with you there, but you gotta remember
where she is." His finger pointed down into the desktop, as he made his case. "This is the first time a woman made it onto Echo. She’s gotta be better than any of the other females we got on the other teams, now or down the road. She’s going to see a side of the world they probably never will. We owe it to her to find out what she’s made of. It's for her own good."

"And if she breaks?" Jack wondered, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees and lace his fingers together.

"Then we did her a favor by getting her out before someone does it to her for real," Brock confidently said. The answer didn't sit well with Rollins, and it apparently didn't escape Rumlow’s notice. His head tipped, thoughtfully, as the men stared at each other. "I understand where you're coming from, big guy, but it's gotta be done," he nodded. "...Dennison is back from vacation, tomorrow. Drop him in there with Cephas, when the shift has to be made. You're still running the show, but you can put the guilt on them, if you want to."

Jack inhaled, deeply, through his nose as he sat up straight again. He gave the suggestion some thought. If he decided to remove himself from administering the exercises for her this evolution, he could give the orders to the others and stop or redirect them, if he thought the scenario could go too far. It could work. Rollins nodded his agreement.

"You got anything else for me tonight?" Brock checked, taking up the report on Spc. Smith again.

"No," Jack shook his head. "We’re doing some sensory deprivation again tonight. Nothing heavy."

"Alright," the Commander approved, with a single nod. "Get outta here. Get some sleep. See ya at oh-600."

Jack nodded again, putting his hands on his knees to push himself up out of his seat. He bent down, retrieving his folder from the other chair. Rollins felt a little better about the situation, and he was a little relieved that Brock hadn't drawn the line between his reservations over the new training outline and his attraction to Addams or made some snappy remark about it. Heading for the door, Brock called after him.

"Hey, Jack."

The Lt. Commander looked back, over his shoulder, quirking up an expectant eyebrow for his reply.

"It’s always nice to see you still got a bit of conscience left about you," Rumlow smirked, not bothering to take his eyes off his reading.

Jack tiredly chuckled, with a small shake of his head. "Fuck off."
"Hypothetically speaking...” Jack began.

"Hypothetically speaking as in, I’m about to hear dumb shit already happened,” Brock considered, eyeing the line the 5 ball would take between his cue and the pocket, “or dumb shit hasn’t happened yet, but is likely to occur?”

Rollins smirked, his head ticking back in amusement of the boss’ skills of perception. “Let’s say, likely to occur.”

The Commander sank his shot and watched as the cue ball harmlessly slowed to a stop along the far end of the table. “I should advise you to keep it to yourself, so I can maintain plausible deniability,” he noted. Brock shrugged, admitting, with a sly smile, “But I’m too curious now not to ask.”

"Hypothetically speaking,” Jack started again, watching Brock circle the table to find his next move, “how inclined are you to enforce fraternization regs?”

The hitch in Rumlow’s arm, as he drew back his cue, was clue enough that he wasn’t expecting this topic for their theoretical conversation. Brock straightened up from his lean on the table, planting the end of his cue into the floor and folding his hands around it to lean a bit of weight on, as he studied Jack with a discerning squint.

"There ain’t enough booze in the world, Romeo,” Rumlow quipped.

"Don’t flatter yourself,” Rollins snorted. “You’re not that pretty.”

After their amusement subsided, Brock suspiciously checked, "Why are you asking?” adding an excusing, “Hypothetically.”

Jack knew to keep his approach casual. He gave a nonchalant shrug and pout, saying, “Just curious. It’s never come up before. Was wondering how you’d handle it.”

"I can’t help but think there’s actually a little specificity to this hypothetical situation that I’m not hearing,” he decided.

He didn’t really expect to get anything by him, but Rollins had been optimistic that he’d be able to avoid too many details. “Just a hypothetical,” Jack reiterated.

"Okay. On one of my teams, or with one of the offices with my division?” Brock invited.

Jack shrugged, giving a tip of his head, as if he were trying to imagine a scenario for the CO to work through and didn’t already have the particulars in mind. “Let’s say it’s on the teams,” he prompted.

"Hell no,” Rumlow replied, firmly and without hesitation.

Rollins grinned, watching Rumlow bend down to find his shot again. He expected the decisive reaction, but wasn’t necessarily deterred and, sounding innocent enough, pressed, “So, what would you do?”
Brock’s next attempt bumped off the corner of the side pocket and he stood up, relinquishing control of the game to Jack. He stepped aside to the nearby high top table and took up his beer, answering, “Depends on what’s happening.” He took a drink, before going on. “Depends on who’s involved.”

“Fair enough,” Jack conceded.

“A little grab ass between a couple lower enlisted?” he considered, with a shrug of one shoulder. “Slap on the wrist write-ups to cut it off would probably work. Some fuckin’ around, on my time or not? Reassignment, possibly. Additional or multiple infractions and regs involved? Dismissal from the Division, most likely.” Rumlow took another drink while Jack made his shot. “I don’t have time to waste with that kind of fuckery in my ranks. It’s distracting and detrimental to morale.” He put his drink aside, adding, “Same goes for my officers. And this hypothetical better not include one of my officers dickin’ around with a subordinate, on my teams or in the support staff.”

“Hm,” Rollins nodded, his eyes studying the table for his next angle.

There was a lull while Brock waited for his turn and Jack sank the 9 ball into the corner. “Why do you ask?” Rumlow wondered. “What’ve you heard?”


The game moved on and, after Jack scratched, Rumlow set up on the table again, pointing out, “That’s a hell of a random hypothetical, if nothing’s going on.” He bent down to line up his cue. “Didn’t figure you for the type to keep secrets for someone breaking the rules,” Brock mentioned.

“I’m not,” he swept his head, a little surprised Rumlow brought it back up.

Brock gave a wary nod. “Uh-huh.” He called his shot on the 8 ball and followed through, winning the game, with a smug grin for his accomplishment, while Jack finished off his beer and wondered if he suspected anything. He joined Rollins at the table and took up his own drink again, warning, “I’m not gonna like it, if I have to find out about this the hard way. So, care to elaborate?”

Jack took a moment to think it over, flagging down a waitress, in the meantime, and gesturing for her to bring over another pair of Budweisers. He didn’t get the impression Rumlow cared for Addams too much. As the only female to make it onto Echo, he’d made it a daily point to give her a little more shit and push her a little harder than the men on the team, so she knew she wasn’t going to be allowed to slack off after the “hard part” of getting the job was over. She was slowly starting to impress the Commander, though, but his expectations were maybe a little higher for Addams to prove to him, and the others, that she could cut it in one of the most demanding assignments in the Division.

Rollins didn’t see it that way. As the lead instructor in several facets of the Division’s selection and training processes, he had a different perspective of the men and woman who he’d help develop from candidates to operators. He already knew Allison didn’t need the push from Rumlow to keep striving for excellence. It was just in her nature. While Rumlow’s participation in recruit training was limited by his role as Division Commander and its demands on his time, Jack’s assessments were based on his near daily first hand experiences with the recruits. Rumlow hadn’t seen Addams in action enough to know that she was already finding her place with her new team and showing incredible promise.

His professional opinions aside, Jack was still intrigued by Allison. Somewhere between that first sighting in the cafeteria and her commission to Echo, she had split up with the boyfriend, or whoever, Brock’s contact had told them about. That he could tell, she’d been single since, or at
least not seriously involved with anyone. If he thought he could get away with it; break the rules, just this one time, he’d ask her out tomorrow. But hearing Brock’s responses to the hypothetical situation of any member of the Division fraternizing with another didn’t bode well for him. Maybe it was personal. Maybe Rumlow needed a little more time to soften up his opinion of Addams, before he’d consider turning a blind eye. In the meantime, he’d keep his infatuation to himself.

Jack gave an unaffected shrug and shake of his head. “It’s nothing. Just curious.” The waitress returned with their second round and Rollins moved to set up the next game. “Have another drink, Bingo. You’re no fun to talk to when you’re this serious,” he smirked.

July 2011

“One last thing,” Jack noted, holding up a file folder for Brock to see before tossing it across the table to him.

“Oh, come on,” Rumlow groaned, sitting up from his deep lean back into the chair of the small briefing room to take the folder. Slumping back into his seat, he checked his watch, pointing out, “I’m gonna be late.”

“Five minutes,” Rollins assured him.

“Fine. What is it?” the Commander sighed, flipping open the folder, his eyes skimming the first page of the file.

“Recommendation for Medal of Valor,” Jack told him, opening up his own copy of the report and accompanying letters of recommendation.

“For who?” he wondered, straightening up to lean on the edge of the table and put the file down to read, thumbing up the pages of the report to skip ahead to his copies of the letters.

“Addams, for Gaborone last week.”

“Huh,” Brock quietly mused, reading line by line now. “Alright,” he conceded, letting the papers fall back into a pile and settling into the chair back. “Tell me why.”

“For the highlights in the report,” he explained, gesturing a hand to the paperwork in front of Brock. “Quick, decisive action. Courage under fire. Was in the only advantageous position to direct the assault. Heroism and bravery for her recovery of the injured BDF soldier while under direct fire and taking that hit in the process. All the usual good stuff.”

“For dumb fucking luck,” Brock snorted, with a small shake of his head.

Rollins smirked, with a bob of his head in agreement. “Yeah, well, they managed to say it a bit more eloquently than that.”

Rumlow chuckled. ”How’s she doing after that, anyway?” he asked, almost as an afterthought.

Jack gave a nod. “Had a limp for a few days. She’s gutting it out. Doc says, she’ll be cleared to go back online by Thursday.”

“Good,” he nodded. “Okay. How many letters?”

“From the whole fuckin’ squad,” Jack said. “I pulled three for the Committee, if you think it
"No shit?" he marveled, brow wagged up in surprise. "That many?"

"It’s impressive," Rollins casually noted, trying not to let his own biases toward Addams overshadow the merit of what she had done.

After a moment’s worth of thought, Brock admitted, “You know, actually, I was thinking the same thing.”

"Really?" Jack quirked up a brow, intrigued. The Commander gave credit where it was due, but he didn’t often make personal recommendations for awards. In fact, Jack could only recall two other times he had, since he’d known him. And Rollins was dumbfounded Brock would bestow the rare honor to Addams.

"Yeah," Brock nodded, tapping a finger on top of the file. “She did a hell of a job. Probably salvaged the whole op by stepping up. I gotta admit,” he shrugged, “the kid’s startin’ to impress me.”


Brock smirked, with a nod. “I know, right?” His expression sobered, when he mentioned, “We’re going to have a hole in the lineup when Ford leaves. I think maybe we give Addams Fire Team Bravo, see what she does with it…”

"That’s a hell of a leap of faith, comin’ from you,” Jack pointed out. Not that he wasn’t curious himself to see what Addams could do with a leadership role, but foremost he’d hate to see her thrown into something she may not be ready for or be set up for failure. “She’s got the skills, but she’s still young.”

His grin turned thoughtful, as Rumlow decided, “She’s working out. She’s turning out to be everything we thought she could be. There’s a lot of potential there. I think we should acknowledge it.”

"You want me to send this through to the Committee?" Jack checked, still a little surprised by Rumlow’s change in attitude towards Addams.

"We’ll move it on to the Committee,” he agreed, with a sure nod. “Tomorrow, though. I’ll have my own recommendation for her for you to add to the packet, in the morning.”

"Yes, Sir," Rollins nodded, with a small grin of pride for Allison and his confidence that the Committee would unanimously award her the medal.

"Okay. Time’s up," Brock announced, as he and Jack started to gather up their paperwork spread around between them on the conference table of the small room. “Gotta get upstairs and see what the fuck Pierce wants.”

"Have fun," Jack called after the Commander, who was already headed for the door.

Rollins snorted, catching the glimpse of the middle finger Rumlow shot him. Tapping his small stack of papers and files on the table top to straighten them before standing up, Jack kept grinning. He had a moment of optimism, when Brock had finally bent and given Addams a little approval. He considered, maybe the Commander might be beginning to see her value, and maybe Jack might be able to test his firmness on fraternization regulations again sooner than he thought.
Chapter 20

Aug 2011

"You heard what's happening, right?" Brock checked.

Reaching for the salt, Jack figured he knew. The Division had a pretty reliable rumor mill. Lately, the air was buzzing with talk of what happened in New York, about Fury's new team of heroes, and, of course, all things Steve Rogers. Sitting in the corner of the mostly empty cafeteria, Rollins was more interested in breakfast before the squad's early flight out to Awbari than beating around the bush.

"That bullshit about Steve Rogers coming to STRIKE?" he suggested.

"Yeah," Rumlow nodded. "Only it ain't bullshit."

"You gotta be fucking kidding me," Jack balked, setting the salt shaker back down, heavily. "What the hell are they thinking, putting Captain America into the middle of-"

"I know," Brock agreed. "It'd be crazy, if it didn't make sense. The cover's set. HYDRA's been entrenched for over 60 years. Put him into the middle of it, have him working for us? If nobody's seen it since the war, they're not going to notice it now. Putting the poster boy for 'the American way' behind the agenda? Talk about a mind fuck. Nobody'd think twice." Rumlow pointed a knowing finger. "Keep your enemies close, my friend."

"They're crazier than I thought they were," Jack decided, shaking his head and edging another bite of eggs onto his fork.

"Ain't that the truth."

"When does this train wreck happen?" Rollins wondered.

"Next week," Rumlow told him.

"Let's not waste any time," he sarcastically invited.

"They're getting him set up in a local apartment," the Commander explained. "He's scheduled to report on Tuesday."

All Jack could do was shake his head, with a disbelieving grin on his face. Like he muttered, the whole thing was, "Ridiculous."

"You haven't even heard the best part," Brock teased.

"Oh, yeah?" he warily pressed.

With a fiendish smirk, Rumlow nodded. "They're putting him with Delta."

"You're fuckin' kidding me," Jack refused. Brock nodded his truthfulness and Jack put down his fork, pushing his tray away. He'd suddenly lost his appetite and said the same, much to the obvious amusement of the CO.

"You should see your face," Brock chuckled.
"Okay," Jack relented. "They want to put him in STRIKE? Fine. There's obvious advantages to having a super soldier on hand. I get that." He swept his head, arguing, "But *Delta*? Right into the viper pit?"

"It gets better," the Commander promised, with a shit eating grin, and Jack knew.

Firmly shaking his head, Rollins swallowed the drink he'd just taken and pointed a warning finger at Brock, insisting, "No. Absolutely not." But Rumlow was still smiling and now he was nodding, "Out of the question. No fuckin' way."

"It's happening," the Commander assured him. "Paperwork came through this morning. He'll be assigned to Second Squad so you and me can keep an eye on him."

Rollins had found his limit. He was dumbfounded. All he could do was stare back at Rumlow, disbeliefingly shaking his head. Across from him, Rumlow chuckled and Jack considered he might actually be insane. He had to be. How else could he support this?

"Are you out of your god damn mind?" Jack growled.

"There's a fine line between bat shit crazy and brilliant," Brock mused. "We'll have to wait and see which side of the line this decision falls on."

A week later, Captain Rogers didn't attend the morning formation. Instead, he'd been instructed to standby in the Commander's office. Rumlow had reasoned easing Rogers into the day was a better approach. It'd give him and Jack an opportunity to size Rogers up for themselves.

After the morning inspection and briefing for Delta was handled, Rollins followed Brock back to his office. Rumlow thought he was being funny when he told Jack to behave himself before they walked into the office, but Jack probably did need the reminder. He still maintained adding Captain America to a STRIKE team full of HYDRA agents was a bad idea, at best. Not that his opinion seemed to matter.

Stepping into the office, Rollins took note of Rogers popping up out of his seat to stand at attention. Jack sized him up, comparing the man in front of him to the biographical information he'd familiarized himself with from Rogers' file. He appreciated the strong grip of his handshake and the confidence he seemed to have meeting his new superiors. Brock motioned for both of them to have a seat, as he walked around to sit behind his desk.

"It's good to have you aboard, Captain," Brock nodded, putting aside the paperwork he brought back from his briefing.

"Glad to be here," Rogers agreed.

Jack listened, while the Commander and Captain bullshitted for a few minutes about the attack on New York. Brock noted, that with what he saw in the news footage and the AARs SHIELD had prepared for the situation, he thought Rogers would fit in easily with the team and its mission. Rollins held his chin in his hand, resting forward into the web of his hand just below his mouth, studying the Captain for any ticks.

"The Lieutenant here," Rumlow said, gesturing to Rollins, "will get you squared away and start orienting you to our facilities and the rest of the Division. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to address them to either myself or Lt. Commander Rollins."
"Yes, Sir," Rogers nodded.

Rollins stood, giving Rumlow a small nod that the Commander smirked at, plainly amused by Jack's lack of enthusiasm. "Let's get you squared away," he said to Rogers, taking a folder Brock reached up to pass him over the desk before Jack left.

The Captain stood up to fall in behind Rollins on his way out of the office. They didn't speak until they stepped into the elevator and the doors had shut behind them. Jack ordered the elevator down to the 23rd floor.

"Lay of the land is pretty simple," Jack began, eyes watching the floors count down on the display ahead of him. "STRIKE owns all of the real estate in Tower B, from the 23rd through 29th floors. Everything you need is housed between here and five off site training facilities in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania." The elevator doors opened and Rollins continued his briefing as they walked. "Locker rooms are here on the 23rd floor. Also, barracks to house up to 100 operators in garrison, if needed. We mostly use the space for recruit class housing and for anyone who needs to sleep off a deployment before heading home or wait out inclement weather.

"Our division is made up of five 48 man platoons. Each platoon is divided into two 24 man squads and each squad is broken down into two 12 man fire teams. Each platoon is overseen by a Lieutenant 1st class, who reports directly to myself and Cmdr. Rumlow," he explained. "Each fire team is run by no lesser rank than a sergeant. Each fire team leader answers to a Second Lieutenant who oversees their squad and they answer to the First Lieutenant. You're assigned to Second Squad, Fire Team Bravo. With Delta's structure, that puts you under my direct supervision under Cmdr. Rumlow. That is your chain of command."

"Yes, Sir," the Captain acknowledged.

"Each team has their own locker room, with the exception of the female operators." He waved the folder up to note a plaque identifying the door for Alpha Team's locker room as they passed. He pointed to another door across the hall, explaining, "The women have their own area, for obvious reasons."

"How many female agents are there on STRIKE?" Rogers asked, as they continued down the hall.

"SHIELD has 267 women classified as "agents" working in the Triskelion," Jack said. He looked the Captain in the eye, when he specified, "STRIKE has five female operators."

Innocently enough, Rogers checked, "Is their a difference?"

Jack proudly smirked, with a nod. "Yeah. There's a big fuckin' difference."

"Oh," the Captain said.

"One operator on Alpha, two on Bravo, one on Charlie, and one on Echo," Jack elaborated. "Few women apply and qualify for STRIKE, and only ever one to serve on Echo. There's technically a sixth that floats in and out of Delta, sometimes. I believe you've met Agent Romanoff." They stopped in front of the door to the Delta Team locker room and Rollins passed his ID badge over the scanner as he went on, "Keep your ID on you at all times, while you're in this building. You can do voice recognition at any secured area, if you fuck up and leave it behind, but I highly recommend not fucking up."

"Don't plan on it," the Captain agreed.

Jack directed him to an empty locker. "No one outside of STRIKE has access on this floor," he
said. "You can leave gear, uniforms, and whatever else here. The one restriction is weapons. STRIKE keeps its own armory on the 26th floor. It streamlines the process of us checking weapons in and out for safekeeping when training restricts the presence of live ammo and for faster response to deployments. Any additional or specialized weapons drawn as part of a requisition from the armory must be returned at the end of each deployment, preferably immediately on your return, but absolutely before you leave this building. The only issued weapons permitted to be stored in the locker rooms are less lethal; stun batons, chemical irritants, etcetera. No lethal weapon will ever be out of the immediate control of any on-duty operator it is assigned to. Senior operators with offices have safes there for storage. For the grunts coming in on their own time for PT, or anything else off the clock, they can check sidearms in and out of the armory for storage. All operators’ personally owned vehicles must be equipped with rollout safes or lockable covert compartments to accommodate storage of any and all issued weapons when offsite or off duty. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir," Rogers nodded.

Rollins tipped his head for the Captain to follow him again. "You're already familiar with Division command and administration offices being on the 28th floor. You'll find all fire team leaders and above have an office there, as well as a small company of agents assigned to our training staff," Jack noted. "Due to the nature of our work, STRIKE has its own dedicated medical facilities. The infirmary is on 24. They'll take care of most everything trauma related and some specialty emergency surgeries, if you go down on an op close enough to home. They don't bother with health insurance for us. You're sick or broken, get yourself to sick call and we'll take care of it. Keeping the docs involved in the daily health of our operators helps us ensure and maintain our operators’ peak physical condition and fitness for duty. Physical therapy can also be done here, after you're cleared to return from any required visits to the Farm for serious or traumatic injuries, of course. Shrinks are on 24 as well, if you ever have anything you wanna cry about."

Back in the elevator, they rode up to the 26th floor. "Up here, we have an indoor firearms range," Jack informed him. "Standard shooting lanes for pistol and rifle. Long range weapons use the outdoor range in Virginia. That's where you'll find our Hogan's Alley, for urban warfare training, as well. Gym facilities are on this floor, open to you 24 hours a day. Most of our guys train together on their days off. PT assessments and weapons quals are done quarterly." Rollins gave him a once over, adding, "Although I don't know if we'll even bother for you."

Rogers snorted and Jack continued, leading the way into the gym. "Just about every piece of equipment you need," he noted, gesturing a hand across the large room. "Through those doors," he inclined his head to the double doors to the next room, "is one of our training areas; mats and rings for force on force training, sparring and grappling. Operators in rotation for deployments have regular PT and practical or classroom training scheduled to round out their down time waiting for an activation."

Jack crossed his arms, while Rogers’ gaze wandered over the gym. "The 25th floor is for specialized training," Rollins added. "SERE training, simunitions, and so on. We make use of the off-sites for the more involved scenarios, like ordinance training, live fire exercises, war games, and such. We also do airborne and amphibious operations training there. Classroom training happens on 27. STRIKE has dedicated techs and analysts for mission planning and support. They're also on 27. Major departments like Forensics and Clandestine Services are in Tower A, but we keep our own staff for everything from weather to cryptology for real time intel and mission support."

"Briefing rooms are on 29," Jack was winding up. "All missions are run out of one of our four Tactical Operations Centers, also on the 29th floor. Our communications hub for everything from
call outs to terps for field support is also there.

“STRIKE has priority requisitions for any equipment from the motor pool and flight line,” Kack boasted. “You name it, we got it. We don't have it, we get it. STRIKE is the best equipped and most well-funded division in SHIELD, and we're worth every penny.” Rogers gave an approving nod, still looking around, and Jack smirked, "You keepin' up with all 'a this, Captain?"

Rogers turned his attention back to Rollins, with a confident smile. "Yes, Sir."

"Good," Jack nodded. "SHIELD's general armory for security and any agent is on the 15th floors of Towers A and C. Our armory is on this floor. Let's show you were we keep the toys."
Sitting in front of Brock's desk, at the end of the day, Jack slouched comfortably in the chair. He checked a new email that buzzed into his phone, while Rumlow was reviewing the statistical report from Capt. Rogers' PT tests earlier in the day. Jack was already bored, having lost so much of his day watching the PT instructors and Infirmary docs try and come up with all sorts of measurements and tasks to try and find the limits of Rogers' strength and endurance.

Not looking up from the report, Rumlow asked, "So, what do you think of him?"

"Who? Snowflake?" Jack checked, glancing up from his screen.

Rumlow snorted, with a bob of his head. "Yeah."

Rollins considered the question, taking a moment to answer. He'd had some time to observe Rogers with the rest of Delta and some of the other Division staff, and with their squad in particular. But he couldn't quite put his finger on what concerned him about Rogers.

"He's quiet," Jack settled on. It was diplomatic enough.

With his attention on the paperwork he shuffled in his hands, Brock distractedly led him on. "So?"

"So, he's holding something back," Rollins decided.

Brock looked up, with a suspicious squint in one eye. "Like what?"

"I don't know," he shook his head. "But I don't fuckin' like it."

"Elaborate," Rumlow instructed, putting his paperwork down and settling into the back of his chair, folding his hands as he rocked back.

"I've known guys like him," Jack nodded. "He's chewin' on something. His interactions with the squad and staff are minimal. He knows what he's doing, I guarantee that, but he's on the sidelines."

"New guy nerves?" the Commander supposed.

"Not this," Rollins assured him. "He's too rigid. You see it in his frame. He's angry about something."

"You've been watching him. The fuck's he got to be angry about?" Brock wondered, swiveling his chair a little to kick his right boot up on the corner of his desk.

Jack flipped a hand out. "Take your pick," he said. "Guy's probably got Adjustment Disorder. Maybe a shot for a little PTSD from the war, or at least from waking up after the ice. He's definitely disoriented; making some big moves, right out of the gate for Fury. He went from New York to here in just a couple months. He may not be ready to play soldier yet."

Brock nodded, seeming to contemplate something, rubbing his fingers across his chin. "Think we need to get him to Psych?"
Rollins quirked up an incredulous eyebrow. "None of us talk to Psych," he dryly pointed out. "What the hell makes you think he'd do it?"

"Just trying to cover asses, in case he cracks up on a deployment," Rumlow explained. He pointed a finger down into his desk, saying, "I can't have a weak link like that on my team, Captain America or not."

"I know," Jack agreed.

"We need to straighten him out," Brock decided. "I want to know what the fuck his problem is, before we sign off on him."

Rollins had been thinking about his conversation with the Commander since he left the Triskelion last night. Driving in to work, it was still on his mind. Pulling into his parking space in the garage, movement across his rear view mirror caught his eye, as he shut off the engine of his SUV. Rogers was just walking in for the morning. Jack slid out of the driver's door, calling out to the Captain.

"Rogers!"

He stopped, turning on his heel to look back at Rollins walking around the back of his car. "Yes, Sir?"

"Get changed, Snowflake," Jack told him, not stopping as he continued talking. "Gym. 15 minutes."

"Sir?" Rogers questioned. "Formation is in-"

"Did I stutter?" Rollins challenged, without looking back or even slowing his stride.

He heard Rogers' footsteps start up again. They caught up by the time the elevator opened to Rollins. The two men rode up to the 23rd floor in silence. Jack sent a message to Rumlow, saying he and Rogers would be in the gym instead of attending the morning inspection. Rogers got off to go to the locker room, while Rollins went up to his office to drop off his keys and check for any messages. He was only a few steps behind the Captain, as he entered the gym.

Jack motioned for him to follow him into the next training room and told him to tape up. While the Captain wrapped his hands and wrists, Rollins settled into a lean against the wall, crossing his arms and taking a surveying look across the large room. There were several early risers working out, but there were no scheduled sessions in the PT areas for the day for any of the teams. That probably contributed to Rogers' confusion about Jack's directives this morning.

There was a newly assigned operator to Charlie Team on his way out the door. It was too convenient and easy for Jack not to stop him and tell him, "I need my morning coffee, boot. Black, one sugar."

The eager to please specialist nodded and hurried out the door. Rogers watched the exchange with a small smirk in the side of his mouth, pressing down the end of the tape looped around his left wrist. Rollins straightened up off the wall, leveling his eyes at the Captain.

"Something funny, Snowflake?" he asked.

"No, Sir," he swept his head.
Folding his arms tightly across his chest, Jack gave him a critical once over, before wondering, "What is it with you, Rogers?"

"I'm sorry, Commander?" he shook his head. "I don't follow."

"No, you don't," he agreed, starting to slowly circle the super soldier, studying his angles. "I don't see you interacting with your teammates. I see you take meals and breaks by yourself, when we're off site and here in the mess hall." Rollins stopped in front of him, looking him in the eye. "So, I'll ask again, what is it with you? You don't like it here?"

"No," he shook his head.

"This Division not living up to your lofty expectations?"

"No, Sir."

"You don't like your new teammates?"

"No, I li-"

"Don't want to be here? Something better you could be doing with your time?" Jack could see he was beginning to irritate him, and that's what he wanted.

"No, Sir," Rogers scowled.

"This is a team sport, Captain," he noted. "I don't have time to dick around and figure out why you're not trying to fit in." Jack took a step in. "So, do me this one favor and tell me, what the fuck is your problem? ...Or do I report that this isn't going to work out and have you removed from this division?"

He saw the Captain's jaw work, and he waited. After a moment, Rogers answered, "I don't have a problem, Sir."

Still staring him down, Rollins quietly disagreed, "Bullshit." Jack stepped back and pointed at the closest heavy bag. "Work that bag, until I get tired." Rogers looked at the bag and then back at Rollins, and Jack added, "Or until you decide to nut up and convince me you belong here."

After a moment of hesitation, where Rogers looked like he had something to say but thought better of it, Rogers turned to square up to the heavy bag and started throwing punches. Jack made a lazy pace of the floor behind him, eyeing the Captain's technique and catching little side eye checks from Rogers to make sure Jack was still there. A few minutes into the drill, Jack's coffee was delivered. Rollins stood on the far side of the bag, watching Rogers. He saw the resentment slowly building, the longer he stood there.

Several silent minutes and half his cup of coffee later, Rollins checked, "Got anything you'd like to share, Snowflake?" But Rogers kept swinging. Jack nodded, sarcastically telling him, "That's fine. Take your time. I'm not even close to tired yet. ...Shit," he condescendingly smiled, "after this coffee, I could do this all fuckin' day. ...How 'bout you?"

Rollins thought he detected a little extra swing in the bag's chain, after the next few hits. He occasionally sipped his coffee, giving the rest of his attention to the Captain's work. When the large styrofoam cup was empty, Jack stepped away to drop it in the trash can, but fell right back into to his stern observation, noticing the sweat finally coming to Rogers' brow and a certain grit to his teeth that Jack took to mean he was beginning to lose his patience, after 25 minutes or so.
"Well, hell," Jack tutted, making a show of checking his watch. "I'm not going to get shit done today, at this rate." He shifted his gaze back up to Rogers. "Step it up, Snowflake. Put some effort into it and maybe you'll change your mind."

Rogers dropped his hands to his sides, his chest deflating and shoulders falling with a heavy exhale. Rollins quirked up an expectant eyebrow, waiting for him to say something. The Captain swallowed a breath to reset himself, before he spoke up.

"All due respect, Commander," Rogers seemed to do his best to mean what he said, "but how long do you plan on-"

"Until I get a satisfactory response to my question," Rollins scowled, stepping up to stand toe to toe with Rogers. "You got a chip on your shoulder?" Jack pursed his lips in a quick mocking frown. "Somebody hurt your feelings? ...You got a problem with the way we do things around here?"

Again, there was no response, but Jack saw the seething in his eyes. "You want another assignment? Think you're too good for this work?"

"No, Sir."

"Well, then," Jack sneered, "you best unfuck your head out of your ass and tell me what the god damn problem is, because I've got news for you, Snowflake. You either ruck up and get in line with the program or you're out. I will personally write your discharge paperwork and kick your ass out of my building. Nothing would make me happier. I don't have the time to hold your fuckin' hand, when I've got 239 other operators to keep alive who actually want to be here. So, what's it gonna be? Do I get to run another recruit class to fill your spot? You gonna make my day and quit? Because I don't have time to waste on people wasting my time."

There it was. The flinch Jack needed.

"No, Sir."

"No, Sir, what?" Rollins pressed. "Because I've asked a lot of questions this morning, and it's not even oh-800."

"You don't have to fill my spot on the team," Rogers told him. "I'm not going to quit."

"Quit?" Jack repeated, giving him a scathing once over. "Shit, Snowflake, you haven't even started. What the hell am I supposed to do with you, huh? How do I motivate the unmovable?" His eyes raked down the front of the Captain. "At the smallest element, you've got 11 men to convince that you're worthy of their trust; that you won't let them down, when they need you. How do I make them believe you'll do any and everything to make sure they get home? Because that's the level of commitment I need from my operators.

"Anyone of these guys," Rollins went on, with a no look gesture, that Rogers' gaze followed, to the other operators going through their workouts, "will gladly lay down his life for his brothers and sisters. They need to know you'll do the same. I need to know that. Because we deserve nothing less from you, or anyone else who comes behind you." Jack stepped out of the way, inclining his head toward the bag. "I haven't even broken a sweat," Jack pointed out. "Get back on that bag, Snowflake."

Rogers balled up his fists. Jack could see his muscles coil, but the Captain didn't budge. Instead, Rogers eyed the bag, contemptuously, working his jaw against itself. The strain in the muscles in his arms and neck relaxed and his fingers fell open again.
"I won't let them down," he said, and Jack crossed his arms, listening as Rogers met his gaze. "I won't let you down, either, Commander. But I-" Rogers stopped and Rollins waited, ready to finally hear what he'd been trying to work out of him. "I'm not interested in making friends here, Sir."

"Fuck, Snowflake," Jack smirked, "it's only been three days. Nobody wants to marry you, either."

The Captain almost allowed a snort, but shook his dropped head. "I've lost enough friends," Rogers told him. "I'd just as soon not lose anymore. Can't lose what you don't have, Sir."

Rollins nodded. He understood. That he could figure, Rogers probably knew less than five people who were still above ground. The kid wasn't technically even 28 years old and he'd already been through one of the most hellish wars in history and died once. Any possessions he may have had left, beside his shield and the uniform they found him in were in a museum somewhere. Jack couldn't blame him for not wanting to make any new attachments. But that attitude wasn't going to help the cohesion of the team.

Rollins followed Rogers' eyes over to the doorway across the gym. He gave a subtle jut of his chin as greeting, as Rumlow crossed the training floor. Jack passed between the Captain and the punching bag, telling him again to get back to work. Jack met Rumlow halfway, keeping his back to the super soldier while he explained what had been going on this morning with Rogers.

"I don't have room on my team for martyrs, Jack," Rumlow frowned, wiping his hand down over his mouth, looking past Rollins' nodding agreement to watch the Captain for a moment. Brock nodded to himself and Jack fell into step beside him, walking back to Rogers. Stopping in the periphery of Rogers, Rumlow spoke up. "I understand you got a motivation problem."

Rogers straightened up, opening his mouth to disagree, but Jack cut him off, saying, "I'm not tired, Rogers, so why are you stopping?"

"Yes, Sir," he nodded, immediately going back to hitting the bag.

Brock started a slow, wide circle around Rogers and the heavy bag, seeming to contemplate him for a long moment. "It doesn't take a lot of strength to hang on. It takes a lot of strength to let go," he told him. "JC Watts once said that. Of course-" Rumlow interrupted himself to correct Rogers' form, "Back straight." before picking up where he left off. "-you don't know who that is and that's okay."

Jack crossed his arms, keeping an eye on Rogers' technique, while Rumlow went on. "You lost a lot, Cap," he conceded. "I get that. We all get that." Brock stood still for a moment, noting, "It doesn't mean you should quit or hold back. Holding back isn't going to help anyone, least of all you. No one would want that."

Listening to Rumlow seemed to be fueling Rogers' anger a little, the same way Jack's comments had. But the Captain's secret was out. He didn't need to be needled anymore. Now, he needed to muster.

"Keep your back in it," Rumlow barked, moving again, with a clap of his hands to be sure Rogers was paying attention. "Legs spread. ...You're letting your emotions get the upper hand in this, Cap." He resumed his walk around. "You're listening and you know it's true," Brock told him. "Your past is holding you back. You know those people would want you to move on. ...None of it is your fault. Stop acting like it is."

Jack saw the flinch again; noticed the flex of Rogers' jaw as he grit his teeth, as Rumlow pressed.
"Let it all out," he insisted. "Let the world know you're in pain...but let them know you're not giving up." Brock leaned into the side of Rogers' face. "Come on!"

There was a new violence to the way the heavy bag shook, shaking on its swing with each hit. Rumlow took one more lap around the Captain, before ordering him to stop. His shoulders heaving with his heavy breath, Rogers stood, staring at the swinging bag, his brow wrinkled in thought and irritation. Brock moved to stand just in front of his shoulder, invading his personal space again.

"You get that shit out of your head, son," Rumlow quietly ordered, stabbing a fingertip at Rogers' temple. "You get your head straight and you decide if you want to be here. If you don't want to be here, I can't fuckin' help you; Jack can't fuckin' help you. Nobody can fuckin' help you." Brock straightened up out of his face, his tone relaxing with his expression. "But, you decide you wanna be here?" he offered. "Then you know you're home. This is your family, now. Here, you only lose what you give up."

"And you don't give up, do you, Snowflake?" Jack prompted.

Rogers nodded to himself, before promising, "No, Sir, I don't."

"Outstanding," Brock nodded once. He tipped his head toward the door, telling Rogers, "Get out of here. Catch up with the rest of the squad in Classroom 4."

"Yes, Sir," Rogers nodded, pulling at the tape on his hands.

Rumlow turned away, heading over to the equipment cabinet to get started on his own workout. Jack stood by, arms crossed, patiently waiting for Rogers to leave, curious to see if the Captain had anything else to say. Rogers wadded up the tape as he unwound his hands, throwing a discerning glance up at Jack from his work and the corner of his eye.

"Can I ask you something, Commander?" he wondered, and Jack gave him a nod to go ahead. "You ever gonna stop calling me Snowflake?"

A fiendish smirk came to the corner of Jack's mouth, as he said, "Not today, Snowflake." Rollins dropped his arms, moving to step around the Captain to catch up with Brock, adding, as he went, "Tomorrow's not looking good, either."

"Yes, Sir," Rogers acknowledged, from behind him, and Jack grinned.

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to @stevebottoms for making this amazing edit and letting me use it for this chapter.
"Morning, Jack."

Rollins looked up from his phone in one hand and coffee in the other to see Rogers joining him at his otherwise empty table. Jack had gotten to work a little early and opted to grab a cup of joe in the cafeteria before heading up to his office. He was skimming through his email, when the Captain appeared. Jack swallowed his drink and turned his eyes back down to his phone.

"Morning, Steve," he nodded back.

The Captain had all but insisted to be called by his first name. It was unusual, but Jack relented, if only to keep in line with the rest of the squad. By default, everyone in STRIKE called each other by their last name or occasionally a variation or nickname for their rank. Even off the clock, they never managed to shift out of that gear. But Rogers seemed to use first names as his way of getting to know you and as a kind of compliment to show his approval.

Jack had noticed not everyone was on a first name basis. Operators from other teams were typically addressed by Rogers by their last name, rank, or both. But he was getting familiar with all of Delta, and not just his squad, and the casualness the Captain used was surprisingly comfortable among Jack and the rest of his troops. Jack still called him Snowflake, once in awhile, just to fuck with him.

"No breakfast?" Rogers noted.

Rollins hummed his negative reply. "Ate at home."

"Hey, I wanted to thank you for that recommendation," he offered. "Dinner was great."


"Yeah," the Captain nodded, as he peppered his eggs, "dropped in there last night with Allison."

"Allison?" Jack questioned, locking his phone and putting it down on the table, his curiosity piqued.

"Addams," he led him on. "From Echo?"

"I know who you're talking about," he told him. "I just didn't know you knew her yet."

"Not really," Steve shrugged, chewing a mouthful of scrambled eggs. "I mean, I'm getting to. She introduced herself when I first got here. We've caught each other in the cafeteria a few times. She's kind of shown me around a few places, introduced me to some of the flight line, stuff like that. I told her I owed her dinner, or something, for helping me out the last few weeks."

Jack nodded, with a faint grin, knowing Allison was the type to have adopted Rogers. He could see them getting along well and told him as much.

"Yeah," Rogers agreed, before a sip of coffee. "She's not at all what I thought she'd be."

Rollins drank from his mug and wondered, "What were you expecting?"
With an almost shy grin, the Captain admitted, "Somebody way meaner."

Jack couldn't help laughing and Rogers smiled awkwardly as he ate. "Trust me," Rollins nodded, "she's meaner than you think. Wait 'till you see her work."

"I've been trying to catch up on STRIKE personnel files," he said. "Hers is very impressive."

Rollins nodded, a little proud. "It is," he agreed.

"First female on Echo," Rogers marveled. "Hell of a way to make an entrance."

"She's a hell of a soldier," Jack bragged a little. "She's made an impression since she joined."

"So, I've read," he nodded. "But besides all that, she's a lot of fun to hang out with." He shoveled another pile of eggs onto his fork. "She offered to let me borrow some movies. Says she's got a whole collection of some guy named Mel Brooks I need to see."

Jack snorted, quietly, with an amused bob of his head. "Mel Brooks, huh?" he marveled. "Yeah, those'll be good."

Rollins heard about their meal at the chop house he'd named for Rogers when he'd asked for a place to get a decent steak and how Steve had laughed, a little surprised, when Allison ordered a whiskey instead of wine or a cocktail. He listened for a couple minutes, as the Captain talked about his conversation with Allison. Jack nodded along, hearing about her taste in music and how interesting it was to Steve that she knew and liked some of the old music he knew before the war. And how he felt a little bad for her when she had told him about cutting ties with what was left of her family, despite her reassurance that it didn't bother her.

Jack was a little jealous of the way Rogers seemed to have just fallen in with her, although he understood the dynamic was different. Rollins' position in the chain of command kept him to a higher standard for socializing than Rogers was held to. While he technically had a higher rank than Addams, Rogers didn't have the time in service and familiarity that she had with the teams yet, and Rollins was pleased she'd reached out and was helping make Rogers feel welcome. Keeping him comfortable would allay or prevent any suspicions the Captain may have about his fellow teammates. But it didn't stop Jack from wishing he were in a position that afforded him the chance to get to know Allison outside of work the way Rogers was.

"But I'm sure you know," Steve concluded, with another drink of coffee.

"We don't hang out," Rollins admitted.

"Oh," he blinked, looking a little thrown for a second.

"Decorum," Jack explained.

"Right," Rogers seemed to realize, with a nod.

"She's good people, though," Rollins conceded.

The Captain's grin returned, apparently relieved he hadn't been chastised or corrected for possibly having stepped outside the bounds of typical or acceptable interactions with subordinates. Rollins couldn't hold it against him. At least he seemed to be loosening up. The conversation turned to when Rollins thought they may finally get a mission. Jack smirked at the Captain's eagerness to get to work and prove himself to his new team. Yeah, Steve Rogers was going to do alright.
He almost got away with it. He'd spent most of the morning and the better part of the afternoon dodging Agent Sitwell. Pierce's favorite lackey wasn't hard to evade, but that little piece of shit was persistent. Nothing Sitwell ever wanted was of any interest to Jack and what he did occasionally have that actually required Rollins' attention tended to be bullshit and, Jack suspected, just a way for Sitwell to throw his undeserved weight around.

Jack had almost made it into the elevator, his raised boot barely breaking the plane of the car doors, when Jasper's unmistakably annoyed voice called out from behind him.

"Agent Rollins!"

"It's Lt. Commander, you little prick," Jack muttered to himself, before he turned around and took a step away from the elevator and back into the hall. He waited, his hands folded in front of him and stone faced, for Sitwell to catch up.

"I've been looking for you all day," Jasper made a point of saying, as he came up to Jack.

"Yeah, well," Rollins shrugged, "if you used the right name, I might've heard you sooner." Sitwell seemed caught off guard, his mouth moving then suddenly stopping, processing Jack's slight. "Spit it out, Sitwell," Jack groaned. "I have somewhere else to be."

"Pierce wants your report on Steve Rogers," Jasper told him, his tone matching the irritation in his expression. Sitwell always was easy to fuck with.

"Tomorrow," Jack said, twisting at the waist to reach out and press the elevator call button behind him.

"He wants it today," Agent Sitwell arrogantly persisted. "He's been waiting."

"I didn't have a deadline," Rollins reminded him. "I said I could get him one by the end of the week. That would be tomorrow. He'll have it tomorrow." He couldn't have been any plainer or more condescending.

The Secretary's interest in how the Captain was fitting in with STRIKE was becoming a pain in Jack's ass. Rollins had already submitted two reports on Rogers' training achievements and assessments, since his arrival. He was falling in to the program easily and his teammates were taking to him well enough. It'd only been three weeks since Rogers' assignment to STRIKE Team Delta had begun. If he had to start weekly progress reports on the Captain to satisfy Pierce's curiosity, Jack was going to start taking hostages.

The truth was, having Steve Rogers around wasn't as bad as Rollins had expected. He was eager to learn, respectful of his place in the food chain, and a decent guy to shoot the shit with. Jack had spent the most time with him than anyone, orienting him to Division SOPs and essentially overseeing and evaluating all of Rogers' training with his squad. The only thing Jack could hold against him was his dislike for HYDRA, but it's not that Jack didn't understand why. As much as he might hate to publicly admit it, Rollins actually was starting to like the Captain. Other than that, there wasn't much to report.

"I don't care for the attitude, Agent Rollins," Sitwell glared.

Jack inhaled an even breath, his eyes flicking up to the ceiling to find a moment of patience, before he pointed out, "I've explained this before. I'll try using smaller words." He set his hard gaze on the agent. "It's Lieutenant Commander, Sitwell. I've earned my rank. Any asshole can be an agent, like
you. People like me are an entirely different breed. You wanna start getting some respect around
here," he cocked up a brow, "you better start showing respect where it's due. When you need my
attention, use the proper title."

"Is that supposed to try and intimidate me?" he scoffed, although Rollins detected the failure of his
confidence in Sitwell's posture.

"Men like me don't try, Sitwell," Jack assured him. "Men like me mean what we say, and we have
the balls and the skills to back it up." He cocked his head, sarcastically feigning interest to ask,
"What do you do, Agent Sitwell?"

"He doesn't like to be kept waiting," Jasper threatened, as strongly as he could but as weakly as he
always came off to Jack.

Having a good 5 inches or so over Sitwell, Jack looked down at him, saying, "Yeah, I don't like
listening to little errand boys like you try and bust my balls like they know anything about what I
do for a living, Agent Sitwell." The elevator returned and the doors slid open. "He'll have his
assessment tomorrow," Jack reiterated. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a briefing to attend."

"Briefing for what?" Jasper asked, a mildly suspicious wrinkle in his brow.

Rollins took a step in to Sitwell, purposefully raising his right hand to draw Jasper's attention to it.
Jack flicked the ID badge hanging from the agent's suit lapel, his finger snapping into the number 6
on the security clearance line. "None of your damn business," Jack quietly told him.

Jack didn't wait for a response. He did a crisp about face and walked into the elevator. When he
turned back to the doorway, Sitwell was still scowling at him, but, as expected and as usual, he had
no retort for Jack. Rollins quirked up an expectant eyebrow, daring him to delay him another
second more, but Sitwell said nothing and Jack saw the frustrated exhale deflate the agent's chest.
Jack gave him a subtle jut of his chin, before the car doors slid shut. Alone in the elevator, Rollins
ordered the AI to the 29th floor.

"Prick," Jack muttered, turning his eyes up to the display counting up the floors.

... Rollins was the last one there. Everyone else was already seated, pens in hand and notebooks ready
to jot down the details of their first sortie with Captain America. Jack checked his watch, as he
made his way down the short aisle dividing the room. He set his jaw, irritated that Sitwell had put
him off schedule and had him walking in to Briefing Room 2 right on time instead of his typical
early arrival.

"Good afternoon, ladies," Rumlow smirked, looking across the faces in the room before turning his
eyes down to the notes in front of him. While Jack took his usual seat at the end of the first table in
the front row, Brock added a smart, "Good of you to join us." Jack cocked his head, giving Brock
an arrogant look and flipping him off, before the Commander snorted, with an amused bob of his
head, and began to outline their mission.

The assignment was simple enough. An asset had infiltrated a unit of the ELN and had uncovered
information about the planned ransom kidnappings of reps for a US oil company scheduled to visit
one of their exploration projects. The intel the undercover operative provided gave SHIELD the
opportunity to thwart the kidnappings and potentially grab one of the top lieutenants of the guerrilla
fighters who would be leading the raid in the process. It would be a good mission to ease the
Captain into the work.
When the meeting broke, Rogers and the rest of his squad mates went to pull and load their gear. Rollins stayed in his seat, slouched back comfortably to wait for Rumlow. He watched, as the Commander gathered his notes and shut down the screens and computer in the room. It was quiet for a moment before Rumlow spoke up.

"You had me worried there," he joked, quirking up eyebrow. "You're always early."

"Fuckin' Sitwell," was all he had to say. The humor left Brock's face and he groaned, "What'd that prick want?"

"Hounding me about the next report on Rogers," Jack told him.

"D'I miss a memo? Are we doing those weekly now, or something?" Rumlow sarcastically checked.

"Like hell we are," Jack said, in no uncertain terms.

"What does he want?" Brock gripped, closing the open folder in front of him on the podium. "Outside of his initial PT assessments and shit, we don't really have anything to report, until we start getting him out on deployments. And you see how long that took to come up."

"So, I guess I'll be doing the AAR for this and writing a fourth report on Roger's first mission performance to satisfy Pierce's little obsession," Jack unhappily supposed.

"Fuck that," Rumlow decided, gathering up his small pile of paperwork to step around the podium. Jack stood up and Brock told him, "Pierce can read the AAR. If he has any questions, he can ask me. We're not doing this bullshit every time we draw an op."

"Good," Rollins agreed. He fell into step with Rumlow, following him into the hallway and toward the elevator. It occurred to him, he should warn him, "Sitwell might have something to say."

Beside him, Brock chuckled, raising an intrigued eyebrow. "Why's that?"

"I might have insinuated he's a useless piece of shit," Jack limply shrugged.

"Did you use those words?" Rumlow checked, plainly amused.

"No," Jack shook his head. "But the implied elements were there."

Brock hummed and nodded, as Jack tapped the elevator call button. "What'd he do this time?"

"That cock sucker keeps calling me "agent" and wondering why I don't answer him," he said.

"Give him a break, Jack," Rumlow laughed.

"Break his fuckin' neck," he grumbled, stepping into the car when the elevator opened.

Both operators nodded to the others in the elevator and Brock gave their destination to the AI. "I'll smooth it out," he nodded, "if he even shows up to complain."

"There wouldn't be anything to smooth out," Jack noted, "if that brown nosing son of a bitch would stay the hell away from me."

"Aw, c'mon," Brock smirked. "I think he likes you, big guy."
Rollins gave him an unamused glare, which only broadened the Commander's grin. They moved aside to let their fellow elevator riders off at the next stop. Alone again, Brock agreed, "I hate Sitwell as much as the next guy. I wouldn't lose any sleep over it, if that guy got hit by a bus. But, Jack, do me a favor, huh?" Rollins met his gaze. "Try to give the guy a little room, alright? Chapping his ass only gets Pierce chewing on mine, and we've got too much going on lately for me to try an' squeeze in time to get reamed by the boss." Jack rolled his eyes and let out an annoyed sigh. Rumlow put up his hand, adding, "I know. Just stay out of his line of sight for awhile and let him feel like he's important again."

"Fine," Jack shrugged, stepping out of the elevator. "I can play nice. I'll be so nice to that prick, he'll be so unnerved he won't be able to sleep at night."

"There ya go," Brock nodded.
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"I don’t know. Some financier or banker, or something. Maybe she didn’t really say? Either way, a
guy like that’s probably loaded."

"Didn’t think she was the type."

"To go for a guy with money? Girl, who wouldn’t?"

"No. To date a civilian."

"Ay."

Jack looked up from his tablet at the greeting, as Rumlow took a seat across the table from him.
“Mornin’,” he nodded.

"Am I late?" the Commander asked, checking his watch.

"No," he assured him. “I’m early.”

"What’re you doing?"

The truth was, eavesdropping on Fender and Penn’s conversation at the next table and being
thoroughly disappointed to hear for certain that Addams was off the market. The answer he gave
was, “Going over the requisition list for the amphibious assault training next week.” It was mostly
true.

"All squared away?" Brock checked, taking a bite of a strip of bacon from his plate.

"Think so," Rollins nodded.

Rumlow nodded, telling him, as he chewed, “Add a few extra tanks of air. Last time, we had a few
bottles that were short. I want some spares, just in case.”

Jack made the adjustment to the order and Brock continued with his breakfast. Next to them, the
pair of female operators had finished theirs and were just getting up from their table. From the side
of his eye, Jack noticed them picking up their trays and it pulled his attention.

"Good morning, Sirs," the women said in unison.

"Ladies," Rumlow acknowledged, ahead of a sip of coffee, and Jack nodded in reply, already
drinking from his mug. Brock threw a quick look over his shoulder, doing a double take and
wondering, “D’I miss something?"

"What?" Jack shook his head, matching Rumlow’s confused expression.

"Did Penn get married?" he asked, turning back around.

"No," he smirked. “She got engaged, last week."

"No shit," Rumlow marveled. “Good for her.” He raised his chin and wrinkled his brow again.
“How’d you know?"
Rollins snuffled a laugh, taking a bite of toast. “Because I’ve actually left my office, lately,” he quipped.

“I’ve been up to my fuckin’ neck in bullshit for Pierce,” Brock grumbled, taking another drink. “What else d’I miss?”

“Nothing,” he answered, pursing his lips and giving a sweep of his head. With a snort, he checked, “What, you not keeping up with the water cooler gossip?”

“Apparently not,” the Commander chuckled.

“Careful,” Jack teased. “People might think you’re slippin’, if you don’t know what your troops are doing.”

“I know enough, smartass,” Brock smugly assured him. “Besides, it’s your job to make sure I don’t miss anything.”

“Fair enough,” he grinned, taking up his fork for some eggs.

“So, then,” Rumlow started, his attention on peppering his eggs, “you probably heard about Addams.”

Jack played dumb, curious to see what exactly his friend meant. He didn’t want to respond with what he’d just learned about her personal life, in case it was a professional matter. Although, Jack didn’t suspect it would be. He shook his head, as he chewed, to say he didn’t know.

Brock quirked up a brow and swallowed his food. ”Really? Thought you were still keeping tabs on her.”

“What makes you say that?” he shrugged it off.

“I’ve seen you watch her,” Brock noted. Jack didn’t say anything, but gave a small shake of his head, taking another bite of his breakfast. He looked up from his plate, feeling Rumlow’s gaze on him. “I heard she’s seeing someone.”

Jack nodded, subtly. “Yeah. Heard that, too.” He took a sip of coffee to wash down his eggs, but Brock was still watching. “What?”

”Nothin’,” he shrugged. “Just, you know, I know you got a thing for her.”

“I don’t have a thing for her,” Rollins denied.

“Huh,” Brock considered. “Thought you-“

”She’s nice to look at,” Jack casually dismissed. “Compared to everything else around here. That’s all. Besides, it’d be against regs, right?”

Rumlow nodded, scooping some more eggs onto his fork. “Right.”

Jack wasn’t in the mood for gossip, anymore. He had another bite of toast and turned the tablet around to push toward Brock, telling him the requisition was ready for his approval. It moved the conversation back to business and gave Rollins a much needed distraction.
"Oh, god," Brock winced. “Jesus Christ, you’re fuckin’ whipped again, aren't you?’’

Jack let out a heavy exhale, cocking up a brow as he watched Rumlow over his shoulder move around to take the empty seat beside him in the cafeteria to peer at his phone. “Fuck you,” he groaned.

"What are those for?” he teased, bumping his elbow into Jack’s arm while he tried to type on his phone. “Made some kind of anniversary already?’’

His head lolled to the side, so he could be certain Brock saw him roll his eyes. “It’s for her birthday, you dick,” he explained, shaking his head.

Beside him, the Commander chuckled, proud of himself. “I’m just givin’ ya a hard time,” he excused himself. “Honestly, I’m kinda happy to see you sticking with a girl again.”

"Did you not hear me the first time I said to fuck off?’’ Jack wondered, tapping the payment icon on his screen and setting the phone aside.

“’I did,” he confirmed, with a nod. “But since when do I listen to you?’’

Reaching for his coffee, Jack conceded, with a smirk, “Never.”

"Exactly,” Brock grinned. It was quiet for a moment, while he set about salting his breakfast and Rollins drank his coffee, before he circled around to note, “Still...sending her flowers on her birthday, that’s a new trick for you.”

“Ah, god dammit,” Rollins complained, shaking his head. Taking up his fork again, he stabbed at the eggs on his plate, pointing out, “Even you’ve sent a woman flowers for her birthday. It’s not a big deal. It literally might be the least amount of effort I could put in to it.”

Shaking his head, as he chewed, Brock disagreed. “Not to her it ain’t. How long’s it been?’’

"Been since what?’’ he asked, on a tired sigh.

"How long have you been seeing her?’’ he elaborated. “What’s ‘er face...Stephanie.”

“I don’t know,” he nonchalantly shrugged. “Like, four months, maybe.”

"New world record,’’ Rumlow quipped.

"I don't know why you think I won't stab you with this dirty fork,’’ Jack mused, eyeing the utensil he held up for Brock to see.

He hummed, with a short nod, before he gestured to the cutlery in front of Jack and corrected, “Use the spoon. It’ll hurt more.”

“Not worth the effort,” Jack snorted, shaking his head. “Idiot.”

"Seriously, though,” he began, ahead of a sip of coffee. “Four months is a long time for you, since the divorce.”

"Can we not bring up my ex-wife?’’ Rollins asked. “Or anything else about my personal life, for that matter? I was having a good morning.”

"Nope,” Rumlow swept his head, taking his next bite. “It’s already out there.”
Jack quietly sighed. It wasn’t a big deal, not to him. Or, at least, he didn’t think it should be. In hindsight, maybe he could see that he’d probably run through a bit more than his share of women, since the divorce. But, to be fair, he didn’t have the time nor the interest to invest in a relationship again. Things were less complicated when there weren’t many expectations. Uncomplicated was what he needed, after Claire. Maybe it was selfish, but it worked for him.

Things had kind of evened out, at work. There hadn’t been any extra deployments without the Asset and there hadn’t been a need to run a recruit class to fill any vacancies or additional courses to run to get new team members operational, for awhile. The last few months had been a welcome change of pace. And so what if a side effect of that was him having a little extra time to offer to a woman. Stephanie was attractive and well rounded, and had recently left a hospital nursing job to work for a private practice physician in Virginia. She was good company and didn't have too many hang ups. It wasn’t a big deal to send a nice girl, like her, flowers for her birthday.

“It’s probably good for you,” Rumlow suggested. “Get your head back into the real world and off work for a bit.”

"Yeah,” Jack chuckled. “You’re one to talk.”

"I’ve got my hobbies,” Brock grinned.

Rollins looked up from his breakfast, his attention drawn by the laughter of the group walking in to the relatively uncrowded cafeteria. Taking a drink of his coffee, his eyes followed Addams and three of her fellow Echo teammates on their way to get in line for their meals. Echo had their quarterly physical assessment, later in the morning. The operators were already in their PT gear. Despite the topic of his girlfriend having come up only moments ago, Jack had no shame admiring the fit of Allison’s compression cold gear leggings.

"Oh, that’s not subtle at all,” Rumlow sarcastically noted. He took another bite, before firmly saying, “Quit eye fuckin’ your subordinate.”

Jack leveled his eyes at Brock for the tone. “The hell?” he questioned, with a deep scowl.

"You heard me,” Brock assured him, with a raise of his chin toward the object of Jack’s distracted attention. “I can hear the HR complaints now.”

"You’re full of shit,” Rollins told him, going back to his meal. “I’m not doing anything.”

"Keep telling yourself that,” he dryly encouraged. “Maybe you’ll remember five minutes ago and that Addams is off the table, for more than just regs being in the way.”

"What’s that supposed to mean?” he frowned.

"It means,” Rumlow began, “you just sent your girlfriend flowers for her birthday and, besides the three regulations telling you to keep it in your pants, she’s got a boyfriend. And, if I recall correctly, that’s the one moral fiber you’ve got in you.”

Taking his napkin from his tray, Rollins wiped his mouth, flatly deciding, “Yyeah. It was a good morning...before you came in.”

"I’m doing you a favor, big guy,” he insisted.

"Not sure how,” Jack groused.

"Keeping you from making a big mistake,” Brock said. “That’s how.”
Jack’s ire was up and he promised, “I don’t need you doing me any favors.” He firmly reminded him, “I’m not doing anything.”

“Sure, you’re not,” he nodded along. “Don’t think I don’t remember you—”

“’What’s it matter, anyway?’ Rollins cut in. “I took a look. Big fuckin’ deal. It’s no more than anyone else around here’s ever done to anyone else.” He inclined his head toward Brock. “You included. You broke policy every time you hooked up with Evy. And now, you’re gonna call me out for taking a look, nothing else?” Jack scoffed. “Fuckin’ hypocrite.”

”Evy was never my subordinate,” he pointed out.

”Oh,” Jack sarcastically nodded, “so, because it was only one reg and the other two didn’t apply, it doesn’t count.”

”This isn’t about something I did,” Brock countered. “This is about watching your six.”

“Some things,” Jack smartly corrected. He held up as many fingers, noting, “Three times you did it, to be exact. Or was it four?”

”Now you’re going to try and ruin my morning?” he figured, with a tight nod.

”Fair’s fair,” Jack coolly shrugged. He finished the last swallow of his coffee and put the mug down on his tray. “If she wasn’t seeing someone—” He paused, allowing, “And if I wasn’t, who’s to say we wouldn’t work out any worse than you and Evy did? Or, even better?”

Rumlow blinked, seeming to realize, “Holy shi— You... You’re actually talking about more than a one and done with her.”

Jack was irritated by how incredulous Rumlow was about it. “Is that so hard to believe?”

With a thoughtful frown, Brock admitted, “Yeah. From you? It is. You haven’t held on to a girl for longer than a few nights since Claire and now—”

Rollins held up a finger, strongly cautioning him again, “Don’t...bring her up. She has nothing to do with any of this.”

“Says you,” he scoffed. “But you haven’t had a single, steady relationship in almost three years since Claire. And you think you’re gonna pull one off with a subordinate? Come on,” he smirked. “Even you’ve got to see the humor in that.”

Rollins gave him an exhausted side eye. “We done?” he checked.

“Sure,” Rumlow condescendingly agreed. “If I thought for one second you were gonna take my advice and keep your eyes on your work and off Addams’ ass.”

”See ya for inspection,” Jack told him, pushing back his chair to stand and taking up his tray.

”Don’t be a pussy,” Brock scowled. “Sit down and finish your breakfast.”

”I’m done,” he assured him, walking around the table.

”Jack, come on,” he complained.

But Jack carried on. When he passed Addams and the others, as he turned for the door and they were on their way to get their drinks, he didn’t respond to their greetings. Rollins hoped Rumlow
had noticed and it had proved some kind of point about him being able to ignore Addams at will and as directed. Part of him felt bad for the slight, but then he had a reputation for being stern. It probably didn’t affect the troops one way or the other that he didn’t acknowledge them. It didn’t help his mood though to know he did it on purpose and they didn’t deserve to be ignored. Especially her.
"Addams accepted the position, as well."

Jack looked up from the satellite images in his hands. Brock didn't seem to notice his obvious confusion, still clicking through the report on his screen. Without exception, Horsemen were HYDRA. They had to be. The Horsemen were the ultimate enforcers of HYDRA's will within SHIELD, until Project Insight was ready. But exceptional stats or not, Addams wasn't HYDRA. How did this happen?

"Allison Addams?" Rollins checked.

"Do we have another one I'm not aware of?" Brock deadpanned, looking up at the knock on his door. "Come in."

A tech from Cryptology came in. He nodded to the officers in the room, explaining what they had found on an encrypted thumb drive salvaged from the scene of a terrorist bombing of a seemingly innocent office building in San Marino, as he moved to hand Rumlow the file. AISI had reached out to SHIELD, unable to hack into the device's suspiciously high level of security coding. Rollins listened in and made some notes in the margin of the initial investigation report he had from the Italian intelligence agency. When they had no more questions and the tech left, Jack gave Brock a moment to see if he'd go back to their interrupted conversation or if he'd have to bring it up.

When Brock began reading the new report, Jack spoke up, reminding him, "You were saying about Addams?"

The Commander looked up, maybe a little thrown by the change in priorities in the room. "What?" he squinted. The lines of concentration in his brow relaxed. "Oh, yeah. Addams, yeah, she turned her paperwork in before formation this morning. I already sent it through." He saw the expectant look in Jack's expression, waiting for more. "What?" he defensively frowned.

"Did I miss a memo?" Rollins asked.

"About..." Brock lazily coaxed him on.

"About changing the criteria for assignment to the Horsemen," he said, as if the answer should have been obvious. "Since when are we allowing non-HYDRA personnel into those slots?"

Rumlow nodded his understanding, assuring him, "We're not. Addams is on board."

"Since when?" Jack scoffed. He had access to damn near every project and assignment that the Commander did, and that included recruitment files and assessments. He had never seen one come across his desk for Allison.

"She's been a slow play," Brock answered. He held his hand out over his desk, asking for the satellite images of the aftermath of the explosion.

"Really?" Jack considered, as he picked through the images in his hands to pass on the ones Brock requested. "Never struck me as the type."

Rumlow nodded, his gaze turned down to the images he spread across his desktop. Obviously
focused on the recon images, but somehow confident in what he was saying. Rollins hadn't gotten
the explanation he was hoping for and pressed for more.

"Who spotted her?" he wondered.

Brock picked up the grease pen on his desk and took the time to make a mark and notation on one
of the photos, before he answered, "I did."

It was a little more credible now. The Commander had an eye for talent. He didn't usually
personally recruit, preferring to pass on the job to someone who had the time to give to such
delicate matters or make the suggestion to the actual scouts, but he had made more than a few good
calls in the past. Maybe Allison was another, although Jack wouldn't have pegged her.

"What was it?"

Brock was back on his notes again, checking one image against another from six hours before the
blast. When he was done looking at whatever he saw, he hummed, distractedly. "Hm?" Rumlow
looked up. "Oh, some comments I heard she'd been making. Besides, Command's been curious. A
kid with her talent could be handy, they figured. So, when I caught wind a couple months ago, I
started paying attention.

"Kid's got a helluva mean streak in her. I know you know," he smirked. "She's the new visionary
type. Doesn't have a problem with the means and she could give a shit about the history. It's the
end she sees. She's been coming around, seeing more of the cesspool every time she draws an
assignment. Kinda pisses her off, but what can she do, right? It's SHIELD," Rumlow shrugged.
"She knows SHIELD's way is a guiding hand, but she's seen now that the world needs a strong one.
Dropped a few bugs in her ear when she's said something. Seemed receptive, so I thought, I'll play
this out; see where it goes."

There were four kinds of classifications recruits were lumped into. The legacies were second and
third generation loyalists, essentially bred for the service, following in a proud family member's
footsteps. Legacy's usually found themselves in Command or other leadership roles pretty quickly.
Nepotism has its perks. The traditionalists believe in the history of the cause, tracing their
interests back to the studies of the ideals of Schmidt and his followers. They tended to be too
analytical for the field. The seekers were recruited for their passion to the cause and their often
ravenous willingness to bring the world to order through any means necessary. Their thirst for
glory made them the best foot soldiers. The visionaries, like him, Jack had found, were arguably
the most reliable. They were pragmatists who weren't in it for any other reason than seeing the
value of the end that HYDRA sought. Those recruits were successful in just about any form of
service they were selected for. They were flexible and adaptable; goal and mission driven.

After a moment's thought, Rollins could see it now. Addams had the credentials and the bearing
for the work. He admitted he hadn't really had the contact with her to see or hear what Rumlow
said he picked up on, but Jack knew the Commander had made it a point to open a new line of
communication with her, in the last few months. With Romanoff's frequent lack of availability,
Addams had drawn a few assignments with Delta, necessitating a new level of access to their team
leader. Rumlow was obviously on to something.

She had quickly proved she belonged in STRIKE, earning her teammates', the division's, and even
Command's respect with several significant mission successes in the relative short time she'd been
on team. The potential was there and the friendship she had developed with Rogers would be an
asset to keeping an eye on the Captain, and that alone would be of interest to Command. The merit
of her recruitment was evident, in hindsight. He figured he just wasn't close enough to her to see
the signs Brock saw.
"She's gonna do great things for us," Rumlow noted, opening the folder again that Cryptology had sent over.

"So, she's already been vetted," Rollins reasoned.

"It's still in process, but I hit all the marks," Brock nodded. "She's good."

Someone with Addams’ skill set and natural ability was a hell of a recruiting win, Jack could agree, but cold recruitments were always a delicate matter. New assets were typically spotted and directly passed on to a scout to handle the investigation and approach. They were trained to analyze and identify worthy candidates. It was their sole purpose in the organization and they were unquestionably good at their job. There was a point of no return, where a recruiter had laid out all the cards and exposed themselves and the organization to a potential breach, if they were wrong. Over time, techniques and procedure had been so fine tuned that failed recruitments were less than 4%. But that meant there was still a 4% margin for error and a misidentified asset was immediately terminated to protect the integrity of HYDRA's infiltration. If Brock had processed the recruitment himself, being out of practice, he may have missed something. If a scout found something in the work up Brock hadn't, and the Commander was wrong about her, Allison would be eliminated. The possibility didn't sit well with Rollins.

"You know what happens if you're wrong..." Jack firmly pressed.

Rumlow nodded, still at work. "I got a feeling about this one," he promised. "I think she's gonna be alright. She's a helluva spy, Jack. She'll drop into the cover real easy. This pans out, I'm thinkin’ about putting her on Insight. We'll need some reliable people there. Barrow's already talking about it. He's going to need some solid operators for his team. They've worked well together up until now and they'd work well together again, when the time comes. He even thought she was a good replacement for him on the Horsemen."

"I'm not talking about her taking the position," Rollins clarified. "I meant if a scout-"

"There's nothing to worry about," Brock shook his head, looking him in the eye, with a confident grin. He stood, gathering up the papers and photos from his desk, as he went on, "It's a formality of paperwork on our end. She's in. She's good, Jack." Rollins stood and followed him to the virtual sand table, as the 3D image of the bombing site was finishing rendering. "She's gonna be around for a loooong time for you to keep staring at her."

"What?" Jack scowled, purposefully dropping the rest of the satellite photos in his hand on the table to emphasis his irritation.

"Cah'mon," Rumlow groaned, rolling his eyes and tiredly dropping his shoulders. "You're not fooling me, big guy. I see you still clocking her in training. You're lookin' too long to be assessing. And after you and Stephanie split up?" Brock mischievously smirked. "I know you still got that hard on from that first day in the mess hall, no matter what you say."

"Fuck off," Rollins grumbled, reaching out to manipulate the virtual image and zoom into the crater in the rear of the blown out office building.

"I'm just sayin'," he shrugged, laying out a trio of images side by side on the table, "you better keep an eye on how you're keeping an eye, so nobody else sees it."

"It's against regs," Jack casually pointed out, nonchalantly trying to warn the boss away from the topic, again.
"I'm glad you realize that," Rumlow nodded, putting aside the rest of the report. "Keeps you both out of trouble."

"Trouble," he quietly scoffed, craning his neck to look across Brock to compare one of the photos to the digital model in front of them. "If that's trouble, then trouble never looked so good."

"You know what I mean," Brock dryly insisted. "Last thing I need is some harassment complaint or something from her. A girl like that? Cross her and she'll go for your jugular," they both knew.

"Wouldn't mind her teeth on my neck," Jack unabashedly admitted.

Rollins looked over when he caught sight of Rumlow's head cocked to sternly state at him. The operators shared a look and then a smirk. They both quietly chuckled, subtly nodding their agreement at the idea, before Jack picked up one of the satellite images and got back to work.
“Let’s wrap it up,” Jack decided, checking his watch and sitting up from his deep lean back in his chair.

“Aww. Five more minutes?” Mickelson playfully begged.

Rollins smirked. “You’re spoiled enough already,” he told him. “And I’m bored. You’re cutting in to my off time.”

“Jealous we get a new toy first, Commander?” Eric quipped.

“Personally, I don’t agree with Echo getting preferential access to a new airframe the entire division should be using,” Rollins admitted, with a small snort. “But for the record,” Jack smirked, “my position as your boss means SHIELD provides me with a new vehicle every year, if I request. Loaded. Enjoy this test flight now, Mickelson, and your car payments the rest of your life.”

“That’s bullshit,” he muttered, and Jack grinned at hearing Allison’s chuckle in his headset.

Jack stood up, rolling his shoulders forward to stretch his back. His attention snapped down at the red banner flashing at the top of the screen of the tech next to him and the alarm that sounded with it. The tech reached out, opening his mic to address the test pilots, warning, “I have a low pressure light on th-”

“Pressure warning, engine 1, fuel,” Allison noted to Mick.

“Check fuel,” he replied.

“Engine 1’s out,” she updated. “Fuel’s at 5600 pounds.”

“Okay. Autopilot disengaged. Restart engine 1?”

“Restart procedure, engine 1,” Allison agreed, and the TOC was silent as they waited for the result. “…Restart failed. TAC is...6 units. We’re good.”


“Copy- engine 1, flame out. Restart failed,” the controller acknowledged.

“Let’s check generators and on-board batteries are still operating,” Eric suggested to Allison.

While the flight crew checked electronics, Jack ordered the controller, “Notify the Ulysses. Get them off the water and headed their way. Let’s try and shorten the trip for them, just in case.” He turned to the techs from the aircraft manufacturer sitting nearby. “I thought your bird was ready.”

The reps from Boeing were looking between their laptops and the monitors for the telemetry the TOC’s computers were running, fingers flying over their keyboards as they tried to diagnose the trouble. Over the channel, Eric and Allison were running through their checklists for their own solution. Mickelson began a decent to 30,000 feet, while Allison shut off fuel to the downed
engine.

One of the Boeing technicians spoke up, asking Allison to verify a reading they had, when she interrupted to say, “Pressure warning on number 2’s fuel pump. ...Shit. Engine 2 failure.” as the TOC computers received the alarms.

“The hell?” Eric muttered. “Fuel pump’s on?”

”Pumps are on,” she repeated, confirming what the computers in the Triskelion were showing, before another round of alarms sounded. “Still low pressure warning, right side. Crossfeed failure, forward and aft.”

”Restart procedure, engine 2,” Eric told her.

”Autothrottle, disengaged,” she began.

”Throttle is off,” Mickelson agreed.

”Thrust is idle,” she checked.

”Auto-thrust is at zero,” he confirmed.

”Right side fuel control switch, off.”

”Right side confirmed.”

”Status on the Ulysses?” Rollins checked, crossing his arms, tightly.

”Ulysses is conducting pre-flights,” the controller nodded. “Airborne in 2 minutes.” He opened his mic to tell the jet, “Ulysses’ pri-fly is monitoring. Advise if you’re switching or if you want to stay with us.”

”We’ll stay with you,” Mickelson replied, “for now.”

”Right side fuel control switch, on,” Allison continued.

”Right side confirmed,” Eric said.

”APU start and release,” she noted. “Engine restart parameters appear normal...”

”Come on,” Mickelson quietly encouraged, while Jack listened to a tech giving an audible count up of the seconds that passed and held his breath for the next update.

”Negative ignition. Number 2 restart failed,” she said, after a minute passed, a subtle level of worry now underlying the irritation that had been in her voice and giving Jack pause that the test flight could be salvaged in any way.

”Mayday mayday mayday,” Mickelson updated and gave his next report, although everyone in the TOC knew they had an emergency on their hands.

Boeing was scrambling with the SHIELD aviation techs, trying to troubleshoot, while the JX-9 lowered its altitude to 28,000 feet to attempt another restart. Jack watched the main monitor on the wall of the TOC tracking the jet’s transponder, listening as Eric and Allison made their adjustments to try and windmill at least one engine back to life. From behind his fist, Rollins’ jaw flexed and he was aware of the rise in his pulse.
The new jet was, in essence, a scaled down copycat of a Quinjet. SHIELD had been pleased, for over a decade, with the reliable performances of the two current models they had in service. They were the workhorses of the fleet, and the preferred jets of STRIKE, for their durability and their stealth capabilities. SHIELD had been interested in the new airframe for its size.

The smaller jet allowed for insertions into trickier environments, like cities, where clear areas to land were hard or impossible to come by. The cockpit accommodated two pilots, but was designed to be managed by one, and the cabin provided room for four additional passengers or a surprising amount of cargo. The miniature Quinjet would be perfect for Horsemens’ missions that sent them into the field alone or to be remote piloted to recover assets that didn’t require an emergency extraction. There were several possibilities for the jet, if it were put into service. Although now, Jack was decidedly unimpressed and furious with its performance, despite it having passed all the manufacturer and FAA tests before delivery.

All SHIELD wanted to do was get the feedback of a few of the anticipated users of the aircraft to finalize their decision to sign the contract. The three previous flights, with other STRIKE operators had gone flawlessly. There was no rationale about why this one had gone so horribly wrong and an ache, from the tension in his shoulders, started to come to Jack, the longer he watched the radar tracking the wounded bird’s path to the helicarrier.

"Ulysses’ ETA to intercept," the controller noted over the channel, “4 and a half minutes.”

“Yeah, I don’t know if we’ve got 4 and a half minutes of glide,” Mickelson warily said, “but we’re trying.”

“That’s a 33 million dollar prototype,” Jack reminded him, taking his seat again. “Try harder.”

A weak grin came to the side of Rollins’ mouth, hearing the quiet laughter on the channel from the cockpit, before he leaned onto the arm of his chair and his raised hand rubbed across his mouth to prop up his chin. The moment of levity was all he could do to help. He checked the clock on the wall and then turned his gaze to watch the Boeing reps and SHIELD aviators doing calculations and advising Mickelson and Addams on subtle adjustments to make to try and draw out the unpowered flight time they had. The two pilots sounded as levelheaded and optimistic as they could, going back and forth with the techs, considering the situation.

Jack listened, helplessly, as Allison talked through the procedure for dumping fuel, seeing the fuel reading decreasing on the telemetry monitors, preparing for an emergency landing. He glanced at the radar and the jet’s altitude and slowly shook his head. God damn it.

Jack was confident in the abilities of the pair in the cockpit. Every STRIKE operator had to annually certify as an aviator on the two Quinjet models they used, just in case something went wrong and the flight crew needed a replacement on a mission. They were capable pilots. But instincts told him everything about this was going to end in disaster.

The controller verified that the rescue and crash crews on the Ulysses were standing by and updated the time for the two aircraft to intercept. Rollins took his phone out of his pocket and set it on the console ahead of him. One way or the other, he had a call to make, soon. Jack wrapped his hand over his fist, the pressure of his hands pushed against each other rising with his worry, as he anxiously waited to see what happened next.

...
night and went straight into his report. He didn’t have time to waste.

“The JX-9 is down,” Rollins began. “Ditched in the Atlantic, three miles shy of the carrier. Angels are airborne for recovery. Salvage team is mobilizing.”

“The fuck?” Rumlow snapped, seeming to have quickly come out of his drowsiness. “What happened?”

”Engine 1 and 2 failure at altitude,” Jack summarized. “They reported an interruption in fuel delivery. Telemetry confirmed. Both engine restarts failed. They were unable to restart on descent, as well. The Ulysses was directed to intercept, but the pilot mayday’d they were unable to maintain level flight and put her in the water.”

“Where are they?” Brock demanded.

“Angel flight hasn’t made contact yet,” Jack shook his head, watching the timer count up on the wall, marking how much time had passed since the bird went down. “We’re plus 2 minutes from the crash.”

“Did they report ejection?” he pressed.

“Not reported,” Rollins said, looking down over the shoulder of the tech monitoring the flight systems for the experimental jet. “Telemetry didn’t indicate cabin depressurization or show a punch out, prior to losing contact.”

“Jesus Christ,” Brock mumbled. “Why the fuck did we take possession of that plane? They rolled it out too fast. Echo shouldn’t have had their hands on it yet.”

“R and D signed off on it,” Jack unhappily reminded him, sitting down in his chair again. “They said it was ready for service trials.”

“I’m on my way in,” Rumlow told him. “I want to know the instant Rescue makes contact. I want my people back.”

With the call disconnected, Jack dropped his phone onto the console and his head into his upturned hands, leaning his elbows into his knees. He sat there for a long minute, listening to the chatter between the rescue team and the tower on the Ulysses piped into the TOC’s speakers, as the rescue helicopter approached the last known coordinates of the plane.

"Angel 1. Tower, be advised, we are on scene. ...Debris in the water. ...Checking for survivors.”

Jack pushed his hands back over his hair, lifting his head to rest his chin in his palm. He was still, his mouth covered by his hand and eyes fixed on the live video from the rescue helicopters camera fed into the main monitor on the wall of the TOC, searching for any signs of Mick or Allison in the water. The room was eerily silent, as everyone waited to hear any good news. There was nothing they could do anymore. It was all in the hands of the angel flight and the crew of the Ulysses.

"Angel 1. Survivors in the water. 2 PIWs.”

The breath fell out of Rollins, his head dropping and shoulders sagging in relief.

"Swimmer’s at the door. ...Swimmer’s in the water. Swimmer’s okay. Swimmer’s away, coming out at your 4 o’clock. ...Contact with 2 PIWs. Basket’s at the door.”

Jack sat up straight, taking in a slow, deep breath. Around him, the personnel in the TOC
congratulated each other, clapping hands on backs and hugging at their relief. Rollins grabbed his phone, sending a two word message to Rumlow, as he stood up. “Got them.”

“Listen up!” he called, bringing the room to order again. “I want them transferred back to the Triskelion, as soon as they’re cleared by Medical, debriefed in room 3.” He pointed across the consoles. “All stations, save and copy all data. Preservation Protocol 31.3. Forward all reports to the senior controller for collection for the crash investigators.” To the tech beside him, Jack requested he be texted as soon as they had a condition on the survivors. Jack looked at the techs from Boeing, firmly telling them, “You’re fuckin’ lucky.”

Rollins walked out of the room, leaving the officers of the TOC to their work. He had his own to do. Jack started down the hall to the Comms hub to make his next phone call. It’d be less alarming if he used his cell phone, but notifications to families were always done on recorded lines, regardless of the nature of the call. As he reached the door, a message buzzed into his phone, advising Eric and Allison were onboard the rescue helicopter and appeared alright.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he breathed out, before he opened the door to the communications center. He wiped a hand down his face, taking a deep breath and a moment to appreciate that he was calling Mickelson’s wife to say that it was only an accident and he was fine. They both were fine.

“Where the fuck are they?” Brock demanded, walking straight out of the elevator.

“In the air,” Rollins assured him, turning to follow down the hall. “ETA of 50 minutes.”

“And Medical cleared them?” he checked.

Jack nodded, keeping pace with the quick strides of the Commander toward his office. “Doc on the Ulysses is almost done. Says they’re both fine. Mick did a hell of a job; put her down as soft as he could.” His tone dropped, noting, “The airframe’s a loss. Salvage has divers in the water, as we speak, but the images we’re getting don’t look too promising.”

“Fuck that jet,” Rumlow growled, opening up his office door and snapping on the lights. “That piece of shit belongs at the bottom of the ocean.” He dropped his keys on his desk and pushed his chair back, standing in its place while he woke up his computer. “What the hell happened up there?”

Jack shook his head. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “They were coming home. It’d been a good couple of hours.”

Brock nodded to himself, for a long moment. He finally sat down, slumping into his chair and wiping a hand over his mouth. Jack was just taking a seat, when Rumlow wondered, “How the fuck are you not pissed about this?”

Rollins made a quiet snort, raising his chin when he told him, “I’ve had a little more time to work the problem.”

“D’you call Mick’s wife?” he checked, a level of concern apparent. “D’she answer, or did we have to send someone over?”

“She did,” he nodded. “She knows. She’s fine. It’s all taken care of. Data’s being collected for the crash investigation team. They’ve already got someone on the way out to meet the Ulysses and start working with the salvage crew. They’ve got a steady signal from the beacons on the FDRs.”
Rumlow nodded, approvingly. “Thanks, big guy,” he told him, starting to sound levelheaded again. “I can’t tell ya how much I appreciate it was you that was here tonight.”

Jack smirked, scoffing. “Yeah. No problem.” He slouched back in his seat, admitting, “But, if it’s all the same to you, I’d prefer to not do this again.” Brock quietly chuckled, giving a nod of understanding. “You have any idea what it’s like, listening, waiting for the inevitable like that?”

Brock solemnly nodded. “I can imagine,” he said. He considered him a moment, before asking, “You alright?”

“Yeah,” Jack nodded once.

It was an exaggeration. The truth was, he was still stressed. It’d been over a half hour since they got word that Addams and Mickelson were found safe, but it was close to midnight and Jack was working on clocking a 17 hour day. There was a dull ache in his shoulders, from the tension of the last 40 or so minutes.

It was real fear he felt, when Mickelson announced he was going to have to put the plane in the water. Fear that it was the last time he’d hear his friends’ voices and could do nothing to stop it. He could feel himself wearing down, but, at the same time, he was still feeling some of the effects of adrenaline. Even if he was at home, he doubted he’d be able to sleep.

“Why don’t you get out of here,” Brock suggested. “You look like hell.” Jack snorted and Rumlow added, “I’ll take it from here.”

“I’d rather wait,” Rollins told him. “They’re only another-“

“You’ve done enough, Jack,” he assured him. “It’s gonna be a long night, and a long day tomorrow. Get some rest.”

“I know,” Jack agreed, “but I-“

“You need to see her with your own eyes,” Brock reasoned, with a slow nod. Jack had no argument to make and it was quiet for a moment, before Rumlow told him, “I get it.” He held up a hand, promising, “I’m not gonna give you any shit about it. But it’s over, tonight. She’s fine. She’ll be home, soon. They both will.” He paused for a moment, before he sat up in his chair and folded his arms on the edge of his desk. “I need you to get some rest, Jack. I’m gonna be tied up all morning with this bullshit. I need you to run things, tomorrow.”

"Yeah," he relented. He nodded to himself, knowing Rumlow was right. The hard part was over. Allison was on her way back to the Triskelion. The medical staff on the Ulysses had said she and Eric were alright. There wasn’t anything left for him to do for the night and he stood up from his seat, saying, “I’ll stop by before formation. Gimme a call, if you need anything.”
Walking across the enormous marble lobby of the Triskelion, Jack ran down a mental list of things to prep before he headed home for the weekend. He had a meeting on Monday with Rumlow and Pierce about some adjustments to the training budget. Jack had a few proposals to run the final numbers on before the revised budget was sent to the Hill for approval. He needed to track down STRIKE's quartermaster and tell him cut the old digital camo pattern from the uniform specs and replace it with the new OCP, and he was still waiting on Fender to turn in her part of Bravo's AAR from yesterday. Spying his visitor standing beside the reception desk, Jack muttered a profanity to himself, wondering what the hell Mike Stevenson wanted this time.

"Jack," Stevenson lit up, spotting Rollins edging his way past a group of visitors only a few strides away. "How are you, brother?"

Returning a grin, Jack shook Mike's outstretched hand when they met. "Good, Mike. Real good," he nodded. Jack inclined his head to the security officers at the desk. "You all signed in?"

"Not coming in today," Mike shook his head, raising Jack's suspicions a little. "Just need a minute of your time." Jack gave him a curious look and Stevenson added, "This can't be done over the phone. ...Even the business lines."

Jack took a deep breath, raising a hand to direct Mike to go with him to the end of the Memorial Wall, away from prying ears and where he could watch for nosey eyes. The men moved aside from the activity of the lobby, each taking a casual, but cautious, look around. Rollins knew whatever Stevenson had to tell him, it was going to be trouble.

Mike Stevenson was a spook. He worked for the CIA. He and Jack met at a counter-interrogation seminar put on by the agency a few years ago and made a vague friendship over a shared acquaintance from Jack's old Ranger unit. They floated each other intelligence when it was helpful for the agencies to share, but that was about the extent of it. It had been over a year since Jack needed anything from him and he was wary that whatever Mike had for him now couldn't be shared over even the encrypted lines between them.

"What is it?" Rollins asked, his tone loud enough for the bustling lobby, but quiet enough for their assured privacy.

"Marshall," Mike replied, simply.

A bit unsettled by the short answer, Jack pressed, "What about him?"

"They got him, Jack," he shook his head.

Rollins shoulders squared, responding immediately to the tension in his frame at the cryptic answer. "Who's got him?"

"31 hours ago he was in Cabinda," Mike started to explain, "to vet an intel buy for us. Deal went south when Kyle tried to identify the designer of a high end hacking program. The seller tried to strong arm our team into the deal and it all fell apart." The spy took another look around. "They got Kyle, his terp, and one of our other guys."

Jack's jaw worked in anger, as his eyes ticked around the lobby and he insisted, "You're telling me
because you've already got boots on the ground to get them out, right?"

Stevenson shook his head. "I'm telling you because we're not going to get him out."

"The fuck do you mean, you're not getting him out?" Rollins demanded, through grit teeth.

"I can't do it, Jack," Mike told him, dropping his head with a small shake. "The fucking atmosphere over there, right now; the politics. They've denied proposals for two recovery operations already, saying it's not worth the risk. The terp is dead, the agent got out and is waiting on extraction in a safehouse, but Kyle's just a tech for us, Jack. There's a dozen more waiting for his desk."

Rollins bristled at the insignificance being placed on his friend. Kyle had always been one of the smartest people Jack had ever known. He left the Army about the same time as Jack, taking his natural savvy for technology with him to the CIA as an analyst and security protocol developer. They had been friends since meeting during the Ranger selection program and, though they'd fallen out of regular contact because of the demands of work, the two former SpecOps warriors still managed to get together for a few drinks and celebrations every now and again, like nothing had changed. Hell, Jack was one of the groomsmen at Kyle's wedding two years ago and Kyle stood with him for his wedding to Claire.

Rollins pushed a slow breath out through his nose, as he crossed his arms tightly across his chest. "What are you telling me for then?"

"So you can go get him," Stevenson said, frankly, reaching for the inner pocket of his suit jacket. He passed an envelope to Jack. "Everything I can give you; coordinates for the last location we had contact from Kyle's tracker after the buy went south, photos and name of the contact for the sale, and the preliminary debriefing from the agent who escaped."

"What was he buying?" Rollins asked, slipping the envelope into the cargo pocket on the left leg of his BDU's.

Mike took another glance around, before answering, "A unicorn. Some sophisticated decryption program to allegedly backdoor NatSec protocols across the board. Some jagoff from the CAR says he lifted it from HYDRA, if you believe that shit."

Jack's ears pricked and his gaze leveled, checking, "HYDRA? Who's selling their secrets?"

"New player. You guys are gonna want him," Stevenson promised. "Our guy that got out says he's behind a couple disappearances from your CS last week, if you don't already know. Thato Motsepe. Does SHIELD know him?"

Rollins gave a subtle nod. Motsepe had been pushing his luck lately, stretching his reach and dabbling in regional concerns not on HYDRA's agenda. He was trying people's patience with his ambition and had obviously been doing more than he let on to the powers that be. Motsepe was a noise maker and drawing attention. That he had an emissary operating so far from his territory, and offering one of HYDRA's most valuable tools to the highest bidder and threatening to expose them in the process, had just sealed his fate. All because Motsepe's agents had picked the wrong man to take hostage.

"Any demands?" Jack wondered.

"None," Mike shook his head, pocketing his hands. "They'll keep him; turn him if they can. If they can't put him to work, they'll kill him."

Jack nodded his understanding of what both men knew; that Kyle was a Ranger at his core and
would be dead soon. Marshall would never betray his country or the Agency.

"That's all I can give you Jack," the spook shook his head. "I was never here."

"Of course, you weren't," Rollins dryly agreed. He shook Mike's hand, promising, "I'll take care of it."

"We'll all have a drink when you get back," Stevenson agreed, turning to go and leaving with a wave. He looked back, only a few steps away, adding, "And, Jack, if you can get your hands on that unicorn..."

Jack nodded and watched him go, setting his jaw before he started his way back across the lobby and to the elevators of Tower B. Alone in the elevator car, Jack scanned the intel Stevenson left him, pulling out the details he needed to run down any leads and get Marshall back. Back upstairs, on the main floor of the STRIKE Division administration, Rollins walked straight in to Rumlow's office, not wasting a second to knock or ask permission to enter. The Commander was on the phone, but Jack went right up to stand in front of his desk, the unfolded documents from the envelope held tight in his fingers by his side. Brock held up a finger for him to wait.

An impatiently long minute later, Rumlow hung up his phone and looked up at Jack. "What is it?" he wondered, a crease coming into his brow.

Brock always was perceptive, but it didn't take a detective to see how pissed off Rollins was. "I need a 12 man fire team," Jack told him.

The Commander held out his hand, his palm turned up and flicking a pair of fingers for his lieutenant to surrender what he was holding. Jack gave him the papers and took a seat, when Brock pointed across his desk to one of the empty chairs and asked, "What happened?"

While Rumlow read over the sparse intelligence stamped "classified" by the CIA, Rollins broke down what Stevenson had told him and what he had gleamed from the information he provided. When he was finished, he gave Brock a minute to finish reading line by line. Jack leaned onto his knees, rubbing his fingers over his chin before clasping his hands together, tightly.

Dropping the pages on his desk, Rumlow wiped a hand down over his mouth, as he inhaled. "Kyle Marshall," he questioned, "from your battalion back in the day? From the wedding, right?"

Jack nodded. "The same."

"Motsepe," Brock unhappily mumbled, his eyes set on the satellite image.

"Bingo?" Rollins pressed. "My fire team."

Rumlow looked over again. "What are you going to do with them?"

"I'm going to bring him back," Jack answered firmly.

The Commander shifted in his chair to lean into his arms on the desk. "Jack," he began, the denial already evident in his tone, as he looked Rollins in the eye, "I can't give you a fire team." Jack opened his mouth to argue, but Brock put up a hand to cut him off. "You know I can't authorize this. This is CIA's problem, Jack. We have no jurisdiction in this and no request from them to intervene."

"Motsepe is-"
"Motsepe is our problem," Rumlow interrupted, with a frustrated nod. "I know. And, believe me, I'm going to let Command know about this latest bullshit. But Marshall is the CIA's. If they've abandoned him, I can't do anything about that."

"But I can," Rollins insisted, his knuckles whitening under the pressure of his own grip. "You know this isn't right."

"It's not," Brock agreed. "But Jack, listen to me." Rumlow swept his head. "I can't authorize a recovery for an asset that isn't ours."

"Motsepe is selling the backdoor," he reminded him. "That makes it our business."

"We'll deal with that," the Commander assured him. "That's HYDRA's business, not SHIELD's. But even that's something that I gotta walk up the chain."

"The window's closing on this, every minute we wait, Bingo," Rollins grimly noted. "He will die there."

Rumlow nodded, running his hand across his mouth, conceding, "I know." It was quiet for a moment, while Rumlow stared at the satellite photograph on his desk and Jack stared at him. The Commander dropped his hand from his mouth, checking, "Are we certain CIA's in the dark about who Motsepe really is?"

Jack shook his head, confident that, "My contact didn't even believe the program they were buying was HYDRA's."

"If Marshall, or anyone else, can dissect that program..."

"They didn't get it," Rollins said. "Doesn't sound like he had access to it long enough to do anything with it, anyway."

"Time?" Brock checked.

"Plus 31 hours."

There was another contemplative pause from Rumlow. "You owe him?" he wondered.

"No," Jack admitted, "but he's my brother."

Rollins anxiously watched, as Brock scrubbed his hands up and down his face, exhaling when he rested his forehead in his hands with his elbows pointed down into the desk. Rumlow shook his head, letting his hands fall to fold over his arms. He studied Jack for a long minute and all Jack could do was wait. The Commander sat up straight and into the back of his chair again.

"You realize the position this puts me in," Rumlow emphasized and Jack nodded. With another discerning look, Brock gave a single nod and began his list of conditions. "You've got your Angel flight and 16 hours. 12 man fire team, volunteers only. And I want a medic on that flight." Brock pushed the CIA intelligence back across his desk to Rollins. "You get that together, I'll authorize you one bird for a training exercise. That window closes tight in 16 hours, Jack."

Jack gathered his paper work, giving a single nod to agree to the deal. "Yes, Sir."

"War games briefing is in 30 minutes," he reminded him, as Rollins stood to leave and begin planning his operation. "Start updating that recon and you can pull volunteers from there."
He turned to go. On his way out, a confident grin pulled back the side of his mouth at hearing the Commander pick up the phone. Stepping out of the office, he heard an order being given before he pulled the door shut behind him.

"Recall Delta Two and Echo One. Priority 1 activation. Rally in Briefing Room 3. 30 minutes."

Rollins couldn't keep his shoulders from knotting. Whenever he became aware of the tension, he'd drop his hands from his hips or cross his arms, but it always came back. It was the clock on the wall fueling the discomfort. 16 hours began ticking down as soon as he'd left the Commander's office. Every minute that went by meant less time he had to find Marshall and make the recovery. It wasn't necessarily that he didn't think he had enough time. He'd done bolder missions on less time before. But those missions were still briefed over a sandtable with intel pulled together and verified long before the team lifted off. At this point, all Jack had was a Quinjet on standby on Pad 5 of the flight deck. He would brief his team in the air, with incomplete intelligence from the CIA and what he could scrap together in barely a half hour before Rumlow's scheduled briefing started. The rest he would have to put together in flight.

The briefing wasn't overly involved. Schedules and assignments were given to the squads in attendance for the upcoming war games. Rumlow ran down an itinerary for the exercise and the room began to fill in. Members of the Delta and Echo squads that were out of rotation were responding to the callout Brock ordered. With both squads from Delta and Echo now in the room, it gave Jack the chance to fill out his team with top tier operators. In varying states of civilian clothes, the off duty operators took the empty seats in the back of the large briefing room, patiently waiting for the Commander to address them and explain the reason for the activation. Only he didn't.

When Rumlow folded the leather padfolio on the podium closed, he looked at Rollins and gave him a subtle nod. He gathered his things and stepped away from the podium, walking down the long aisle splitting the rows of chairs and tables in half, without another word. Everyone watched him leave, aware very quickly that they had not been dismissed and that, minus the squads and fire teams that were currently deployed on ops, damned near the full division was present. The Commander walked out the door and, when it latched shut, Jack moved up to the podium to address the assembled soldiers. Jack didn't waste time with a welcome and got straight to the point.

"I need a 12 man fire team," he told them. "2 pilots, one doc, and 8 grunts." Rollins paused only a moment to let the request sink in, before giving only the vague details he would share. "Black op. The CIA has abandoned a civilian tech, taken captive during an intel verification on foreign soil. The information the tech may have can hurt us- real bad." It wasn't a lie or an exaggeration, until Jack looked his friend in the eye and heard what he saw from the HYDRA program, there was a risk. The tension from his frame shifted into the tight grip Rollins held on the sides of the podium, as he continued, "The lethality assessment for the tech is high."

Jack conceded, "I know some of you are watching the clock, waiting to transition to other assignments or time out from the division and enjoy the good life. Some of you've got families to look out for. ...But I need a 12 man fire team."

The room was still after Rollins finished. He looked over the large briefing room, hoping to see enough hands go up in the air. He'd like more, but 12 was the bare minimum he needed to get this done and he didn't want to press his luck by asking for more than he knew Rumlow would give. His attention flicked to his left, seeing the first hand go up, Rollins nodded to Whitfield. He had his medic. From the back of the room, a pair of hands rose in unison. Addams and Mickelson. An
operator from Delta and one from Charlie were next, both aviation trainers for STRIKE he could use as pilots. Within seconds, the rest of the ground pounders he needed were filled in, mostly from Delta and Echo.

"The rest of you are dismissed," Rollins advised.

The volunteers remained seated, while the other soldiers filed out of the briefing room. Again, Jack waited for the door to be shut before he spoke. He looked over the determined faces of his fire team, satisfied with what he had to work with and confident that he could pull this off.

"Loadout for tropical climes," he ordered, "night op, expecting SAF and moderate fortifications. You'll be briefed in the air. Pad 5. You have 20 minutes."

Rumlow did the favors he could; authorized putting the photo of Marshall's seller through facial recognition and run against any available live feed video they could tap in the area, retasked a satellite to hold in geosynchronous above the coordinates Stevenson said was the last location Marshall's tracker signaled from, and put a call in to the Angolan National Air Force for when they arrived. Jack knew he'd have to come up with one hell of a good bottle of whiskey to pay him back. The rest was up to Jack and his team.

Rollins adjusted his ruck slung over his right shoulder. His attention was drawn up to the end of the hallway where a flash of warm, orange light struck across his face from the hatch to the flight deck opening and closing. Ahead of him, he spotted Addams talking to Rumlow. She smiled at whatever the Commander said and the two exchanged a single nod. She was sent away with a clap on the arm, as she turned to go. Rumlow stood by, waiting for Jack.

"I've got three controllers to run down whatever you need," Brock spoke up, when Jack was close enough to hear. "Weather, ATC info, local chatter, updated satellite. Just ask. There's a couple of Tucanos on standby for you, just in case. I'll be in the TOC when you get there."

"Thanks, Bingo," Rollins nodded, with a solemn grin.

"Good luck, big guy," Rumlow told him. "Bring those guys back with you. It's my ass, if you don't."

"I ever let you down before?" Jack smirked, lifting the handle on the hatch.

"Not yet," Brock quipped. "Be safe, Jack. And if you can't be safe..."

"Be deadly," Jack nodded, pushing open the heavy metal fire door to the flight deck.

On the other side, the setting sun was painting the Potomac and clouds in soft colors. The ground crew was just pulling away from the Quinjet on Landing Pad 5. On seeing his approach, the few operators hanging out at the end of the downed ramp of the plane picked up their gear and boarded the jet. The last of his team on the tarmac was Addams, speaking to the marshaller. Allison reached out a hand, grabbing Jack's forearm to stop him before he got a boot on the ramp.

"Don't forget," she told him, tipping her head to the aircraft marshall. "The hat."

Addams held out her upturned, gloved hand. Rollins shook his head, almost forgetting. He hooked a pair of fingers under the collar of his compression tee, fishing out the stainless steel ball chain around his neck. Jack ran his fingers under the chain, pulling off his dog tags overhead to drop into her hand. Allison turned her right hand over her left, dropping her own ID tags into her palm with
Jack's.

She passed them off to the marshall, with a wink. "Don't lose those," she joked, watching the flight deck officer add them to the collection of chains and tabs in a small, black cotton bag he stashed in the cargo pocket of his uniform pants. "We're gonna need those back in the morning."

"Yes, ma'am," the officer smiled, with a confident nod. "They'll be here waiting."

With nothing but a quick grin, Allison turned past Rollins to board the jet. The aircraft marshall moved up to his position at the head of the plane and Jack paused a moment, looking after him and considering the stash of dog tags in "the hat". Jack turned his gaze up into the airframe, seeing his volunteers stow their gear in the racks and strap into their jump seats. His jaw set, as Rollins walked up the ramp and signaled the pilot to fire up the engines, thinking on his promises to bring back Rumlow's operators and to bring home his friend.

After locking his rifle into the rack, Rollins paused, cocking his head to listen when he put his headset on. Amidst the whine of the turbines coming to life and the hydraulics raising the ramp, the sound of humming was unmistakable. Jack turned over his shoulder to find the source, seeing Mickelson shaking his downturned head and trying to hold in his laughter. Allison was sitting beside him, pushing her fist into the side of his leg while Mickelson was plainly trying to ignore her. But it only spurred her on and instead of just humming, Allison started to sing.

"All my bags are packed. I'm ready to go," she serenaded Eric, and everyone else on the Quinjet's local freq. "I'm standin' here outside your door. I hate to wake you up...to say goodbye."

Jack took his place in the last open jumpseat on the bulkhead across from the free show, hooking the harness straps over his shoulders. He sympathized with Mickelson, shaking his head with a pitying smirk, as Addams literally kept poking at Eric. Across from her and two seats to Jack's right, Shuster chimed in, while a shudder went through the airframe as the pilots brought the engines up to power.

"But the dawn is breakin', it's early morn," Shuster belted out with her, their voices lifting to climb over the rising roar of the engines. "The taxi's waitin'. He's blowin' his horn. Already I'm so lonesome-" They both paused for a breath and Allison dramatically fell against Mickelson's shoulder. "I could dieee!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Rollins muttered, shaking his head again, when three more voices around the cabin fell into the chorus, "So kiss me and smile for me." He looked at Whitfield sitting next to him. The medic shrugged and joined in. "Tell me that you'll wait for me."

Allison grabbed Eric's hand clutching it to her armor covered chest, begging him, "Hold me like you'll never let me gooo! 'Cause I'm leavin' on a jet plane..."

Mickelson caved and Jack would be damned if the fucking pilot wasn't singing along while his copilot cleared their departure with the tower. Rollins looked up and down the two rows of jump seats, simultaneously amused and embarrassed by the plane full lethal operators having a fucking sing-a-long.

"Don't know when I'll be back again. Oh babe, I hate to go."

He settled on embarrassment, when the top tier soldiers’ rendition devolved into a free for all harmonizing bastardization of the chorus for a couple rounds. Jack completely understood why, by that point, Mickelson had wrangled Addams into a headlock and was working hard at keeping his gloved hand over her mouth.
“'Cause I'm leavin' on a jet plane! Don't know when I'll be back again! Leaving on a jet plane!”

Jack surprised himself, joining the last round with his team. When the song fell apart, the open mic channel was filled with laughter. Allison was sitting upright in her seat again, resetting her headset on her ears, after her tussle with Eric. She caught Rollins shaking his head and she smiled, sending him a sure nod. He replied with a raise of his chin, appreciative of the tension that had been taken out of the jet, if only for a couple minutes, by her shenanigans. Looking over the faces of his volunteer teammates, as their smiles faded and laughter wound down, Jack hoped he could keep the promises he'd made.
Chapter 27

Dec 2012

Rollins took a look down the line of soldiers to his left and then to his right. In black uniforms with grease painted faces, his volunteers practically dissolved in the shadows. Without patches or insignias on the black tees the operators were sweating into in the Angolan humidity or dog tags dangling from their necks, there was no one to identify and hold responsible, if something went wrong. The rescue split them into four elements- two to actively search and rescue and two for cover and to maintain an egress to the LZ for extraction. The pilots stayed with the jet, ready to take off the second the team returned with the abandoned CIA agent. With a sharp snap of his arm, Rollins deployed the first part of his team to move up to their cover positions.

Satellite images showed no vehicles had left the warehouse that the CIA reported as Marshall's last location in the past 14 hours, but one vehicle had come in. A SHIELD asset was relocated from Muanda and, by the time the Quinjet was touching down about a mile from their objective, he had only one quick pass for recon of the area, disguised as a local merchant whose truck broke down on the nearby road. But the operative had been able to launch a drone when he left the area and it verified the heat signatures outside the building that were hard to distinguish under the canopy of the jungle nearby.

On the hike in, the team didn't encounter any traps along the dirt road or in the jungle they pushed in from. It gave Rollins a little more confidence, knowing Motsepe's underlings weren't apparently concerned with company. But he was still worried about the large objects shrouded by camo netting that satellite photos and a drone pass couldn't identify, and the escaped CIA's agent's debriefing hadn't explained, dotted around the grounds of the spread out facility. They prioritized the warehouse as the most likely location for Kyle to be in, setting a pair of cover positions on the two smaller structures on the dirt lot, in case their guess was wrong. There was one flare on the thermal that hadn't moved in the warehouse since the drone had been watching.

When Rollins radioed that the team was 'green', the controller in the TOC came online to verify, "Vise and Forge in position. Hammer and Anvil standing by. FANA Tucanos on alert. Additional standby, one Spectre; callsign Reaper 1-5. ...Friendlies' IR beacons lit. ...Operation Vulcan is go. I say again, Vulcan is go."

Rollins gave the next signal, and he and the other operators doing the search for Marshall went to work. Rollins, Whitfield, and Addams split off from the other three man search team, rounding the south side of the warehouse to make entry through a rusted door hanging just crooked enough in its frame to not shut tight. Stacked up along the wall, Allison slipped an endoscope camera into the doorway to peek inside. Satisfied no one was on the other side, she gave a thumbs up to Jack and retracted the wire camera to stash in her pant leg pocket. Pulling the door back slowly, to fight against the soft shriek of the old hinges, Anvil had breached the building.

They were in no rush. Slow meant quiet, and quiet they were. Their measured heel to toe steps made no sound on the dusty concrete floors of the warehouse or its halls. Their stealth assured they heard early warning sounds of targets approaching. Hearing the footfall of someone coming down a metal staircase ahead, Rollins and his partners flattened against the wall.

At the head of the three man column, Addams slid her rifle down behind her. She unsheathed the knife from the front of her vest, holding the KaBar in her right hand and folding her arm across her. The instant the man broke the plane of the corner, Allison was on him. In one smooth movement,
she drove her knife up under the man's jaw and hooked her left arm around his neck to clamp his mouth shut with her gloved hand. The man jerked and twisted once in her grip. Within seconds, the life had drained from him and Allison was sinking to lay his body down on the ground. She secured her knife, while Whitfield dragged the body back into the shadow of the hall behind them. Allison flicked her hand down, whipping as much blood off her glove and arm as she could, while her left hand pulled her rifle up again. She did quick peek checks to clear the intersection of the hall and they were on the move, headed up to the second floor.

The three man element silently disposed of two more of Motsepe's henchmen, as they pressed forward. They radioed that they located a security room on the second floor. Addams and Whitfield watched the hall while Rollins snuck inside. The man watching a small bank of old CCTV monitors never knew what happened. Jack left him the way he found him, still sitting up in his chair at the desk, his head fallen limply forward now to rest on his chest after Rollins had cut his throat. A quick check of the monitors showed him what they came for. Kyle Marshall, tied to a wall, his arms stretched out to his sides by ropes and pulleys to keep him standing. From the placement of the windows in the view of the camera and the flickering lamppost outside them, Jack knew the room was on the second floor with them.

Rollins radioed in the update on Marshall's location, as he came back into the hallway. "Anvil-Hammer. Package is on the second floor, northwest corner."

"Hammer copies. Still securing first floor," Mickelson's hushed reply came through the comms.

The controller spoke up to advise, "Stoker- Vise. Stoker- Vise. Vehicles inbound. Two fast movers; one technical. ETA- minus two mikes."

"Vise copies, trucks inbound; ETA- minus two mikes," Emery said. "Moving to secondary; covering the gate."

"Stoker copies- Vise moving to secondary position."

From somewhere in the building, a burst of gunfire echoed through the halls. Rollins held up a fist to order his teammates to stop. Backs pressed to the wall, Jack covered the hall ahead and Allison watched their six. Jack exhaled at the update he didn't want to hear.

"Hammer- Stoker. Contact, northeast corner!"

Accompanied by the sound of more gunfire, the next update came immediately. "Forge- Stoker. Engaging Tangos, northeast perimeter."

Hearing nothing else in front of them, Rollins whispered the command to move his element forward again. Outside the building, chaos was erupting. From somewhere further down the hall of doorways, anger and frightened voices argued. Beneath them, the second search team was in a firefight. Ahead of Rollins, a door flew open and a man ran out. He didn't look before he took off down the hall and had no defense against the three round burst of silenced rounds Rollins put into his back. But the sound of the man's gargled choke and body falling to the floor carried.

With the element of surprise gone, Jack and the others were aggressive. Charging toward the sounds of the agitated French voices from the room the man had left, Rollins and his partners breached the doorway. Jack cut in to the left and Whitfield to the right, acquiring a target each and putting them down. The last one in the door, Addams took out a third man just as Jack's sights found the fourth. The fifth man in the room lived a little longer.

With a pistol pressed to the prisoner's temple, hard enough to tip Marshall's hanging head to the
side, the man in a grey uniform yelled threats and gestured his intention to kill his hostage. The STRIKE operators stopped, weapons trained on the panicked man. When he got a chance for airtime, Whitfield radioed they had located the package and backed into the wall, turning to cover the door behind them. Rollins didn't speak French, but Addams did and she translated out loud.

"Don't come any closer. I'll kill him. I swear to god, I'll kill him."

"Tell him to calm down," Jack told her, not taking his eyes off his target. "Tell that cocksucker to put the gun down and I won't shoot him in the fuckin' face."

Rollins figured Allison would make his offer sound a little more diplomatic. Addams said her piece and the man appeared to think for a second. The hostage taker seemed to reaffirm his previous threat, locking his arm out and thumbing back the hammer on his gun as he yelled again.

"No deal. Leave now, or I'll kill him. If I let you live, I'm a dead man," Allison spoke for the man.

She didn't wait for Jack to give his next statement, she was already negotiating with the nervous soldier. Addams let go of the forward grip of her M4, slowly showing the man her open palm and lowering her weapon as she spoke. The man flinched when she took an easy step forward, holding his breath. Rollins and Whitfield held steady. The hostage taker's eyes stayed with Allison, as she continued trying to strike a deal, gesturing toward Marshall and then to the door as she calmly addressed the man.

Jack didn't give a shit what Allison was saying. She could have been offering the man coke and hookers, for all he cared. All that mattered to Rollins was the subtle break he saw in the soldier's elbow; the sign that he was wearing down or was changing his mind. Allison took another step, the soothing tone of her words seeming to get to Kyle's captor, as the man turned the gun from Marshall to her. A move Allison smiled at and Jack took advantage of, pulling the trigger and painting the wall behind his target's head blood red.

The trio rushed forward. Whitfield went to Marshall with Jack, while Addams kicked the gun out of the dead soldier's hand, just in case. Rollins called over comms that the package was secure, as the medic checked vitals. Jack hooked his arm under Kyle's, as he reached to cut the rope over his shoulder. He couldn't understand whatever it was that his friend mumbled, but it didn't matter. He was just relieved to hear any noise from him. Allison cut the other rope free and Whitfield hooked Marshall's arm behind his neck, dipping to shoulder the weight of the beaten man and carry him out. Rollins and Addams were already moving up on the door again, ready to clear the hallway and get back to the extraction point.

Over the radio, the fight was still on outside. Mick and his team had cleared the first floor and moved to the rally point outside, helping the others engage the targets that had appeared out of one of the smaller buildings nearby and arrived with the two trucks. It turned out, Motsepe's crew had some heavy weapons stashed underneath the camo netting the team had seen in the satellite recon. The perimeter agents were pinned down by the SAWs mounted on a pair of humvees.

Rollins and the others held up at the door they came in, when the controller advised their route was cut off by the fire being exchanged with the vehicles that had arrived. Behind them, they heard an engine start in the far end of the warehouse. Whitfield set down his charge, concealing them behind a stack of pallets and collection of rusted out drums. Rollins and Addams took cover behind an old manufacturing press. To get outside, that vehicle had to pass between a funnel of them and Whitfield to get to the rollup garage door. Headlights came on and the vehicle started forward.

"What is it?" Jack asked.
Craning to see through a gap in the machine's body, Allison shook her head. "Can't tell. Can't see. Truck of some kind."

Moments later, the vehicle chirped to a stop on the smooth concrete floor of the warehouse, as a man jumped off and jogged to the wall to press the button to open the garage door. Rollins slid back on his knee to keep out of sight, as Addams whispered, "It's another fucking technical."

"That cannot get outside," Jack ordered, raising his rifle to put the man at the garage door control in his sights.

Addams inched for an angle around the press to find a target on the truck. Rollins exhaled and pulled the trigger, dropping the man who held down the 'open' button on the wall and stopped the garage door from rising more than a few feet. As soon as their comrade was down, the men in the vehicle started yelling to each other. A row of flood lights above the cab of the pickup lit up and a handheld spot light swiveled around, looking for any signs of the intruders. Against the lights, Rollins couldn't see a target, and he guessed Allison wasn't having much better luck. The tires of the truck squealed, as the driver sped backward from the garage door.

Allison took a shot, firing near the handheld light to try and catch the holder behind it. The light fell but was quickly picked back up and turned toward the press. Rollins yelled for Whitfield to stay down, as he opened fire on the truck to keep focus on him and Allison. Addams joined him. They both stopped, hunkering down against the machine separating them from the enemy, when someone in the bed of the pickup turned a minigun toward the press. Jack could barely hear himself think, over the sound of the flurry of rounds punching into the metal at their backs.

After the first barrage, Rollins and Addams returned fire, aiming to take out the lights on the vehicle to get a better view of what they were up against. They had marginal success before the machine gun was firing again and forced them back behind cover. Jack wondered how much the press could withstand, while he and Addams waited out the latest volley and oil seeped out of a wound in the machine to run along the floor next to Jack. He glanced at Allison in the dim glow that curled around the machine from the truck's lights. She called out that she was changing her magazine and let her head fall back against the side of the press, as she exhaled and waited for her next chance.

In a moment's calm, Jack advised the controller they were pinned down in the south end of the warehouse by the garage door. Everyone else was engaged with their own targets. Help wasn't available. Jack signaled for Whitfield to stay low and out of sight. Where he and Marshall were didn't offer any protection from the rounds they were up against. Beside him, Addams smacked the back of her hand into Jack's arm for his attention, showing him the pin dangling on her thumb.

While the minigun was shooting again, Allison made a blind toss of a grenade, calling, "Frag out!" to warn Whitfield of the impending explosion. The concussion of the blast moved through the air and a new glow from over the top of the press told them something had caught fire with the blast. It was anyone's guess what was burning, as the warehouse was littered with trash and debris and who knew what was held in the random barrels dotted around the area. But the fire did them a favor, illuminating an angle of the truck and affording them the first look at the opposition. The men with the truck were cleverly concealed behind it for the most part, but Jack got a few shots off at the man on the machine gun and was sure he saw him fall. The victory was short lived, as a replacement climbed into the bed of the truck to take over the gun.

"We don't take out that technical," Rollins looked at Allison, "we're dead."

Allison nodded, flinching to duck her head when a panel of the machine popped overhead and fell into her lap. She picked up the dented and perforated piece of metal and gave it a once over before
tossing it away. With a shake of her head and a misplaced smile, Addams looked at Jack and said, over the sound of bullets hitting the press, "You sure know how to show a girl a good time."

"You volunteered," he reminded her, with a smirk, twisting to shift and lean out around the side of the press to return fire.

From her end of the press, Addams shot back. The men were still yelling and the minigun still sporadically firing, but Jack could make out two bodies on the ground. In his last look, he saw another man run up from the back of the warehouse and join his friends.

Jack sat back against the machine, complaining, "Where the fuck are these guys coming from?!"

Addams' response was to throw out another grenade and Rollins took the opportunity in the confusion caused by the blast to lean out again. Over the channel, the operators outside were still engaged. He could only hope they were making better progress than they were inside. Allison changed her position of fire, crouching to pop up over the top of the machine for a view to throw out her last grenade. It skipped off the ground and under the truck, but tumbled too far before the fuse was spent. Two more men were down, but the truck was still in play.

While the remaining soldiers scrambled, one swatting out a fire on the side of the truck and the other reclaiming the minigun, Jack and Allison were on their third magazines. Reloaded, the operators fired back. Somewhere in all the noise of the firefight in the warehouse, Rollins had missed the arrival of more reinforcements for the other side. Outside, the other STRIKE members were holding their positions against another technical. The odds for success were rapidly leaving the fire team. In his earpiece, the controllers were calling out enemy movements they saw from the satellite and drone, but the operators were simply becoming outgunned. The intel from Stevenson had severely underestimated the capabilities and numbers of the men who'd taken Marshall.

He wasn't sure what it was. He'd actually never know exactly what it was; bullet or shrapnel, but something hit Jack in the face. Rollins was stunned, fumbling backward from his knee. He put a hand out behind him to try and catch himself, but he was too disoriented to make the move happen fast enough. His back hit the ground and his boot heel dug in, instinctively pushing himself away from the firefight and toward the warehouse wall. There was a ringing in his ears and a buzz in his head he couldn't think around. The next thing he knew, his arm swung up, hooking his hand to grab the arm that latched itself to the shoulder of his vest and tugged him to his right. In the next moment, he was looking up at Allison's face over his, seeing her mouth moving but not hearing the words.

He tried to sit up, turning his head to try and shake away the haze, but Addams pulled him back with one hand and pushed him down with the other. He tried to wave her off, to tell her to keep her eyes on the enemy; that he was fine, but his voice was missing when he tried to speak and Allison's hand was pressed down over the side of his jaw and neck. His hearing cleared slowly. In between the beating of bullets on metal, he could make out Addams yelling at Whitfield.

"Stay there! I got him!" And then her speaking to him. "It's okay, Boss. I got you."

Addams reached behind her, taking out gauze from the small medical pack on her belt. She muttered to herself, saying a soft "fuck" as she tore open the packaging with the side of her teeth and moved the gauze down to his face. Jack didn't know why. He couldn't feel anything there, but the next time Allison put her hand near her face to tear open another package of gauze, he saw her bare hand wet with fresh blood and he felt the front of his shirt warming below his neck. She kept talking to him, telling him he'd been shot but he was okay. As his focus slowly came back, he tuned into Whitfield laying down suppressing fire from his position. He knew what would happen next.
The resistance from behind the press had stopped. Motsepe's men turned their sights on the barrels and pallets hiding Jack's medic and friend. He jerked to sit up and see the wood splintering and barrels perforating, as Whitfield dove toward Marshall and Jack lost sight of them both. The assault from the truck continued and Rollins was pulled backward again, this time with Allison's left arm firmly pulling back across his shoulders and the other hooked up under his arm to keep him there.

Rollins tried to pull away, but his sudden moves made him feel lightheaded and, against his will, he slumped in a momentary fog. The spell passed and he found himself still restrained by the blood covered arm across his shoulders. Now he could feel it. The searing pain tearing through his jaw, radiating up his cheek and down his neck. A growl left him, fighting against the physical pain that shot through him and the frustration for the predicament they were all in. He involuntarily thrashed and he felt Addams choke up and flex to hold him back.

"Rollins!" Allison barked, over the whir and thuds of the minigun firing. "Stay here, Commander! It's okay. They're fine."

He knew it was a lie. She was doing what she was supposed to do; trying to keep him focused and calm, but she couldn't see Whitfield or Marshall anymore than he could and, that she had the balls to try and tell him she did, pissed him off. Her hand was back at his face and neck, applying pressure. Addams told him to be still, losing her arm from him to dig under his back and into his medical kit for more gauze to replace the material that had fallen away while she fought to restrain him. Rollins tried to listen, when she told him to breathe, but he was breathing too fast and in too much pain to get enough air in through his nose and when he tried to breath through his mouth he choked on blood.

Addams worked the last roll of gauze off Jack's belt, wrapping it around his jaw and neck and over his head to keep what she had packed onto his wound in place. The comms were still congested with updates from the perimeter team and the controllers trying to keep track of everyone involved. In a fleeting moment of self-awareness, Rollins realized he couldn't run the op anymore. He was wounded, couldn't speak, and was fighting to keep his focus. He could barely help himself, let alone his men. Swallowing a mouthful of blood, Jack grabbed Allison's wrist.

Blood spurted past his lips with each syllable, as Rollins struggled to tell her, "Speh- Spectre. C-all-Call it in."

Shaking her head, she warned him, "We're too close. There's no room."

He had to make her listen. Rollins jerked her arm and squeezed, insisting through grit teeth and spit blood, "Call it."

Addams blinked, holding her breath for a fraction of a second before she nodded. An odd wave of exhaustion went through him and Rollins closed his eyes, listening to Allison's voice in stereo, above him and on the comms channel piped into his ear, call out with "flash" traffic and the lined report that followed. She gave their position in the warehouse and requested the gunship. He read the discomfort in her eyes, when she told the TOC, "Broken arrow. Repeat- Broken arrow."

Neither of them had been on a mission before where they had had to warn they were in danger of being overrun. It wasn't supposed to be this bad. And it occurred to Jack the reason why the CIA had walked away from Marshall.

"Stoker copies, broken arrow."

Rumlow finally spoke up, an unmistakable level of anger in his voice, "Blacksmith- Anvil 1-2. Confirm, broken arrow."
The defeated cock of her head and disgusted snarl on her lips, before she could repeat herself, punched at Jack's gut. He'd walked them all right into this. It wasn't Rumlow's ass if they didn't all get home. It was always going to be his, and the thought of letting them all down made him sick.


Brock didn't reply and Rollins didn't expect him to. The controller had to take over the air, feeding coordinates and troop numbers to the gunship. "Reaper 1-5. Reaper 1-5 proceed to target. Troops in contact. Friendlies in the open; marked by strobe. Danger close."

Addams threw a glance to her right, looking for Whitfield or Marshall, before turning back to Rollins, nodding what they both knew. "Rain's coming."

The other teams called in their low ammo statuses and verified the number of vehicles and targets they were engaging. The controller ordered the perimeter operators to withdraw, making room for the air strike to come in. Addams advised she and the others were pinned down with a technical still inside the building with wounded. She did her best to specify the location of the truck off their position near the garage door, knowing if the gunship put rounds into the building it was a game of inches for them. The Spectre was closing in and all Jack could do was listen and wait.
Dec 2012

There wasn't any response from the corner where Whitfield and Marshall had been, not that he could discern from the rounds striking metal and brick around them anyway. Beside him, Allison continued to engage the enemy, firing short bursts to hold them back when they heard the engine rev. Rollins figured the soldiers knew they had to get out of the building. They were probably ramping up for a run on the door. It was open about three feet high and the aluminum was as rusted out as everything else in sight. With a running start, the truck could easily punch through the door.

He watched, furious that he saw Allison reload with her last magazine, stand up, and step out from behind the press, when they both heard the truck tires chirp again as it backed up. Addams leaned in, sending every round in her last magazine down the length of the warehouse at the truck. She stood her ground, even as Rollins' heart skipped a beat at hearing the technical charge forward. There was the sound of a crash and some yelling. Allison dropped back in behind the edge of the press, taking a deep breath before she turned to Rollins and gave him a nod.

"Technical's out of service," she breathed, but shook her head. "Gun's still up."

When he couldn’t manage a smile, he gave her a thumbs up instead. Addams dropped the empty mag from her rifle and reached over, pulling the last one from Jack's rig. Allison corrected the last known position of the truck in the warehouse to the controller. She nodded to herself, eyes turned up to the ceiling for a moment, saying, "We're gonna be okay, Boss." before the controller and the crew of the Spectre took his attention over the comms channel and the minigun fired again.

"Reaper is 5 miles out," the gunship announced.

"Copy, 5 miles," the TOC acknowledged. "Let me know when you see the target area and I'll start the talk o-"

"We see it. Start talking."

"You got the three buildings in sight; one rectangle, two small square? North of the road."

"Got 'em."

"Tangos engaged in multiple locations around that building."

The controller was quiet, while the aircraft made its approach and the crew handled their in flight business on the channel. Allison and the gunner on the disabled truck traded shots, if only to remind the other they were still there it seemed. Rollins didn't even care what the two foreign voices in the warehouse were yelling back and forth about. He tried to shut out the sound and listen to the chatter in his earpiece, balling his fists against the excruciating hurt and making it to his side to back up against the press again, groaning through another flare of pain and spitting out a mouthful of blood and saliva.

"Two miles," the gunship updated.

"Troops in contact to the west, northwest of that rectangle," the controller spoke up. "Reaper, confirm visual of the friendlies."

"We got your guys. Taking heavy fire. Counting 2- Check, 3 technicals on the west and northwest of
the rectangle building. Two oriented east-west, one north-south. And, uhh...four vehicles oriented north-south of the rectangle, closer to the southern small square."

"Roger that. Additional- Friendlies inside the rectangle with a technical and wounded. Friendlies are in the south end of the building near the garage door, right in that western corner. Technical is north of them, about 20 meters, on the west edge."

"Confirm- Technical is inside the rectangle, 20 meters north of southwest corner," the crew member questioned.

"Affirm. Fourth technical inside the rectangle, with troops."

"Roger that."

"Reaper, you are clear to engage."

"Burn those motherfuckers down," Rumlow ordered, and the world outside exploded.

The unmistakable sound of the Spectre's Gatling gun turning cut through the night. The ground and building shook, with a pair of explosions. The inside of the warehouse lit up with fire bursting through shattering glass. When the shuddering stopped, the gunship crew were adjusting fire and giving reports, while the TOC and operators listened in to the Spectre’s crew tidying up.

"Reaper 1-5. Personnel and the technicals on the northwest terminated."

"See that guy moving? West of that northern technical..."

"I got him," was the casual acknowledgment before the Gatling strafed again. "He's done."

"Reaper 1-5- Stoker. Tell your people inside, we're gonna put down some 40 mike-mike in there; take care of the technical for them. Tell them to take cover."

Allison moved to Jack, slipping in behind him and pulling him with her to put his back against the wall, as far away from the truck as they could safely and quickly get. With the back of his neck against her bent knee, Addams folded over top of Rollins, covering her head and sheltering him as best her small frame could, as the warehouse cracked open, the brick and mortar pulverized by the short barrage of 40mm rounds that thundered in from above. All he could do was hook his left arm up, curling over the back of Allison's neck to try and help shield the fragile spot, as debris rained down and a few explosions rumbled around them. Seconds later, it was over. The air was thick with smoke and dust. The only sound was the crackle of fires across the warehouse floor and the chatter on the comms.

"Reaper 1-5. Looks like the technicals are eliminated and personnel is down. Maybe one or two crawling. Your guys can clean up the rest. If we can just get a reply from your guys inside the rectangle; little piece of mind."

"Stoker- Anvil. Stoker- Anvil. Do you copy?"

Addams sat back, giving Jack a quick once over, before snapping her attention to her right. Whitfield was coming over, coughing in the smoke, as he called out for an update on Rollins. Allison scooted back, letting the medic work on Rollins and answering the controller, "Anvil 1-2. We're still here."

The relief was evident in the voices on the air. The gunship advised they were leaving the area and the controller in the TOC was coordinating the return of the other operators back into their
Mickelson and his team ducked under the garage door, weapons ready. Addams called them over, as she and Whitfield struggled to get Jack down on the ground again. The medic pointed two men away to the corner he had held with Marshall, telling them to “recover the package”. Mickelson was closest to them and helped hold Rollins down. Whitfield looked down at the Lieutenant Commander, with a regretful sweep of his head.

"I'm sorry, Jack," he told him.

The fight left him and Rollins slumped down, held up against Allison's knee and his head cradled in her arm. "It's okay, Boss," she quietly promised, pressing her free hand over his armored chest. "He's going home."

The morphine threading through his veins and Allison's reassuring tone did nothing for him. In spite of the agony it caused, Jack grit his teeth, crushing his eyes shut against the loss he felt for his friend and the weight of defeat on his chest for the mission gone wrong. Mickelson and Whitfield pulled Rollins to his feet, bearing his weight with his arms held over their shoulders to help steady him as he walked. The mission controller had pulled the Quinjet from the LZ when Forge had called the compound 'secure', directing it in to pick up the wounded and the rest of the team.

Outside, dust swirled as the pilots set down their aircraft and the operators rallied to board when the ramp lowered. That Rollins could see, the men on the perimeter were mostly unscathed. The able bodied jogged up the ramp, securing their gear quickly to help the others as they came in. Jack was set in one of the jump seats, while Whitfield moved to the medical supply locker to begin treating him. Marshall's body was laid reverently on the deck, with Mick going over to take care to fold and keep Kyle's hands across him.

Jack could see what went wrong. Staring at Marshall's wounds, his chest was littered with wood shrapnel from the pallets he hid behind, and maybe a pair of bullet wounds. He'd have been alright, if Jack hadn't been hit and forced Whitfield's hand to engage the technical.

The pilots raised the ramp and advised the controller they were taking off. The medic was removing gauze to better assess Rollins' wound, but Jack's attention was set on his friend, watching with a vacant stare as Marshall's lifeless body was tucked into a body bag and his teammates unfolded a flag to drape over it. It's where Jack's eyes were set for the rest of the flight.

Jack woke up, slowly. His head heavy after surgery, he struggled against the brightness of the room to crack open one eye and then the other to look around. His throat was dry, when he tried to swallow. The simple move of raising his relaxed jaw to even try was difficult. Everything around the right side of his face felt impossibly tight. Blinking to adjust to the sun shining low outside the window, Rollins didn't have to squint long. The curtain was pulled over and his vision adjusted to see Addams walking around the end of his bed from the window, in fresh desert tan BDUs.

"Here," she said, dipping a plastic spoon into a cup of melting ice chips. She poured the chips into his mouth, explaining, "It's all you can have for now. They said you'll feel pretty dry after surgery." Allison gestured to ask if he wanted more and he gave a small nod.

"You're at Nouasseur Air Base," she went on. “We diverted here last night for the wounded. Doc
didn't want to wait on X-rays and CT for you. ...You remember that?" Jack nodded and took another spoonful of ice. "Surgery went well," Addams nodded. "Nurse'll come back in a bit to see how the anesthesia's wearing off." She put aside the ice, sitting down on the edge of the chair by the bed, asking, "How do you feel?"

He surprised himself, when he was able to say, "Fuckin' tired", croaked as the sound may have been.

Addams snorted. "That's the drugs," she conceded. "I meant, how's your face?"

Rollins shifted himself up a couple of inches higher on his pillow, before reaching up to gingerly touch the post-surgery wrap around his jaw and head. "Still there," he figured, his voice coming a bit rough and muted, the movement of his mouth limited by the gauze covering the side of his face. "You tell me."

A mischievous curl tugged back the side of her lips and, with a soft snort, she answered, "Still a mean looking son of a bitch, Sir."

He couldn't manage a laugh, but he grinned, as best he could, and his head tipped back into his pillow to carefully nod. Rollins didn't really expect a compliment like he was fishing for, but her answer amused him nonetheless. Addams explained that, as the next ranking officer on the team after Whitfield left, she stayed with Rollins to liaise between the staff at the air base and SHIELD. She told him that Rumlow told her who Marshall really was and the Commander had figured Rollins could use a friendly face to wake up to. She told him Whitfield took the rest of the team home, confident he was leaving Jack in capable hands with the Air Force medical staff. A call was made to deliver Marshall's body to the CIA for the proper arrangements to be made. By the check of her watch, she reasoned Marshall would be returned to his family tomorrow.

"I'm sorry we let you down," Allison regretfully told him.

Rollins gave a small shake of his head, recalling what she had said in the warehouse. "No. He got home. That was our job."

Even saying it out loud didn't convince him, though. A sick feeling came to him, in the pit of his stomach. Rollins closed his eyes and let out a deep breath. It was quiet in the room for a moment, before the door opened and a nurse came in. She checked Jack's vitals and how he was feeling. She summarized the surgery and plates the surgeon put in to repair his fractured jaw and estimated the doctor would clear him for transport home in the morning. After all, SHIELD was quite insistent he return as soon as possible. The nurse promised to come back in an hour with dinner and left.

"Can't wait to see the paste they feed you, with your jaw all wrapped up like that," Addams quipped.

Rollins saved himself some discomfort and simply flipped her off, instead of letting out the chuckle he held back. Allison shook it off with a smile. She made amends for the joke with another scoop of ice and Jack made a comment about not minding the ice if there was whiskey in it. Addams laughed and the sound made his chest feel a little lighter.

"You alright?" Rollins wondered, giving a once over of what he could see of her.


"What about everyone else?" he asked, feeling brave enough to hear the answer, if only momentarily.
"Stitches and glue. Nothing a little duct tape couldn’t fix," Allison winked. "We will all, unfortunately, live."

Stepping off the ramp of the Quinjet and onto the landing pad, Rollins quietly groaned at seeing the Commander walking out to meet him and Allison in the cold drizzle. They met halfway and while Addams gave the salute decorum required Jack didn't bother. Rumlow opened his fist and handed a set of dog tags to Allison. He sent her away with a two word dismissal and looked Jack in the eye.

"I oughta turn these in to Fury," he complained, holding open his hand to show Rollins his dog tags, "and let you hang for this. You let this one get away from you, Jack."

With a heavy exhale, Rollins accepted the blame. "I know."

"Your fuckin' friend held back," Rumlow sternly reminded him. "That son of a bitch knew why they weren't going to get him back. I guarantee it." Brock jabbed a finger Jack's way. "And he was going to let us take the hit on this. He's done," Rumlow shook his head. "That motherfucker sets one foot on that bridge, trying to get in here..."

"He's done," Rollins agreed. "I'll shoot that son of a bitch myself."

"Good," Brock nodded, holding his hand up to Jack. "Last ones to give back," he told him, opening his fist to drop Rollins' dog tags into his upturned palm. "Everyone's home."

"Now, the fallout," Jack understood, taking the chain and tucking it away into the pocket of his jacket.

"Now, you go home," Rumlow corrected and Rollins couldn't help the skeptical look on his face. "Addams filed the AAR from Nouasseur, last night. You're on medical leave, as of right now. You're to report out to the Farm for minimum three days eval, by 1200 tomorrow."

"What about the investigation?" Rollins checked, knowing that the mission was technically a failure and he had a lot to answer for.

"There won't be one. We can't look at this without calling out the CIA," the Commander explained. "They'll keep any complaints to themselves, if they know what's good for them. They played you, Jack, to fix their mistake. They never should've got in bed with Motsepe's people. And you better believe those fuckers in Langley are running with their tails between their legs. They're bending over backwards to kiss our ass for doing what they wouldn't. The book's already closed on this, to save the DO director's face. You're a goddamn hero." Rollins shook his head, disgusted at the idea, but Brock pressed on, "Doesn't matter that Marshall is dead. He was dead the minute they turned their back on him. It wasn't the way we wanted it, but you got him home. They're all home."

Rollins nodded, feeling the deep ache radiate from the tension that came to his flexed jaw. He exhaled, taking a second to concentrate and relax. The pain lessened, but didn't entirely leave him. Rumlow inclined his head toward the building, telling him it was too fucking cold to stand in the rain. Brock walked him to the garage where an agent was waiting to drive him back to his apartment. The narcotics he was on meant he shouldn't be driving and Brock told him he'd make arrangements to get Rollins' truck home by late afternoon and have a driver for him for the trip to the Farm, as well.

Dropped off at his building, Rollins waved off the offer to carry his ruck inside for him from the
young agent who drove him home. Inside his apartment, Jack dropped the pack by the door. Peeling off his damp jacket and dropping it on top of the bag, Jack snapped on the light in the hallway. He walked into the kitchen and went straight to the counter for the bottle of Jameson. On his way back out, he snagged a tumbler from the rack in the sink and went out to the living room.

He didn't bother to open the blinds. He preferred the darkness of the overcast sky today. Jack eased down onto the couch, sitting on the edge of his seat while he filled his glass. He slouched back into the cushion behind him, resting his head on the back of the couch. Rollins held up his glass and considered it a moment. Not giving a damn for the medication he was on, he made a quiet toast to his lost friend, before taking a drink.

"Sua sponte."
Chapter 29

Jan 2013

Jack checked his watch, as the elevator slowed to a stop. The doors slid aside and he flashed a tired grin, as Addams stepped into the car. That shouldn’t be so much trouble. A smile. But the first couple of days back to work were exhausting, somehow.

Rollins was using the pain meds he’d been prescribed. Although he didn’t really want to. But sometimes, just the subtle lean he had to make standing up out of a chair was enough to send a pain through his jaw. The pills helped the daily discomfort, and shots of pain, but it also made him feel a little dull. At the end of his light duty day of 8 hours of office work, he was more than ready to go home.

”Good evening, Commander,” Allison smiled, and he nodded back. She addressed the AI with her destination, before looking to Jack again. “Long time, no see,” she quipped.

”Took a couple of days off for myself,” he smirked, for as long as he could bear it. “Caught up on some reading.”

Allison sniggered, with a small shake of her head. Giving him a discerning look, she noted, “You look different. New haircut?”

Jack gave a subtle raise of his chin at her levity. He gave up on shaving, as soon as he got to the Farm. It was uncomfortable to do and was a pain in the ass to work around his wound, anyway. He hadn’t had a beard since his last tour in Iraq, almost 10 years ago. He’d take advantage of the shaving profile, while he was on light duty.

”Yeah, well, I got shot in the face,” he nonchalantly explained, with a casual shrug, as the elevator slowed again, “so, ya know, there's that.”

"Oh, yeah,” Allison playfully realized, squinting at him. "I see it now.” Allison confidently nodded, assuring him on her way out of the elevator, “Don’t worry, boss. Chicks dig scars.” She turned around to look back at him from the hallway, giving him a friendly smile and telling him, “It’s good to have you back, Commander.”

"Good to be here,” he agreed, giving her another grin before the elevator closed and was back on its way to the garage.

Alone again, Jack shook his head to himself, a quiet chuckle in his chest and his eyes watching the floors count down on the elevator wall. It was the first time anyone had mentioned the new scar still healing on his face and neck. He wasn’t necessarily surprised it was Allison.

As facial wounds went, it wasn’t a necessarily bad one. The Navy surgeon who’d worked on him had done a hell of a job, all things considered. The stitches had come out and the wound was healing well enough to no longer need attention or dressing. He was getting used to seeing the new five inch jag that ran up from the side of his throat and under the right side of his jaw to split into a small Y at his lip every day in the mirror.

The worst part of it all was how slow his recovery plan to return to full duty was. Jack’s stay at the Farm was short. Just the mandatory three days for evals actually, but he came home with plenty of restrictions. The worst of which were him not being able to train with his team and not being deployable. At the earliest, the docs anticipated his return in mid-February.
Walking through the garage to his SUV, Jack dug his ringing phone out of his pocket. He checked the caller ID and hit the remote unlock for his car, before he answered.

“Yeah.”

“Hey. Change of plans,” Brock announced. “The game is gonna be over at my place, next week.”

“What for?” he asked, not that it made a difference.

“Eh, Mick’s wife is hosting some kind of party, or something,” Rumlow said. “Either way, the game’s moved.”

Jack slid in to the driver’s seat and pulled the door shut. “That’s fine,” he agreed.

“So, how’s the first week back treatin’ you?” he checked. “Enjoying you’re new 9-5 schedule?”

Starting his car, Jack grumbled, “It’s fuckin’ killing me.” He pulled the seatbelt across him, adding, “This is bullshit.”

“Yeah yeah,” Brock sympathetically agreed. “Don’t worry, big guy. It’ll go by faster than you know it. In the meantime, I put your paperwork through. The Committee’s accepted it. They’re going to review your nomination for Addams and Whitfield for the Medal of Valor. Should hear something by Monday.”

It was the least he could do to thank them. He’d come home and been at the Farm for a day before he was debriefed and learned that Whitfield had left Cabinda with a pair of cracked ribs after taking a few rounds in his armor. The medic had been injured trying to shield Kyle, when the gun on the technical was turned on them, after Jack had been hit. Whitfield had done everything in his power to treat and revive Kyle, while under fire. And that he worked past his own injuries to help Jack, even shouldering some of his weight, was more than admirable. It was a forgone conclusion that Rollins would nominate Allison, for everything she did that night to stop the technical from getting outside and treat him until Whitfield could help.

“Good,” Jack nodded to himself.

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Sometimes it hurt to laugh. Spots in his jaw were still tender. The numbness in his cheek and the right side of his lower lip and the lack of taste from the edge of his tongue were a bit unnerving, but lent themselves to good natured jokes about the positive effects it might have on his love life. The doctors said it likely wasn't permanent, but it might take a few to several months for the nerves involved to come around.

He couldn't complain too much, though. After all, getting shot in the face usually didn't end so well. The damage to his jaw could have been much worse. The surgeon used a couple of titanium plates to shore up the bone after the round had splintered part of his jaw as it cut open his face and neck. No one would ever see that, but it was still keeping him behind his desk and it was driving him nuts. He was confident he'd be cleared for non-contact training by Monday morning. He still wouldn't be deployable, but it was better than nothing.

In the meantime, the discomfort was worth the laugh for Emery busting his ass on a patch of ice walking back from the beer cooler to the fire pit. And whether or not his face fucking hurt, Jack was just happy to still be around for another poker night. While Emery rubbed his ass and eased
into his chair, the laughter settled down. The opening and closing of the back door caught a couple people's attentions and Jack was one of them. He watched Allison pause and shiver in the cold, before she buttoned her pea coat and joined them at the fire pit.

Addams inched her chair a little closer to the fire and Rollins pulled the cigar out of the corner of his mouth to tease, "Come to beg for your money back?"

"I wouldn't beg for anything from you, Rollins," she smiled back. "It was a good game, though. I'll get you back next time."

"You coming back for more?" Emery checked, from his seat across the fire.

It was the first time Allison had made it to poker night. The idea had been tossed around, more than once, but schedules and sorties had delayed her accepting Rogers' invitation to join them several times. She didn't win tonight, but she put up a good fight.

"I can take it," Allison assured him, with a laughing nod.

"She can come back anytime," Jack nodded. "I don't mind taking money from a girl." And he wouldn't mind any excuse to see Allison more outside of work.

The group of card players had a laugh, Allison included. Rogers stood up, with an arch in his back to stretch. He finished off the last long drink of his bottle of beer.

"You outta here, Cap?" Rumlow asked.

The Captain nodded. "Got some things to take care of in the morning."

Brock put up his hand for Rogers to shake. "Alright," he said. "I'll see ya on Monday."

Rogers nodded again and turned to Allison, saying, "It was nice to finally see you at the table, Ally. You gonna make this a regular thing?"

"It's up to you guys," she shrugged. "Don't want to upset your delicate atmosphere of testosterone."

"Hell, you probably got more testosterone than Jack does," Mickelson quipped.

"Fuck off," Rollins griped, reaching down to shovel a handful of snow and throw it Eric's way.

Emery and Mick stood as well, prompting Brock to question, "What, you're all quittin'?"

"The wife's pregnant again," Eric reminded them, clapping the snow Rollins threw off his coat. "If I'm not home before 2, she'll be pissed. And I'm not sleeping on the couch while she's still putting out."

Emery jerked his thumb toward Eric, explaining, "And I'm this bitch's ride."

"You ladies be careful getting home," Jack smirked into his beer.

Rumlow stood, twisting his beer down into to the snow to stay cold. "Hold up a second. I'll get that disc for ya, Mick," he offered, leading the way back inside.

The departing trio waved and called their goodbyes. Allison and Jack were left at the fire. When she rubbed her hands together to warm them near the flames, he snorted and shook his head. He twisted the burning cigar in his mouth and Allison gave him a curious look, as if she'd missed something.
"Aw, what'sa matter?" he pouted, blowing out smoke. "Too cold for you, Princess?"

"Princess?" Addams parroted. "That's the best you got, Rollins?"

He shrugged, his laugh stifled by the drink he swallowed. "It suits you," he told her.

"How on earth...?" she led him on, shaking her head and holding her hands out wide to invite an explanation.

"Look at you," Jack said, gesturing at her with the cigar in his hand. "You work so hard at being a badass and not just a pretty face, climbing up the ladder. The only other female agent with a better rep than you is Romanoff. So, until you dethrone her, you're stuck being the princess of the castle."

"You're fun when you drink, you know that?" she winked, picking up her beer from the snow covered ground and tipping it his way as a toast.

"You have no idea," he promised, giving her a wicked smile and hoisting his drink in reply.

"So, what do you call Romanoff then?" Addams wondered.

"Romanoff," he answered, matter of factly, as if it should have been obvious.

Allison's smile broadened. "Well, ain't I the lucky one."

Jack shrugged, giving the joke some consideration. "Actually," he decided, "yeah." He got up, dropping his empty bottle in the trash can and pulling a pair of fresh drinks from the cooler on the deck. He passed one off to Allison and took up residency in one of the empty chairs beside her.

"Thanks," she told him, finishing the last drink from her old bottle and setting it aside.

"You're not too bad, Addams," he admitted. "I mean, you're not good enough for Delta," he said, with a sarcastic frown and shrug, "but you're alright."

Allison laughed, twisting the cap off her new beer. "Okay, now you're just fucking with me," she insisted. "You've never been this nice. What do you want, Rollins?"

Jack chuckled, shaking his head. "Nothing," he assured her. He gave her a discerning look, before giving her an easy smile and telling her, "And my friends call me Jack."

Allison smiled and nodded into her beer. Rollins figured he could give her that much. After Cabinda, nobody in the Division would think twice about the privilege of calling the Lt. Commander by his first name being given to Addams. And he had always been curious about what his name would sound like on her lips.

The back door opened and Rumlow came back outside. He dropped into his chair and picked his beer out of the snow, looking suspiciously between the pleased expressions on Allison and Jack's faces.

"What have you two been up to?" he wondered aloud.

"Nothin'," Jack smiled, glancing over at Allison.

She flashed a quick smile to them both and shrugged. "Nothin'."
"It's a great cabin," she assured him. "We go there every year. And with everyone else going, it works out to be a steal."

Jack nodded, as he chewed. His eyes flicked up from his plate, feeling Christy's gaze on him. He held up a finger, signaling her to wait, while he took a drink and hoped his stalling wasn't too obvious. She waited, with a hopeful grin.

"When was that again?" he checked, even putting a thoughtful wrinkle in his brow to convince her he didn't catch it. In reality, he was already mentally mining his calendar for any excuse not to go.

"Third weekend in February," Christy repeated.

“Oh, right.”

"You said you could take the time," she reminded him.

After another sip off his glass, Rollins corrected her, "I said I could try."

"But you have the time," Christy began to complain.

"I do," he agreed.

No use arguing that. He barely took any personal time during the year. Work kept him busy, and he liked it that way. The biggest use of his vacation time was the annual hunting trip with Rumlow and the guys in October. But he hadn't ever pissed away any earned time for a ski vacation to Aspen, with a woman he'd been dating for barely three months and her friends he'd maybe met twice. In fact, he hadn't burned any real time off for a woman since he took a couple weeks down in Cabo for the fishing, after the divorce from Claire was finalized.

"But I need a little warning," Jack told her, "so someone can cover for me."

Christy frowned. "It's, like, four weeks away, Jack. How much more notice do you need?"

She had him there, but Rollins spearred another bite of steak on his fork and ate, the early dinner before a play at Ford's the first descent meal of real food he'd had since surgery, before he tried to explain, "I know, but the thing is..." Jack paused, considering how to make his excuse make sense without her knowing exactly what he did for SHIELD, let alone HYDRA. "I have the time, and I'd like to go. It sounds great," he continued, his well-trained speech pattern and expressions making his bullshit completely undetectable. "It's just that I can't always guarantee that I can go, even if the time off's been approved."

If it weren't for the prospect of a few days in the mountains, the trip actually sounded kind of annoying, but the pretty brunette across the table was none the wiser, pouting a little to suggest, "Maybe they won't need you to work that week." She gestured toward him, noting, "I mean, you said the doctor told you things are going well, but, Jack, you still got a little ways to go. The car crash was only a few weeks ago. Maybe they'll see you could use the time off."

"Yeah, maybe," he conceded, just to make her happy and see if the topic would change. "We'll see."
Christy was a nice girl, had a decent job managing a bank and was a good time. But she wasn't anything long term. Not that he was looking. A part of him hated himself for not really putting in the effort to get to know her better, but she came along before the holidays and got attached right before he got shot. Jack felt a little guilty for the way he Florence Nightinged him after he was injured in Cabinda. Admittedly, he was in a weak spot, after the wound and Kyle's death. He still hadn't forgiven himself for that, either. But still, he probably should have just cut her loose, instead of having to come up with a bullshit reason for the broken jaw and stitches.

He was just about to make the sacrifice play and ask about how her parents were enjoying their cruise, when he caught sight of the front of the restaurant. Rollins always took the seat facing the door, to watch for threats, unless he was with another operator or an agent he could trust to watch his back. But it wasn't trouble that made him sit up a little straighter, on alert. Jack locked eyes with the agent at the hostess station, watching him politely excuse himself and the agent accompanying him from the greeter to walk straight toward Jack's table.

"Commander," he said as greeting. "Sir, I'm sorry for the interruption..."

"Hey, Phil," Rollins warily replied, with a lift of his chin to the two dark suited men.

Christy, quite confused, looked between the three men, wondering, "Commander? Jack?"

Agent Coulson turned, smiling his apology to Christy, saying, "I'm sorry, miss, I didn't-

"It's alright, Phil," Jack waved him off, figuring he definitely had some explaining to do now, no matter what Coulson said next. "What are you guys doing here?"

"I'm afraid I need you to come with us," Coulson frowned. "Cmdr. Rumlow sent us to find you. They've been trying to call you, Sir." Jack reached to pat the pockets of his suit coat, realizing his phone wasn't there at the same moment that Phil produced the device from his own pocket to hand to Jack. "Must've fallen out in the car."

"The car?" Christy questioned. "How di- Did you break into my car?"

Jack put up a hand to assure her they wouldn't have, but Coulson spoke up first. "No, ma'am," Phil smiled, kindly, before turning his attention back to Jack. "Sir, I need you to come with us, right away."

Seeing the missed calls on the screen of his phone from Brock and the communications center, Jack asked, "What is it?"

"There's been an incident," Coulson told him. "In the CAR. Cmdr. Rumlow is requesting you respond to the Triskelion, immediately."

As much as Jack should have been grateful for the excuse to leave and not have to talk his way out of Aspen, he hesitated. The expensive steak on his plate was still perfectly warm and he'd only had a few tastes of the aged whiskey that accompanied it. Besides, he felt a little bad, having promised Christy the nice evening out.

"What does Bingo need from me?" Rollins griped. He took another bite, pointing out, "I'm on light duty and out of the rotation, for now. Besides, I'm in the middle of dinner."

Christy smiled, clearly not understanding what was happening, but plainly pleased he chose her. Jack chewed, watching a flash of discomfort cross Coulson's face. Phil's eyes ticked toward Jack's date, before he took a step closer to Jack's side of the table and quietly told him, "Sir, we have a cancelled flight."
"Reason?" he casually checked, taking another sip of his drink, not overly concerned.

"Due to weather," Phil answered. "Possibly diverted."

Operations had hiccups. Shit happens and they can't control everything. Rendezvous were rescheduled, drops were missed, extractions were relocated, all for a hundred different reasons. A cancelled flight meant an operator didn't or couldn't make their rally point. Not all reasons for a "cancelled flight" deserved the same level of worry. While a mechanical issue could mean real-time intelligence changed the parameters of a mission or an overbooked flight meant an operation needed to be extended, a new reservation being made meant the exfil was moved up or delayed. But a cancelled flight due to weather meant an agent was captured and a diverted flight meant they were dead.

Jack put down his fork, taking his napkin from his lap to wipe his mouth. "Whose ticket?" he unhappily questioned, instantly pissed and running the list in his head of operators and agents he knew STRIKE and CS had in service in the region.

"It's Lt. Addams, Commander," Coulson solemnly informed him.

"Allison?" Rollins balked. Worried, skeptical, and furious, all at the same time.

Rollins was already rising to stand, as Phil added, "43 minutes ago, Sir."

"43 minutes," Jack muttered to himself, thumbing out a few large bills from his pocket to drop on the table and more than cover the cost of his half eaten meal with Christy's. "43 god damn minutes."

"What's going on?" Christy worried. "Who's Allison?"

"They tried to call you, Sir," Phil offered. "When you didn't respond, we pinged your phone and came here right away."

Leveling his eyes at Agent Coulson, he hotly demanded, "Which one is it? Is it weather or is she diverted?"

"We don't know yet, Sir," Phil regretfully admitted. He gestured toward the door and then to his partner, saying, "We have a car waiting outside. Agent Mowry will take you."

Christy was on her feet, napkin in her hand and looking between the men. "Wait. Whose flight got cancelled? Jack, you're leaving, 'cause someone missed a plane?"

Rollins sighed, stepping past the suited agents to stand next to his date. "I'm sorry. I have to go," he said.

Completely flustered, Christy stammered, "You just- You're leaving me becau- Jack, you promised we'd-"

He interrupted her, pecking a quick kiss to her cheek. Jack shook his head, "I don't have time to explain." He remembered the theater tickets and pulled them out of the pocket inside his suit coat, putting them in her hand. "Call your sister. Maybe she can go."

"Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," Coulson observed, with a pleasant smile. "I think you'll like it."

Christy was at a loss, looking confusedly around. "I can't believe you're doing this to me," she breathed out. "Who the hell is Allison?"
"Sir," Mowry spoke up, "we need to go."

Jack nodded, holding up a hand to the agents and apologizing again to Christy. "I can't tell you," he answered her. "Sorry. I'll call you, when I can."

Rollins was already walking away, with Coulson and Mowry following in step. Behind him, he heard Christy warn him not to bother calling. He was surprised how little it affected him, when he threw a look back over his shoulder and saw her red faced and angry. After all, she was a nice girl. Jack retrieved his coat from the coatcheck and Mowry pushed open the door ahead of them, pointing Rollins to the first of two running, black SUVs at the curb. At least he didn't have to go to Aspen anymore.

The ride from downtown to the gate on the Triskelion bridge took just minutes, with the hidden lights and siren of the SHIELD SUV activated. They were waved through the gate, as soon as Mowry said who he was driving for. Inside, Jack briskly walked through the building, practically ignoring anyone who tried to say hello as he passed, until he badged his way through the secure door of the tactical operations center that was running the Motsepe operation.

He didn't have much patience left, after Mowry and the other agent he was with in the car had no information to share. Standing by, while Rumlow was on the phone, was quickly whittling away what little he did have. While he waited, Rollins scanned the screens on the wall and at the station of the tech closest to him. The timer above the center of the bank of large monitors on the wall was counting forward. It was now 56 minutes since whatever went wrong happened.

"Sheryl," Brock was arguing, on the phone, "we both know the Intelligence Collaboration Act says I have the authority to commandeer that plane. I'll be happy to highlight the finer points of the Act for you on the Hill later, if that's the way you wanna play it. But right now, that bird is fueled and parked on the tarmac."

Rumlow listened for a moment before he looked over toward the monitors, pointing with the full length of his arm at one of the screens, an emphasis the Deputy Director of the CIA's Directorate of Operations couldn't see. "Don't bullshit me," he warned. "I'm looking at a live satellite view of it, right now. I need that plane back. Put a fresh crew on it and get it back over my AO. I'm still two hours away from having my resources there, and you know how precious time is with this."

Rollins crossed his arms, tightly, over his chest, the knuckles of his raised fist pressed against his lips to keep his comments to himself. Sheryl could be a ball buster, but Jack couldn't understand why she would be over this. Brock had the authority to commandeer the CIA's aircraft, if it was the only available resource in the area. It wasn't the first time SHIELD, or anyone else, had borrowed from another agency, and it wouldn't be the last. He shook his head, incensed at the sudden thought that the Deputy Director's unwillingness to share and play nice might be a result of the tension there had been between the two agencies over the attempt at Marshall's recovery and his accidental death in the process.

"You owe me Sheryl," the Commander sternly reminded her. "You and I both know you wouldn't be in that office without me. I'm callin' in that favor. Give me the goddamn plane back, Sher. It's one phone call. That's all I'm asking for." The sigh that fell out of Brock was a mix of relief and irritation. "Thank you," he told her, more arrogantly than sincere, and unceremoniously hung up the phone.

"What the hell happened?" Rollins asked, before Brock's hand was even off the phone.
Rumlow looked over and then around the room. He stepped over to Jack, giving the back of his arm a touch for him to follow to the back of the room. Brock scrubbed his hands up and down his face, inhaling a deep breath before quietly telling his lieutenant, "We lost her."

"The fuck does that mean?" Rollins hissed, his brow angrily knitted down and his words pushed through grit teeth to keep the conversation between them. Pointing away at the door, he leaned in and went on, "Fucking Coulson comes after me saying we have a cancelled flight, but he can't decide why. So, which is it? Is it weather or diverted?"

"We don't fuckin' know, alright?" Rumlow bit back. "It was over. She was on her way to the rally point and she got made. She called out that she was being followed, but she couldn't shake them. We lost comms before we could get back to her. We don't know yet." Jack straightened up, moving out of Brock's face, speechless. "Seconds, Jack," Brock told him, shaking his head, his expression stressed and almost pained. "We missed her by 9 seconds."

"Jesus Christ," Jack muttered, taking a look around him, one hand on his hip holding back his coats and the other hand wiping over his mouth. He exhaled, trying to get his head around what Brock was saying. "Okay," he nodded, checking the timer on the wall. "Plus 59 minutes. Where are we at?"

Rollins listened as Rumlow briefed him about the successful mission, darkly pleased, for his own personal reasons, that Motsepe was dead. But his scowl deepened when Brock broke down how the egress went wrong. Jack asked questions and Brock answered with what they knew. It wasn't much. There was no clear indication that it was Motsepe's people. On the one hand, they couldn't have coordinated a response to the assassinations so fast. But there were no other organizations necessarily skilled enough in the region to pull it off the way Brock described.

Motsepe's splinter faction from HYDRA were their only real suspects. They didn't have enough resources in the area of operations to effectively search. As it was, the small element that had been inserted with Allison to recon and execute Motsepe and his lieutenants were applying pressure to try and get any leads on any witnesses or informants they could find, but it wasn't enough. The CIA was dragging their feet to cooperate and it would be hours before SHIELD's force multipliers would be on the ground in the CAR.

When all of the information was laid out, Jack checked, "Does Pierce know?"

"No," Rumlow shook his head. "That's why I need you, Jack. I need you to run the TOC 'til I come back. Start pulling favors and strings. We have to get a handle on this. We have to get her back."

No sooner had Rumlow announced he was handing over control of the TOC to Rollins, Jack had shed his coat and jacket, gathering the controllers at the sand table and going over every action from the moment Allison pulled the trigger on her target to the time they lost contact. He rewatched the video feed from the agents on Romeo 6 as they made their way back to try and help Addams and listened to the playback of the mission radio traffic. When he had gone over everything they had, Jack took out his phone and got to work.

Rollins had accumulated a lot of names and numbers over the years. Most of them were professional contacts he'd never needed to call on, but had access to with his positions in SHIELD and HYDRA. He would leave the higher up calls to Brock. Jack needed to start with people closer to the problem.

He made calls to a few CIA agents he knew were assigned to the southern end of the Central African Republic. Jack's wariness grew when a pair of phone calls to each went unanswered. He moved on down his list, trying to tap a private contractor working with the intelligence agency.
When that call went to voicemail twice, Rollins felt the ache coming to his still healing jaw, feeling the tension from the way his irritation was setting the muscles.

The next person he contacted was the CIA's Congo station chief, Rowan Williams. While the phone rang, Jack folded up his shirt sleeves and checked his watch. His eyes ticked up to the clock on the wall showing the time in Bangui. Rollins checked the timer gain. It was now plus two hours.

Jack leaned forward onto his knees, at hearing the tired voice that answered his call. "Chief Williams, this is Lt. Commander Rollins from SHIELD, STRIKE Division."

"I remember the name," he yawned. "Been a long time, Jack."

"Five years, or so," Rollins confirmed. "Birava."

"Birava, right," Williams recalled. "Lt. Commander, huh? When'd they do that?"

"Bout two and a half years," he answered.

"Congratulations," Rowan said, sounding a little more awake. "What can I do for you?"

"We had a cancelled flight," Jack told him, the admission twisting his gut. "We're not sure if it's weather or diverted yet."

"In my neck of the woods?" he checked, a hint of worry coming to the Chief's voice.

Jack rubbed his hand along the back of his neck, hanging his head. "Close. In Bangui."

"Do I want to know what you were doing in Bangui?" Rowan asked. "Because I've heard some bad things about Bangui, lately."

"What have you heard, lately?" Rollins pressed, bracing himself for any news on Allison.

"Nothing good for you guys," he admitted. "The Agency's been keeping an eye on a heavy hitter named Thato Motsepe for about six months now. We heard about a pair of agents you lost several weeks ago. Found them in Lioto. Or what was left of them. My understanding is they came out of Bangui; pissed off Motsepe somehow. He's been making a lot of moves and getting his hands dirty in local mining interests and shit. ...Jack, with Motsepe, if you lost another agent in Bangui, I hate to tell you, but you're probably looking for pieces of him in the jungle."

"Her, Rowan," Jack corrected. "Motsepe is dead. Just over two hours ago. She got made en route to her rally point. It was a professional grab."

"Jesus, Jack," Williams muttered. "Hold on. I'm getting online now." Rollins waited, glancing at the timer counting up on the wall. "Yeah. We got the heads up about a half hour ago about Motsepe and a couple of his boys being taken out. It's got Motsepe's group and the local competition on edge. We've pulled everyone back from the area, 'til things calm down. ...Your girl," he carefully questioned, "she any good?"

"She's one of the best we've ever had," Rollins nodded. "She's tough, but if it's Motsepe's people that took her..."

"What do you need?" he offered.

"We have people in the air now," Jack told him, "but I need local info. The rest of her team is still
there. I need eyes and ears to help point my guys in the right direction."

"Jack, I just told you," Williams began, "I'm looking at an email here, right now, telling me we've suspended-"

"Rowan," Rollins cut in, "we need to find out who took her. I need someone who knows the region and I don't have any local assets in the city."

"Our personnel have withdrawn, Jack," he reiterated. "I know one or two guys who've been doing passive probes, but I don't have anybody who's taken him up as an assignment who'd know. And I can't send anyone in to you, even if we were keeping tabs on Motsepe like that."

"Then share your intel with me," Jack insisted.

When Rollins heard Williams sigh, he knew he wasn't going to like what followed. "The next email I'm reading tells me not to interact with SHIELD. Sorry, Jack," he reluctantly said. "I won't mention this call, but I can't give you anything."

"Who sent the email?" Rollins pressed.

"Jack," Rowan began to complain, "this is a blackout order for every station and center within a 300 mile radius."

"I lost contact with an operator 138 minutes ago," Jack firmly reminded him. "You and I both know what happens to missing operatives in that region. Now, I'm trying not to take it personally that everyone I'm reaching out to isn't taking my calls tonight, Chief. So, who sent the fuckin' email?"

There was a heavy pause, before Williams answered, "Deputy Director Sheryl Winger."

Rollins' suspicions were confirmed and he was fuming. He took a deep breath, feeling the heat rise up the back of his neck, before a tight jawed "thank you" to Williams. "Have a good night, Chief," Jack said, promptly hanging up his phone, getting to his feet, and heading for the Secretary's office upstairs.

It was late. Pierce's secretary had gone home, but the Secretary could often be found lingering around to get some work done in the quiet after hours or taking a late meeting due to time zones. They were lucky this was one of those nights. Stalking past the empty receptionist desk and down the corridor, Rollins spied Rumlow and Pierce through the glass panel near the door. His purposeful movement caught their attention and Pierce waved him in to the office before he even reached for the handle.

"Lt. Commander," Pierce nodded as greeting, turning his fists down into his hips.

Jack tuned in to the tension in Rumlow's frame, instantly. Arms folded tightly across his chest, Brock didn't even wait for the door to shut behind Jack to ask, "What have you got?"

"Not a god damn thing," Jack growled, crossing the large office to join them beside Pierce's desk. "We've been blacked out."

"On whose authority?" Rumlow demanded.

"Winger," Rollins told him. He turned to Pierce, insisting. "Sir, we need to get her in check. She's pulled back their assets and shut down communication with us for anyone within 300 mikes of
"And how do you know this?" the Secretary calmly checked.

"The Station Chief in Congo was the only call I could get through," he answered.

Pierce nodded and turned his attention to the maps and images layered on the large screen on the wall. "Get her in check," the Secretary distractedly repeated to himself. "Correct me if I'm wrong, Lieutenant," Pierce turned to address Jack, "but didn't this whole thing start with you and not Deputy Director Winger?"

"Sir?" Jack questioned, as respectfully as he could, bristling at the remark.

The Secretary only got his next words in by a fraction, before Brock could speak up. "I find the whole thing to be a strange coincidence that, not four weeks ago, you were running a black op against Thato Motsepe in Cabinda. An operation that resulted in the death of a CIA civilian analyst, as well as injuries to you and your team, and the deaths of 37 of Motsepe's men, which actually translates to 37 of HYDRA's men," he reminded them, the patronizing tone grating on Rollins' nerves.

"Sir," Rumlow interrupted, "those 37 men, and the rest of Motsepe's organization, are not HYDRA anymore. Motsepe made that clear when he decided to try and sell the-"

"I'm aware of how Motsepe has separated himself, Commander," Pierce flatly told him, raising a hand to stop him. "And, I believe, that decision was remedied just a few hours ago by your Horsemen. What we're dealing with now is whether or not Motsepe's people have Lt. Addams and, if so, whether or not this is retaliation for the operation last month. An operation that Lt. Addams was a participant in, correct?"

"Yes, Sir," Rollins nodded.

Rumlow stepped up, redirecting Pierce by saying, "I think the presumption we should be working with is, that in all likelihood it is Motsepe's people. There's no other players organized like this in the region. We should be focusing on how, not why."

"On the contrary, Commander," the Secretary disagreed, "I think the why is germane to the problem at hand. If your people hadn't gone on a rogue operation to Cabinda, we might not even have this problem."

Jack's pulse was up. Maybe Pierce was right, that this wouldn't have happened if they hadn't gone to Africa after his friend. But it didn't stop him from staring daggers into the Secretary's skull as Rollins watched the man turn his back on him. Pierce touched a panel on his desk, expanding the map of Bangui on the monitor on the wall.

"Now," he began, resting his hands on his hips and looking over the image in front of him, "your men on the ground, they've checked Motsepe's holdings in the city?"

Rumlow nodded. "They're working on it now, but so far, nothing. We'll have a better picture when the support team lands. But preliminary intel indicates he's shifted his operations from his city strongholds; that they might be using locations off our grid. Makes sense, if he's been planning on breaking free, he'd have moved camp to cover his tracks."

"And I suppose somebody already tried reaching out to Motsepe's people," Pierce dryly suggested.

"No response from anyone in the organization, since Motsepe's death," Rumlow told him. "With
Motsepe and his lieutenants dead, the company should have fallen into disarray. We anticipated a power struggle from three of his second tier officers, but we haven't identified any one man that stepped up to take command. It's possible that a percentage of his troops are still loyal to HYDRA, but we have no way of authenticating that and no one's reached out to us, yet, if it were true.

"So, no one wants to take our calls anymore," Pierce mused.

"In all likelihood, Sir," Brock nodded, "they know it was SHIELD who took out Motsepe. Even anyone still loyal is going to keep their head down, until they think it's safe to make contact. Sir, if we can get a couple teams in place, expand the scope of our search and have a reactionary force in play to make the recovery..."

Pierce didn't respond to the suggestion. Rollins and Rumlow shared a disconcerted look, while Pierce silently considered the information on the screen. The Secretary turned back around, deciding, "Gentlemen, while I'm not unsympathetic to the problem, I am confident this could have been avoided." Pierce walked behind his desk, taking up his suit jacket from off the back of his chair, while the STRIKE commanders watched. "Lt. Addams' loss is unfortunate, but, as for now, we have no reliable intel or verification that it is the work of Motsepe's people. We all know that region is unstable and full of all kinds of unscrupulous sorts just waiting for their chance to prove themselves. We don't want to make any moves to worsen an already volatile situation."

"Sir," Brock began to argue, taking a step forward.

But Pierce put up a hand to cut him off. "Until such time that we get verification of who took Lt. Addams" he continued, adjusting the lapels of his suit after he shrugged on his jacket, "we will monitor the situation and consider all possibilities."

"Sir," Jack protested, as the Secretary made his way to the door, "with all due respect, we cannot afford to be passive. If we can even just get Winger to release CIA's assets to-

"Deputy Director Winger has made a smart decision," Pierce sharply noted, turning on his heel to look back at the two men. "And I respect her decision, all things considered." Jack felt the point meant for him and inhaled deeply to keep his mouth shut. "Continue to observe known locations for Motsepe's people," Pierce reiterated, continuing on his way, "and see if you can get me something actionable. In the meantime, I'm late for a dinner reservation."

The door shut behind Pierce and the two operators watched him pause outside his door, pleasantly smiling when he took his phone from his jacket pocket to answer a call and disappeared from sight.

"Fuck!" Brock punched his fist down in to the corner of Pierce's desk. "You believe this asshole?" Rumlow straightened up, pointing, hatefully, at the last place they had seen Pierce. "And fuckin' Sheryl...I'm gonna kill her."

"He can't shut us down like this," Jack insisted. "She's one of ours, Bingo."

"I know," Rumlow sighed, dropping his head when he leaned on his palms pushed into the desk.

"Put me on the ground," Rollins pressed. "Give me-"

"I can't," Brock shook his head. "You heard 'im."

"Then send-"

"Jack, I can't!" the Commander snapped, pushing up off the desk.
"We can't just leave her," Jack argued.

Rumlow was on him in an instant, in his face, demanding, "Is that what you think I'm doing?! You think I want to tell you “no” and leave her in that hell hole with those animals?!"

He didn't have an answer. Jack knew better than to speak. Brock withdrew, taking a pair of steps back and turning away to scrub his hands over his face. Rollins' own frustration was about to get the better of him. He took a moment to breathe, knowing Rumlow didn't deserve his anger.

"What can we do?" Rollins asked.


"We've got to get her back," Jack insisted. "It's Ally. She's one of us. Does he-"

"He knows," the Commander defeatedly nodded, turning to study the satellite feed on the wall. "Of course, he knows. He doesn't give a shit. We're all disposable to him."

A fear came to Rollins, aware for the first time that there was a chance they wouldn't get her back. "Bingo, we-" Jack trailed off, not knowing what to say. The ache in his jaw reminded him, "In Cabinda...she kept me down. When that truck went for the door, she stood up and she leaned in." He swept his head, sending the memory of her standing in the path of that truck away and swallowing the tightness in his throat. "...I owe her."

Rumlow looked back at him, over his shoulder. "I know, big guy," he solemnly acknowledged. "We all do. We'll find her. I don't know how," he admitted, "but we’ll find her. I have to."

After a quiet minute, it came to him. "What about her family?" Jack worried. "Have they been notified?"

Brock shook his head, saying, "She doesn't want any notifications made. She signed the waiver. They'll only know if her status changes to KIA. She's estranged from most of them, doesn't keep any contact. ...We're all she has."
Jan 2013

Jack locked his screen and looked up from his phone, walking into the tactical operations center. His brow furrowed, as he crossed the dimly lit room. His eyes flitted up to the clock still counting forward on the wall above the bank of monitors directing every aspect of the Horsemen's mission in Bangui, before his gaze shifted back to Rumlow, standing at the sand table, leaning with his hands pressed into the edge and eyes studying the digital rendering of the street where Addams had been taken. Rollins could tell by the tired redness in his eyes and the extra stubble on his face, the Commander hadn't left the TOC all night.

Looking over the room, as he stopped at the end of the table, a majority of the staff had been relieved and left their counterparts to keep up the work of the mission gone wrong. The remaining personnel in the room would be cycled out soon enough. For himself, Jack had left just after 2 a.m.; gone home to get out of his suit, take a quick shower to wake up, and changed into a clean set of BDU's. But not Brock.

"Anything?" Rollins asked, after a moment, when Rumlow didn't acknowledge his return or take his attention off the rendering in front of him.

He shook his head, slowly. "Nothing."

Even his voice sounded as run down as he looked. Jack eyed the scene displayed on the table and exhaled. They should be hearing something by now; chatter, demands, anything to say Allison was still alive. Rollins stepped over to the senior controller's desk and the agent began to rise from his chair, before Rollins put up a hand to wave him off, more interested in any information than he'd ever be about decorum.

"SitRep," he ordered.

"Support team arrived at 2116, local time," the supervising analyst began, making some keystrokes to change the info displayed on his computer screen. "CS has identified some of Motsepe's facilities, as well as some possible informants to attempt to locate and tap. No positive results from the search team, yet. CIA still has us under a blackout. CS agent for the region is still in holding."

"What's the delay?" Rollins asked, folding his arms, unhappily.

"The agent's in the middle of an approach for a new asset," he explained, with an incredulous tinge in his voice and sweep of his head. "He's been instructed to adjust his tactics and expedite to rally with the Horsemen and the rest of the support team."

"Where do we stand on any CC or other feeds?"

"Closest we've come is this surveillance camera," the analyst tipped his head, enlarging an image from the corner of his screen as Jack took a step and leaned in to scrutinize the still that took over the monitor. "The camera's a few years old, pointing at the end of a driveway to a hotel nine blocks from Seraphim's last ping. Video captured a chalk of three SUVs and one sedan, fast movers, headed out of the area. A civilian witness said he saw a woman grabbed by men with guns who drove away in dark colored SUVs. We isolated some frames and ran some filters," he noted, zooming in on the image. He pointed out features, as he explained, "Natural light is low, street lights are shit, and the windows of all the vehicles are smoked, but three of the four vehicles left
with three passengers on board. One left with five." The agent pointed to a figure faintly outlined behind the tinted glass and seated in the middle of the backseat. "We believe this is Lt. Addams."

Jack stared at the grainy image, for a long moment. He searched for any recognizable feature in the shadows on the screen, but there was none. Rollins straightened up and slowly inhaled, wiping a hand down over his mouth. He subtly nodded his agreement. It had to be her.

"Is she alive?" Rollins questioned, keeping his tone even and trying not to let his honest fear of an answer come through.

"We believe so, Sir," he nodded once. "Based on the posture of the figure in the image, she was alive when they passed this camera."

Jack found little comfort in the wording of the reply, but he had to stay optimistic. "Anything on the vehicles?"


Jack nodded, instructing the supervising agent, "I want to know the instant the CS agent is on the ground."

"Yes, Sir."

Rollins went back to the sand table. The hologram he was staring out had changed, but Rumlow hadn't. He was still locked into his lean on the table, eyes taking in every detail of the rendering of a 20 or so block section of the city. Brock spoke up, but didn't take his eyes off of the city model.

"I can't put any more assets on the ground," he complained. "Not until they bring me something to justify it to Pierce."

"What about the witness and images they lifted from the camera on the street?" Jack offered.

Brock shook his head. "It's not enough."

"The hell it's not enough," Jack scoffed. "We have a statement from a witness, at her last known location, saying armed men took her and drove away in the SUVs we have on tape."

"A statement from a guy who doesn't know faces," Rumlow frustratedly corrected, "who can't identify any of the men involved, and only saw that the woman was white with brown hair. Pictures that show shadows with no discernible features to corroborate that Addams is the one in that vehicle." He swept his head, with a snarl in his lips. "And that's damn near a verbatim quote from Pierce."

"Are you fuckin' kiddin' m-" Rollins stopped, in complete disbelief of what he was hearing. "For fuck's sake, how much more does he need? How many other women were taken like this in that fuckin' town last night?"

"I know," Brock nodded, straightening up out of his lean and finally looking at Jack. "I already used that argument."


"Fury's out," the Commander shook his head, cutting him off. "Pierce has already shut him down, just like he did to us. If we pick the wrong target; blame the wrong party, we'll set off an international incident, he says."
"So, he's just going to sit back an-"

"He's been holding a weak hand since New York with the Council," Brock reminded him, folding his arms across his chest. "You know that." He dropped and shook his head, tiredly. "I talked to him already, privately," he quietly mentioned. "We have his support for anything we can do, but our hands are tied until we can get Pierce some solid evidence that it was Motsepe and get a location on Addams."

"She could be dead by then," Jack scowled. "We need to be in the city, applying pressure; kicking in doors and breaking bodies. That's how we're going to find her."

"You think I don't know that?!" Rumlow bit, the muscles in his shoulders and neck flexing at the anger Jack's argument apparently stirred. "I'd've dropped the whole division into the center of that god damned city by now, if it were up to me."

Rumlow's tone hadn't been loud enough to gain more than the attention of a couple agents working at the stations closest to him, but Rollins put up a hand to try and calm him down anyway. "I'm not saying that," he evenly argued.

"What are you still doing here, anyway?" Brock scoffed, giving Rollins a stern once over. "Thought you left."

"I'm here to help," Jack reminded him. "You called me in."

"You're still on light duty," he pointed out, the sharpness of his attitude slowly beginning to dull. "There's nothing you can do here anymore. Not while we're blacked out."

"I can run the TOC while you get some-"

"Some rest?" the Commander sarcastically suggested. "Not until we know something."

"You've been here since formation yesterday," Rollins knew, glancing at the clock on the wall and figuring his friend was only an hour or so shy of being awake 24 hours, if he wasn’t already. "You're not gonna do anybody any good, if you-"

"I got a SitRep with Fury and Pierce at 0700," Brock informed him, turning his attention back to the digital city above the table top.

"Let me run the TOC," Jack insisted. "Catch a few minutes in your office, or something. Then get some coffee and a shave before you go back up there. I'll let you know if we get anything."

Brock slowly swept his head, looking over the sand table. "Since taking over this division," he considered, "failure rates are down. Injuries are down. We train better; harder. We haven't lost a single operator since Fuentes."

A sympathetic twinge of guilt made Jack swallow. "We haven't lost anybody now," he said, trying to keep himself convinced as well. "We'll get her back."

"I lost her, Jack," Rumlow softly disagreed, wiping a hand down his mouth, shaking his head. "The Horsemen are under my direct supervision. I authorized the mission. I was on watch in the TOC when it happened."

"None of us could have known, Bingo," Rollins assured him.

"It's our job t- It was my job to know," Brock snarled. "Pierce has made that very clear. This is on
me, Jack. It's on me."

Jack nodded his understanding and took a look across the operations center. He inhaled a deep breath through his nose and turned back to Brock, deciding, "Something isn't right about this, Bingo. This shouldn't have happened." Rumlow met his suspicious gaze. "Nobody should have been there that fast. How did they find her?"

"I don't know," the Commander swept his head.

Jack was dumbfounded. It had been three days since Addams had been taken and still no word. There were no more witnesses on the streets. There was no ransom or demands. Facilities and offices Motsepe used were abandoned and gave no traces to where operations had been moved. The few foot soldiers of Motsepe they had found knew nothing. The rest were in hiding. There had been no activity from any of Motsepe's followers anywhere in the city. The agents and operators on the ground were expanding their search, but the silence was unnerving them all.

The TOC remained operational and specifically designated to efforts to locate and recover their missing operator. STRIKE techs and analysts were on overlapping 10 hour shifts, combing through and dissecting any intelligence as it came in. Without any positive results, Pierce continued to decline requests for additional resources to be put into the area, and Fury was obligated to agree. The CIA was still holding their agents out of the area and Jack's phone calls and messages still went unanswered.

The only thing good he had to say about those first few days was that he was cleared for no contact training. He still wasn't deployable, but he was back with his team. He spent most hours of the day at work. He split his time in the Triskelion between the TOC and Rumlow's office. He took his frustrations out in the gym or at the range on the training level of Tower B. After a week with no news, tempers were rising and patience was dangerously low. People were starting to keep comments to themselves and holding back asking for updates when they'd see Brock or Jack, knowing they were tired of saying they had nothing to report and seeing the way subordinates were being snapped at for practically nothing. Even Rogers didn't ask many questions, when he stepped in to the TOC first thing every morning to check with the agents on watch, just in case there was something new.

Each empty handed day was a worsening mental and physical strain of the Division's Commanders and for the morale of the teams, especially Echo's. Brock was practically living out of his office. Rollins would have done the same, if he knew it wouldn't raise flags from the shrink he'd been ordered to meet with twice a week until he was cleared for full duty from being shot. If Jack hadn't been woken up by a call at 0247hrs, the morning of day 8, telling him to report to Rumlow's office, who knows what would have happened to them all.

Rollins never abused the lighting and siren kit covertly installed in his POV, but having the operator on the line tell him the order came from Rumlow, with the highest priority level, he didn't hesitate. As he raced through the DC streets, his mind wandered, worrying over the reasons for the recall. He hoped it was word that Allison had been found; that she'd escaped or someone had talked. He had one fleeting thought that it was to tell him she was dead; that whoever had taken her had left her for them to find. He had one fleeting thought, and immediately shook it away.

The order to meet Brock in his office, instead of the TOC or a briefing room was a little disconcerting, as Rollins made his way through the nearly deserted hallways of the STRIKE Division at just after 3 in the morning. He gave a quick knock to the Commander's office door, feeling a flash of dread he couldn't explain as he turned the handle open when Rumlow called for
him to come in. Jack twisted, shutting the door behind him, and stopped when he faced into the room again, transfixed by what he saw on the monitor on the wall.

On the screen was a paused image of a bleeding and bruised woman, stripped down to her underwear, and bound by ropes at her wrists and ankles. She was stretched out on the floor of some wornout building or warehouse, surrounded by three, maybe four, uniformed men, that he could see in the frame. By the tension in her limbs and angle of her head, Rollins could see the woman was doing what little she could to resist the tubing two of the men appeared to be forcing down her throat. Looming above her and standing at her head was a man, waiting with a bucket, of what Rollins presumed would be water, to pour down the tube and into her throat.

"Jesus fucking Christ," he muttered, so quiet he barely heard himself speak. Jack took a few steps into the room, looking to Brock, who was staring at the frozen video, and asked, "What the fuck is that?"

He was afraid he already knew, but he had to hear it from someone else. His stomach dropped, anyway, when Brock told him, "Proof of life." Rumlow finally turned back toward his desk, his attention coming off the monitor to look up at Rollins. "It's her, Jack. She's alive."

"Fuck me," Rollins breathed out, hazarding another look at the image on the screen. Closer now, he could make out the face of the prisoner; of Allison. He stared for a long moment, trying to decide if there was any recognizable features about the men or room in the video, but the figures were all in shadows and they wore no patches or other identifiable insignia on their clothes. The room was poorly lit and the view partially obscured by the backlighting coming in from the windows. Jack broke his gaze away, suddenly incensed by the image and needing answers.

"Who are they? Where did this come from?"

Brock sat back in his chair, scrubbing his hands up and down his face for a moment and taking a deep breath. The Commander rubbed his thumb and forefinger into his red eyes. By the look of him, Rollins recognized it was another day that Rumlow was pushing himself to the limits of exhaustion. He gave him his time to speak and tried not to look at the monitor again.

"It's them," Rumlow acknowledged. "It's Motsepe's people. This video was delivered to the US embassy in Bangui, in an envelope containing a thumb drive and addressed to SHIELD. No ID on the currier. It was recovered by the CS, who forwarded this copy of the video and a letter found in the envelope to us. It's all on its way back here for Forensics to dissect."

"How do we know it's Motsepe?" Rollins checked.

"The letter attached was signed by Duval," Brock scowled. "Guess we know who took over."

"And the letter?" he pressed.

Rumlow picked up a sheet of paper from his desk and stretched to reach it out for Rollins to take. Jack crossed the rest of the room to stop at Brock's desk to take the page, scanning the paper, while the Commander told him, "It's useless." He shook his head, explaining, "There's no demands or declarations made. It's just a proof of life, but they identified her by her NOC. They don't know her real name. They just know she's ours."

Jack handed back the paper, demanding, "So, what the hell is Duval doing? What does he want?"

Brock shook his head, again. "We don't know. We don't know where she is or how to find him. He's got us by the balls and he knows it." Rumlow pointed an angry finger and look at the monitor...
on the wall. "He sent us this much just to fuck with us."

Jack's gaze followed, against his better judgment and will. He swallowed the acid rising in the back of his throat, asking, "How long is the video? What else is in it?"

Rumlow looked back at the paused video, with a kind of tiredness coming to his face, as he slowly shook his head. He didn't answer right away. Brock wiped a hand down the sides of his mouth and leaned back into his chair again. After a long moment, he looked away and answered, "It's 3 minutes and 17 seconds. There's this," he noted, with a small nod of his head to the screen, "1 minute and 22 seconds of them trying to beat a name out of her, and 14 seconds of the proof of life with her blindfolded." Brock's hand rubbed at his chin and then fell limply to his lap. "She doesn't speak. The only thing she gives them is her serial number. That's it."

There was something disturbing in the way Rumlow spoke about her; something he hadn't ever seen from his friend and nothing he could readily name. A kind of distance in his expression when Brock looked back at the monitor. It gave Jack an unsettling feeling in his gut. His weight shifted, edging the view of the monitor from his periphery. He wasn't sure how Brock could stomach looking at the still from the video.

"Has Pierce seen this?" Jack checked.

"No," Brock shook his head, leaning forward to rest his forehead in the palms of his hands. "He's holding off 'til morning. I'll brief him and Fury at oh-700."

"Oh-seven-hu-" Jack blinked. "Are you shitting me?" Rollins didn't look when he waved a hand toward the monitor. "Here's his fucking actionable intelligence, and he's waiting 'til 7 in the fucking morning?!"

"It's fine," Rumlow nodded once, putting up a hand to calm Jack. "It's better this way. The original video and letter will be here in about an hour. It gives me a little time for Forensics to see if they can pull anything that might help." He bent forward in his chair, leaning his elbows into his knees and rubbing his hand on his chin. Brock reached over to tap the controls for the monitor on his desk, restarting the video and musing to himself as he turned his gaze back to the screen, "There's got to be something in here to say where she is. I need an image in the windows, a sound-something to try and zero in a location for her."

Jack couldn't help himself, his eyes drawn back to the monitor to see for himself. He was surprised he made it through the short few minutes the video ran. As he watched, his blood boiled. It took a minute for the pain to register in his jaw from the way it was set in anger. Rollins felt helpless as he looked on, seeing the masked men dole out broad-handed slaps and heavy fisted punches; seeing and hearing her choke and gag at the simulated drowning.

He shook his head. These were things she was trained for; that she seemed to be holding up well against, like she was taught to do. But the SERE training was never the same as surviving captivity would be. And Jack understood, she wasn't a prisoner of war, where there were trades and deals to be struck to bring her home at the end of a conflict. The most likely scenario was, Allison was a show of power for Duval. She was a trophy he'd stolen; an example to show he was in charge and, like his predecessor, not to be underestimated.

Allison was reliving the hell he and the other instructors had put her through when she and the other new STRIKE operators received their commissions. The Division's survival, evasion, resistance, and escape training was second to none. But in training, when it was too much; when you reached your limit, it could stop. You could withdraw from training and resign from the Division; admit your weakness and failing, own it, and go home at the end of the day. In real life,
being broken didn't mean it was over. In reality, the likelihood of her never coming home was immeasurably high. And if, by some miracle, she found herself in the small percentage who were allowed to live, she may never be freed. Maybe worse, depending on the tortures she'd endure, if she was ever set free or found, she may never recover.

Rollins was broken from his troubling thoughts by Rumlow telling him, "There's a copy of this waiting for you." Jack swallowed the lump in his throat and turned back to see Brock looking up at him. "I need another set of operators' eyes on this," he pressed, picking up a folder to hand to him. "There's something in here the tech geeks and desk jockey analysts might not see."

Part of Jack wanted to refuse. Seeing it once was more than enough for him. The thought of rewatching it over and over again; of studying it frame by frame, was beyond what he felt he could tolerate. It was nothing he hadn't seen before, and certainly nothing he hadn't himself done to others. But this wasn't training and it wasn't an enemy of HYDRA or SHIELD. It was her. It was Allison. And he'd never felt so much rage and disgust watching, or participating in, a scene like this in his life.

He almost did it. He almost said no. But seeing the exhaustion in the Commander's face, knowing how the situation was wearing them both down, and hearing the earnestness in his voice, Jack couldn't. He took the folder from Brock and nodded. He didn't know what else to say. Rollins turned and left the office.

Jack went down the hallway and shouldered open the stairwell door. He walked up to the 29th floor, preferring the distraction of the small effort over the silence of an elevator ride. He flipped on the lights of one of the smaller briefing rooms and locked the door behind him. Rollins walked up to the podium, taking up the tablet to run the equipment in the room and a pad of paper. He took a seat at the middle of the first row of tables, tapping on the tablet to wake the monitors and computer. Jack looked over the notes in his folder, calling out to the SHIELD AI, "Playback, Lt. Allison Addams' proof of life. Authorization- Lt. Commander Rollins, John W., 62237542. View on monitor 1."

The largest screen in the center of the wall ahead of him came to life. Jack pulled a pen from the slim pocket on the sleeve of his BDU jacket, pulling the pad of paper in front of him and clicking the pen open. Jack inhaled deeply, holding the breath and exhaling slowly, steeling himself as he lifted his eyes up to the screen.
Chapter 32

Feb 2013

After Addams' proof of life came, Secretary Pierce consented to sending a small expeditionary element to assist in trying to locate Addams. The other team members who had comprised "Host" on the mission to assassinate Motepe and his lieutenants were recalled and replaced by fresh agents from Clandestine Services. Forensics continued analyzing the video Duval had sent them, trying to extract any clues but coming up largely empty handed.

In the meantime, Duval had sent a communique to Pierce. In it, the new leader of Motepe's small army bragged about snatching one of STRIKE's operators from the street. He boasted that she was beginning to spill the agency’s secrets, mocking how easy she was to break down. Duval arrogantly offered a trade. For the return of SHIELD’s assassin, he demanded the release of three prisoners, condemned to the Raft for life by the World Security Council for their atrocities under Motepe's direction.

Jack and Brock anticipated the refusal of the deal, but they hadn't expected Pierce to concede before the Council that attempts to recover Allison were still fruitless. Both Division leaders and Director Fury were put in their place during the meeting by a warning glare from Pierce, the second time Rumlow had insisted that Duval's cockiness and ambition would lead to a mistake soon that they could exploit and use to find Addams. After the meeting with the Council ended, the Commander was put at heel by a sternly worded reminder from Pierce that his job was not a lifelong appointment and that he served at the discretion of the Secretary. There was a promise from Fury that no such arguments from the Commander would be made in front the Council again.

It was over two weeks gone by, since Allison went missing; almost a week since the video had arrived. At the end of another long and unproductive day, Jack was standing behind his desk, just shutting down the computer and grabbing his car keys from the desk drawer, when there was a knock at his door. Jack called for the unexpected visitor to come in. The door opened and he looked up to see Rumlow walk in.

"Hey," Jack nodded as greeting.

"Calling it a day?" Brock surmised, jutting his chin toward him, as he crossed the office to take a seat in front of Jack's desk.

"Was about to," he said. Rollins glanced down at the rucksack Brock had set on the floor next to his chair. "What're you doing?"

Rumlow looked over the arm of his chair and down at the bag. "Thinking about taking a long weekend," he shrugged.

The vagueness of the answer and the certainty of the bag in the room piqued Jack's curiosity. In the last couple of weeks he'd barely known Brock to let himself sleep in his office, let alone actually leave the Triskelion for more than a few hours at a time. He eyed the bag again, and then his friend. Rollins lowered himself back into his chair and nodded.

"Going somewhere, or just taking a couple days at home?" he wondered.

"Headed out of town," Brock said, after a thoughtful pout that seemed like it was for more show
"Uh huh," Jack nodded, warily.

"Thought I might go someplace warm for a bit," he casually shrugged.

"Oh yeah?" he suspiciously mused, quirking up a curious brow. "Any place in particular?"

Rumlow shrugged again, cocking his head with a frown. "Not really. Just gonna get some fresh air; do some wandering around, see where that takes me."

"Right," Rollins scoffed, kicking up his right boot to rest on the corner of his desk and slouching, comfortably, back into his chair. "Going by yourself?"

"Actually," Brock mentioned, "gonna meet a couple 'a friends of mine."

"Anybody I know?" Jack checked, absentmindedly rolling a pen back and forth on his desk under his fingertip.

"Don't think so," he shook his head. "Some guys with my old unit have a few days off and we thought we'd catch up."

Jack nodded along, with a smirk set into the corner of his mouth. There was only one thing Rumlow would be doing with a few friends from his old SEAL team in a warm clime that he wouldn't be specific about. Rollins nodded his agreement when Brock told him that Fury had suggested he take some time off; that maybe he needed to rest.

"Nick's probably right," Jack conceded. "You've been putting in a lot of hours, lately. Getting out of town for a few days sounds like a good plan."

Brock shrugged. "What the hell, right? I got plenty of time off I never take. What's a couple days?"

"Besides," Rumlow went on, "you'll be here. You can keep an eye on things for me, in case something comes up."

"Right," he agreed, with a nod.

Rumlow stood up, grabbing his ruck and slinging it over his shoulder. "You'd give me a call if something came up with this Addams situation, right, big guy?"

"Of course," he nonchalantly tipped his head, rolling his hand up at the obvious.

"I don't need to be here," Brock decided, with a smirk. "I can afford a few days out of town. I'm leaving everything in good hands."

Jack nodded again, letting his foot fall to the floor and standing again, as the Commander headed for the door. "Hey," Rollins said after him and Brock turned back. "Wherever you end up, see if you can pick up a woman, or something. Might do you some good," he smirked.

"Funny you should say that," Rumlow chuckled. "I was thinking about that exact same thing."

"Wake the fuck up, Sunshine."

"Fuck you," Rollins grumbled, rolling onto his side and stretching up to click on the lamp on the nightstand. He winced at the new brightness in the room and squinted through the pain to see the
time on the alarm clock. 3:28. "What is it?"

"I'm on my way back," Rumlow told him.

"How was your trip, dear?" Jack smirked, stretching overhead.

"Get your hand off your dick and get dressed," Brock snorted. "I need you to grab someone for me."

Jack chuckled and sat up, swinging his feet down to the floor. He leaned his elbows onto his knees, tiredly scratching his fingers back across his scalp, asking, "Who is it?"

"Andrew Eichorn."

"Never heard of him," Rollins said, ahead of a yawn. "Who is he?"

"He's one of ours," Brock replied. "He took a transfer from Motsepe for some big pay promotion late December. He's in DC again. He kept Motsepe's books for the last two years. He was there when they killed those two agents from CS. He'll know where they're running ops out of now."

Rollins had snapped on the overhead light in the bedroom and was walking over to the closet, when he asked, "Where do I find him?"

"He's working in Senator Stern's office," Rumlow told him. "He's his new Chief of Staff."

Jack stopped, hand resting on the hanger of a clean pair of uniform pants. "You want me to grab the Chief of Staff of a sitting US Senator?" he checked, his tone every bit as incredulous as the question deserved. "And do what with him?"

"Whatever the fuck you want," Brock evenly told him. "That piece of shit knows where she is, Jack."

"He works for Stern, Bingo," he cautioned him, pulling the hanger from the rod and tossing the BDU pants to the side of the bed, wanting to make sure Brock understood what he was telling him. Not that he actually gave a shit about who Eichorn was, other than somebody who could tell him where Allison was.

"He doesn't get any deals," the Commander insisted. "He doesn't make any demands. He tells you where she is and we're done with him. I don't give a shit if no one ever sees him again." Jack pulled a fresh compression tee from the dresser drawer, adding it to the pile of clothes gathering on the bed. "Stern is in Pierce's pocket," Rumlow angrily continued. "We could have found her weeks ago, if that son of a bitch had put any effort in to talking to anyone about this."

Rollins inhaled deeply and let it out slow, to settle the irritation Rumlow had stirred, nodding to himself. "I'll take care of it."

Grabbing Eichorn was as easy as he expected. The man was a civilian. He'd spent his time with HYDRA and Motsepe in administrative roles. He never served his country and he lived alone in a three story townhouse in Virginia guarded by an easily bypassed security system and a golden retriever who was too social to even bark when Jack and his handpicked team of STRIKE operators made their entry through the French doors to the kitchen from the backyard.

Jack had unquestioning loyalty from some of his Delta teammates. When he'd gotten off the phone
with Rumlow, he'd made a couple calls to muster Haney, Dennison, and Greer, telling them to rally in his office for a black bag. Rumlow had signed orders to authorize a Quinjet for an operation, while he was still in the air on his way back to DC. Eichorn only struggled for a few seconds, before succumbing to the chloroform soaked cloth pressed over his nose and mouth. By the time he was coming to, Eichorn was lashed to a chair in the center of a disused barn in the middle of nowhere Ontario.

"You ever build anything?"

"What?" The question was clearly confusing to him, just as Jack figured it would be. For the oddity of it for the circumstances and the disoriented haze of unconsciousness slow to dissolve, it'd keep him off balance.

"With your own two hands," Jack led him on, holding up his own, looking at his open palms before turning them to the man. "Worked so long, your hands got blisters and you bled. ...Ever build something?"

Eichorn shook his head and Rollins could see the alarm building in him.

"No," Jack sneered. "Not someone like you." He shook his head, eyeing Eichorn and deciding, "Not you. You don't know the satisfaction of seeing an idea come together; manifest and thrive.” Rollins put his hands on his knees and pushed to stand up from his chair in front of his prisoner. “A guy like you gets carpel tunnel, sitting all day at a computer.”

Rollins began a slow walk in a wide circle around Eichorn, telling him, “You don't know what it's like to sweat and bleed for something; to sweat and bleed with your brothers and sisters who helped you build it. Guy like you doesn't know the pride of the hard work it takes to keep what's been built from falling apart; of working as a team. A guy like you takes the next job for the money.”

Jack tilted his gaze up to the ceiling of the old barn, gesturing his hand around, as Eichorn’s head turned to nervously follow Rollins. "Take this place," Jack mused. "Looks old and rundown. Who knows the last time anyone actually used it. But it's still here; still doing its job, because it was built the right way, with sweat and blood and pride. That used to mean something, ya know? Now it's just an aesthetic to idyllic people, like you, who admire it for what it looks like, but will never grasp how it got here in the first place. Because you can't fathom the work that went into it; how hard it was or how long it took to get here. You don't understand the commitment you have to make, because you've never bled for anything or anyone.

"That says a lot about you, Andy," Rollins knowingly nodded. "Actually, it tells me everything I need to know about you. ...You wouldn't give your life for Stern or HYDRA, or anyone else. You're not the type of guy who would do anything for your people; to lay down your life for theirs, to do anything to bring them home."

The growing panic was unmistakable in his eyes now. Eichorn shifted, as much as he could in his seat, making a fruitless pull of his wrists against the knots binding his arms behind him and to the chair.

"But, hey," Rollins shrugged, casually and indifferent. "Can't be all bad then, right? People go for the aesthetics of things these days. They don't have to put in the effort, when they can sit back and just watch, like you. It's easier that way."

"It took time and strength to build this place," he went on, lazily walking around to stand in front of his prisoner. “Like it takes to build a team. You can't just stick any ol' group of jack offs together and call them a team. They have to trust each other. They have to earn that.” Rollins held up a
finger to highlight the weight of his next point. “And then...they will believe the other ones; their brothers and sisters, are going to be there and sacrifice for them the way they would sacrifice themselves.

“That's the foundation of a team, Andy,” Rollins explained. He paused, checking, “Can I call you Andy?” Now visibly shaking, Eichorn didn’t answer and Jack waved a hand down at him to forget the courtesy. “Like I was saying, that bond is the nails that hold them together. Without that, it'd all fall apart...like this place might have, if it hadn't been built right the first time.

"I have that," Jack confidently said, making a show of drawing his knife from its sheath hooked into the MOLLE webbing of his gear. "I have people that I would trade my life for...at any given moment...without hesitation, Andy. People that I'd do anything for; that I know would do the same for me. The unfortunate thing for you is...one of them was taken from me. ...And I want her back."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Eichorn shook his head, his eyes fixed on Rollins' knife at his side.

"You know what the funny thing is?" Jack continued. "It's really no different anywhere you go." With the tip of his knife, he casually gestured around the dilapidated and bare wood structure. "Anywhere you go, there's men building places like this. You could find this place,” he shrugged, “literally anywhere. This barn could be in fucking Kentucky or Nebraska, for all you know." Rollins gave a thoughtful frown. "Maybe that's what a guy like you never considers," he figured. "That guys like me, the ones who build things, believe in them, and protect them; who do anything to keep them standing...they're everywhere. Just like the old buildings and barns like this. Everywhere."

Jack sat back down in the chair across from his subject, comfortably bent forward to rest his elbows on his knees and look Eichorn in the eye. "You wanna know the really fucked up part, Andy?" he checked. He didn't wait for an answer. He just went on, saying, "The really fucked up part is, the barns in Canada all look like this. Hell, the ones in Ukraine do, too. The ones in Russia, Sokovia-"

"I work for Senator Stern," Eichorn angrily pointed out.

Rollins nodded. "I know." Jack swept his head. "I don't care."

"You can't do this," Eichorn insisted. His eyes leveled, seething through grit teeth, despite the fear underlying his voice, "I'm an American citizen."

"Yeah," Jack agreed, with a nod of his head and a flash of a thoughtful pout. A discerning squint came to his eye, as Rollins checked, "But are you in America anymore...citizen?"

"Where the fuck am I!!" Eichorn demanded, with a useless tug at the restraints.

Wagging the end of the knife his way, Rollins laughed out loud. "You see? That's what I'm sayin'. That's what's so great about all this millennial aesthetic bullshit, Andy." His laughter stopped and his expression hardened, before Jack reached out and stabbed his KaBar down into the wooden seat between his prisoner's thighs. "You just. never. know...do you?" Eichorn was on the verge of all out panic. "...But there's one thing you do know, Andy," Jack assured him, with a nod, his eyes locked on Eichorn's wide with fear. "You know where Motsepe moved to. You know where he keeps his prizes."

"Motsepe's dead," Eichorn told him, the words vibrating out of his mouth as he took short, startled breaths.
"And Duval is too lazy to shop for new furniture," Rollins argued. "You're going to tell me where Motsepe kept his prisoners. You're going to tell me where to find Duval."

"It's done," Jack said over the howl of the wind, watching the ramp of the Quinjet close.

"You know where she is?" Rumlow checked.

Rollins nodded, turning away from the rising ramp as the cabin sealed again. "I know where she is. We're coming back."

"What about Eichorn?" Brock asked.

"We just dropped him off," Jack said, "in Lake Erie. Stern'll have to post a job opening."

"Wasn't too much trouble, was it?" he wondered.

"No," Jack scoffed, settling into one of the jumpseats near the cockpit.

He rested forward on his forearms on his thighs, his free hand hanging over his knee. Jack frowned, turning his hand over to see the fresh blood from dragging Eichorn's body across the deck and dumping it out of the aircraft. He wiped his hand down the side of his pant leg and eased back in his seat.

"Where is she, Jack?" Rumlow pressed.

"She's still in Bangui," he said, feeling a kind of relief from saying it out loud. "Just outside the city." Jack pointed at Dennison, as much a direction for him and a note for Rumlow, when he said, "I'm sending the coordinates now, so you can get started on recovery." Jack watched Dennison work at the computer for a few short seconds, before Dennison gave him a nod to say it was done. "You should have them now."

"I've got them," Brock confirmed. "Now get your ass back here so we can get our girl."

"Roger that," Jack nodded.
Chapter 33

Fen 2013

On the ground, Jack and his element held their position. The other half of his team was on the west side of the compound, standing by for his go command. Jack had requested to participate in the recovery operation. The medical staff was practically strong armed into releasing him to Active Duty status again, when Rumlow made the appeal on Jack’s behalf, in person, to the shrink and doctor overseeing his recuperation after Cabinda. Delta was running the mission to rescue Addams, and Brock needed all hands on deck.

Rollins listened intently to the chatter in the comms. Brock and his fire team, with Rogers, were clearing the location Eichorn had given up as Duval's prison camp. Jack had been temporarily placed to lead Delta’s Fire Team Alpha with Second Squad. Brock wanted no mistakes with their assignment. Communications with the prison camp had been disabled. First Squad was holding the perimeter to ensure no calls for help crossed the line, and assisting in the search, with Rumlow. Jack and his men were seventeen miles up the road, sitting on Duval's headquarters.

Part of Jack wanted to be with Brock to help recover Allison. But the Commander wanted to make sure they wouldn't have any further problems from Duval and his recently acquired troops. Jack and his element were the solution. Once the recovery was complete, Rollins and his team would raze the compound, eliminating anyone inside. If anyone was left of Motsepe's old army after that, they certainly would know better than to resurface.

"This is Rogers. I have Seraphim."

After hearing Rogers report contact with Allison, Jack inhaled, deep and slow. Rollins shifted his weight, giving his shoulder a small roll before tucking his rifle in again. His jaw worked against itself in anticipation, and the tension it made sent a dull ache back along the side of his face. Jack took another long breath, evening out his pulse again and relaxing his jaw. The minute or so it took to hear the next update, seemed like an eternity.

"Raider 1 to Goliath," Rumlow radioed in. "Seraphim secure. Request dustoff, northwest corner, 1 Alpha, 1 Lima. Possible hot LZ marked with red smoke in two mikes."

They were all ready. They were tired of waiting. But Jack didn't give the command. He stood fast, needing confirmation that Allison was safely away, before he could begin the assault. While he waited for the next report, Rollins signaled the breacher up to the gate and for his element to stack up and standby.

"Seraphim secure. Goliath is airborne."

"Copy, Goliath. Seraphim secure," the controller confirmed. "Raider 2 rally at LZ Alpha. ...Azreal and Leviathan are go."

"Azreal 1 copies. ...Azreal- Leviathan," Jack said, low and evenly, into his mic. "On my mark. 3...2...1...Go."

The breacher ignited the torch. Less than a minute later, the thermite had burned through the steel lock and handle. The breacher discarded the spent cutting tool and popped the gate with a pry bar. The men formed up on Jack followed him through the door. Their infiltration went unnoticed, allowing Rollins and his element to come up on Duval's soldiers without warning. Each target that
crossed their sights fell to the suppressed sound of three round bursts. Stepping over warm bodies, Jack and his team of Delta operators worked their way through the building, pausing at key structural points to set charges for remote detonation. From the West side of the compound, the rest of the squad carried out the same orders.

On the third floor, Rollins found what he was really after. Jack found Duval's office. He put up his hand, giving the "hold" signal to the short column of operators behind him in the hall to halt. Reaching down, slowly, Jack tested the door handle with the fingertips of his gloved left hand. Feeling the subtle give of the handle, Rollins carefully moved his rifle to hang from its sling behind him. He quietly drew his pistol, taking a steadying breath, anticipating what might be on the other side of the door. Jack signaled for a pair of men to stack up and make entry with him. They tapped up, and Jack nodded before he kicked in the door.

Jack went straight in, pistol aimed down the room and sights trained on the man in the dark grey BDU's behind the desk. His partners covered the corners, taking out the startled guest in Duval's office who stood up suddenly and turned, reaching for his own weapon. Rollins walked directly up to the front of Duval’s desk, staring him down as Duval watched, unmoving, his hands gripped tightly on the arms of his chair.

After a long moment, Duval swallowed and calmly reasoned, "You've come for the girl."

"Yes."

Duval nodded to himself. "She said I wouldn't see you come," he told him.

"She was right," Jack agreed, and pulled the trigger.

The high back of the leather chair was splashed in blood and tissue, as Duval's head snapped back from the force of the near pointblank shot. Duval's head lolled forward, as he slumped onto the arm of the chair. Jack holstered his pistol, running the heel of his left palm over his chin and wiping away the splatter he felt there. Rollins turned for the door, taking up his rifle again and radioing in, "Almighty- Almighty. Azreal 1."

"Azreal 1. Almighty. Send it."


"Almighty copies- Tango down. Confirmed."

It was a long flight back to the Triskelion. Somehow, Jack refrained from calling Rumlow for an update. He nodded off on the jet, for about an hour or so, fatigued after the adrenalin wore off. He deserved the rest. Being sidelined for almost two months from training and full strength workouts after his injury in Cabinda hadn’t done his endurance any good. After dealing with Eichorn, Rollins had a collective three hours sleep between solidifying the recovery plans with Rumlow and the flight into Bangui. By the time the raid was over, and Duval's headquarters was reduced to a blazing inferno, Jack felt the exhaustion of the last few weeks taking its toll.

When his jet touched down, he was met by the aircraft marshaller who notified him of an order to respond to the Commander's office. Jack wasted no time, bypassing the stop he should have made at the Armory to turn in the weapons and gear for this deployment and heading straight to Rumlow's office. He knocked and entered, not waiting for an invitation. Brock looked up to see
"How is she?" Rollins immediately asked.

"It's pretty bad," he conceded, "but she's gonna be okay."

Jack finally relaxed, nodding his understanding, while he debated if he wanted to know how bad it was. He took a seat, when Rumlow invited him to with a gesture of his hand. While Rollins let out a slow exhale, relaxing into the comfortable chair, Brock reached down to open his desk drawer and take out the bottle of whiskey that stayed there. He took out the bottle, setting it up on his desk to free himself to grab the pair of tumblers he kept with the liquor. He didn't need to offer. Brock poured two generous helpings, and Jack accepted the one he stretched out over his desk to him.

"She's gonna be okay," Rumlow repeated, with a subtle nod. "We got her home."

Jack lifted his glass, mirroring Brock's toast, before taking a large swallow of whiskey. He welcomed the burn. There was a satisfaction that came with it, for doing what for weeks seemed impossible. They found her. She was alive. She was home.

Rollins looked over his shoulder, hearing the door to the conference room open. He watched Rumlow walk across the room, turning to see him go to the head of the table and lay a folder in front of the empty chair there waiting for Pierce. Brock took the seat next to Jack and gave a nod to the room as greeting.

“Good afternoon,” Councilwoman Hawley said, as the images of the World Security Council members rendered. “I’m told Secretary Pierce will not be joining us today.” Jack thought he heard a subtle disapproval in the Councilwoman's voice and glanced at Rumlow. Brock gave an almost imperceptible sweep of his head in disapproval, as Hawley went on. “We’ll continue without him. ...Director Fury.”

“Yes, Madame Councilwoman,” he nodded.

“The Council received your reports last evening.,” she noted. “I understand that Lt. Addams has already been transferred from DC for her recovery...”

“Yes, ma’am,” Fury said. “She arrived at the Farm, yesterday morning. She’s expected to make a full recovery.”

“Excellent news,” Hawley nodded, allowing a faint grin, before her expression sobered. “As for the circumstances surrounding her capture and detainment, I’d like to refer to your Intelligence Report created prior to Lt. Addams’ recovery and your After Action Reports for her rescue and subsequent action taken against-” She paused to glance at the report in front of her. “Col. Duval.”

“Yes, Madame Councilwoman,” Fury agreed, opening up the cover of the folder in front of him.

Jack didn’t need to open the files in front of him. He already knew the reports, forward and back. They were practically committed to memory, for the effort he and Brock put in to making sure the documents were accurate and still covered their tracks for how exactly they’d come by the information on how to locate Allison. For the next hour and a half, he answered questions with Fury and Rumlow about everything that happened over the 18 days Allison was held captive. When Hawley and the rest of the Council were satisfied with the information, the matter was closed.
“I, and the rest of the Council, would like to thank you for your time,” Hawley said. “The Council remains confident in your assurance that SHIELD will continue to monitor activity in the CAR for any threats posed by the return or resurgence of Motsepe or Duval’s organizations. I would like to be kept advised of Lt. Addams’ progress.”

“Of course,” Fury nodded.

“If there are no further inquiries to be made...” Hawley checked. The other Council members gave their declinations and Hawley nodded. “Good day, gentlemen.”

The digital broadcasts of the Council disappeared and Fury closed the folders in front of him. Jack quietly exhaled, sitting back to rest into the high backed leather chair. Beside him, Brock reached over to give his upper arm a clap and sent him a confident nod. The hard part was over. The Council had accepted their reports and sanctioned their actions in the Central African Republic as permissible and necessary, considering the circumstances. But there was still the review to come from Fury.

“Let me begin, gentlemen,” the Director began, slowly straightening up in his seat, “by congratulating you.”

“18 days is hardly worth congratulating over,” Rumlow muttered.

“I know,” Fury nodded, understandingly. “But this could have ended up a lot worse.” Jack and Brock both gave a small nod, appreciating his assessment. “The fact of the matter is, Lt. Addams is home, safe. Regardless of how long it took to happen, it did happen. I’m not going to beleaguer that point by continuing to question how it got done. The Council has given its approval, and so will I.

“We had a hell of a lot of roadblocks to get around,” he noted. “All things considered, 18 days might have been the best anyone could do. Frankly, I’ll take 18 days over having to hand a family a flag and see another star carved into that wall downstairs, any day.”

Fury looked between them, telling them, “This matter is closed. All files and materials relating to the Motsepe operation and Lt. Addams’ capture and rescue will be reclassified, Level 9. The report is sealed, gentlemen.”

“Yes, Sir,” Rollins and Rumlow acknowledged in unison.

Fury shuffled his folders into a pile, as he stood. Jack and Brock moved to stand with him. They waited, turning and watching Fury walk around the table. He stopped, looking to Jack and giving him a discerning once over.

“Good to have you back on the roster, Lieutenant,” he nodded, with a confident grin. “Hell of a way to show us you’re back.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Jack nodded.

Fury gave them both a nod and smile. “Good night, gentlemen,” he said, turning to leave.

When the door shut behind the Director, Jack turned back to the table to gather his things. He picked up Brock’s files and handed them to him. Rumlow nodded his thanks, falling in to step with Rollins.

“That went better than I expected,” Jack noted, pulling open the door and holding it for Brock to pass ahead of him.
“You’re tellin’ me,” Rumlow snorted.

They made it to the elevator, before Jack warily asked, “Did you, uh, talk to her before the Farm?”

Brock hit the call button on the wall and looked at Jack. He nodded, slowly. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, she’s, uh... She’s holdin’ up real good. They had her pretty doped up. Pain meds, ya know.”

Jack nodded, his attention turning to the doors opening to the elevator. “What’d they say about her?” he pressed, curious to see if the doctors’ had upgraded their assessment, as worrisome as the initial report read.

Rumlow took a moment to direct the elevator AI to the 28th floor, before addressing Jack’s concern. “They’re optimistic,” he told him. “Whatever the fuck that means.” Rollins gave a weak snort in agreement. “The wounds will heal,” Brock confidently said, with a nod. “Infection seems to be responding to meds. ...The rest is up to her, they said.”

“She can make it,” Jack believed. “We just have to wait.”

“Yeah,” Rumlow quietly agreed.
Chapter 34

April 2013

“What’s her rating?” Brock asked, unaware or indifferent that Allison could hear him while Mickelson finished taping her right hand.

Rollins thumbed up a paper on his clipboard. “Numbers from the Farm aren't too bad. She's coming in at 89.2, overall,” he read. “Psych came back solid. PT score is consistently rising. Still, she doesn’t get her shit together, she’s out.”

Jack glanced over to Addams, giving her a discerning once over. She looked fit enough, maybe a couple pounds underweight, but the muscle would come back fast, now that she was back to training with STRIKE again. He saw the progress reports from the Farm, when they would come in. He knew she'd been working hard and making quick progress, but nothing she could do there, under their cautious guidance, could keep her competitive the way the division could.

“We’ll see,” Rumlow said, thoughtfully, one arm crossing him and the other bent to rub his thumb across his stubbled chin. “Give her Kowalski.”

Rollins wasn't one for disagreeing with Brock. In fact, he couldn't think of an instance that he'd actually refused an order or genuinely argued about it. For anyone else, he actually wouldn't argue now, but this seemed a bit aggressive for Allison, all things considered.

“It's her first day back on the mat. We never took it easy on her, but..he’s a big guy, Bingo,” Jack reminded him and Brock set his eyes on Jack's, nodding to reiterate his decision. That was the end of it. “Kowalski, Addams- lace up,” Rollins called.

"I don't want to see anyone pussyfooting around, either," Brock added. "This is what she'll have to do after she clears her Fitness For Duty, this is what she has to do today."

Kowalski was a good guy, but he was a big son of a bitch. At 6'3" and 231 pounds of solid muscle he was a hell of a welcome back for Addams' 5'9", 147 pound frame. Rollins thought better of mentioning the flaw he heard in Brock's reasoning, because he saw the merit in it, too. If she could get the takedown, it'd be a boost in her scores.

Rollins stepped over to Kowalski, as the soldies was tightening up his gloves. "Hey," he began, quietly, just between the two of them. "You go at this hard, okay? This is just another day on the mat."

"LT," Kowalski started to argue, "she literally just got back fr-"

"I know," he firmly assured him. "She needs to do this. She's got a lot to prove. You hold back, we're gonna know. You're not doing her any favors being a nice guy."

The soldier reluctantly nodded, but kept his gaze fixed down on the strap he was working on his glove. "You read me?"

Jack insisted.

"Yes, Sir," Kowalski stood a little straighter, raising his eyes.

Rollins nodded. He felt a little bad for the position the Charlie Team operator was in. Almost as bad as he felt for the position Allison was in. Jack moved back to stand beside Rumlow, crossing his arms and holding his clipboard by his side. He eyed the two operatives facing off on the mat, judging them ready.
Rollins called for the sparring to begin and Allison and Kowalski danced for a moment before she went in for a strike. He may have never studied a training session so critically in his life. She was still fast, but her balance wasn’t quite right sometimes. She got one hit in before Kowalski’s defense was up and the fight had officially begun. They traded blocks, punches and kicks. He wasn’t as fast, but her hits weren’t as hard as his. Following orders, Kowalski wasn’t holding back.

Addams needed to get her rating up or she risked being taken off team. Credentials, reputation, and honors would mean nothing if she couldn’t show she was ready to be back; that she could fight and win. X-rays and scans looked clear. She had positive reports from trainers from the Farm. Now, all she had to do was knock down a brick wall named Kowalski.

Addams had managed to hold her own for three minutes and their scrap had pulled the attention of nearly everyone in the training room, eager to see if she really was ‘back’. Encircling the mats, they hissed and hollered as the hits came, shouting encouragement and advice to both of the brawling agents. Jack made some notes on his paperwork, assessing and scoring her efforts.

They was a collective cry of disappointment and wincing breathes, and Jack looked up from his paperwork to see Allison fall. His posture stiffened and his jaw flexed, seeing her obviously disoriented on the mat. The agents gathered around yelled their encouragement, trying to rally her to her feet. Addams crushed her eyes closed, pulling her limbs in to find the ground beneath her to stand.

"Fuck," Rumlow quietly bit beside him.

Jack looked over, seeing Brock move in his periphery. Kowalski was stepping over to check the damage, but was waved away by the angry CO stalking across the training floor.

"Back the fuck up,” Rumlow told him, pointing Kowalski away. Rumlow dropped, proned out on the mat, his face inches from Allison's, as she tried to pull it together.

“Get up,” he commanded, growling and insistent. “Get. the. fuck. up.” Rumlow leveled his gaze on her eyes. “Who trained you? Huh?..I did. I trained you to do one thing- keep moving! …We don’t move, we die. ...Are you dead?”

Her fists found the floor under her bent arms and she brought her head up, trying to shake away the haze. “No.”

“Are you hurt?” he demanded.

“No,” she breathed out, pushing into her fists to right herself.

“Then get up, Addams,” he ordered. “Get up! Keep moving!”

She was on her feet, a slight sway to her right and it was gone. And Rollins let out the breath he'd been holding. Rumlow popped tall from the mat, standing dangerously close to the action with his arms crossed tightly across his chest and brow folded in intense focus.

“Get in there,” Rumlow growled.

The fighters traded blows again, Allison playing it close to Kowalski, trying to cut his range of motion to keep some of the power out of his strikes. Rollins knew her style. All she needed was one good opening. She may have taken a hit, but she wasn't done. She could still pull this off. Addams just needed to focus.

She dipped under his cross and Jack saw her chance. She latched a hand behind Kowalski's neck
and climbed up to his shoulder, one foot at his knee and the other running up his stomach. She
hooked her leg over his shoulder and, with both hands clasped behind his neck, threw her shoulders
back to pull him forward and to the ground with her. He threw a pair of blind punches at her core
and she trapped him in an armbar, his head and neck still locked between her thighs and knees.

They pulled at each other on the ground, Kowalski trying to take back his arm with blows into her
side and Allison holding him down and squeezing him into submission as his hits softened and
Jack saw the red rise in Kowalski's face. Kowalski tapped out to the testosterone fueled cheers of
the STRIKE team members gathered around. She let go and Kowalski rolled back onto his heels to
find his breath.

Taking her own pause on the mat, she reached out to accept Kowalski’s pull up to her feet. He
pulled her in for a tired bear hug, patting her back as congratulations while they swayed together in
a moment of fatigue. Kowalski let her go as her friends and teammates gathered around her to
to cheer her victory.

Jack met Brock as he walked off the mat, the Commander telling him, "That's what we needed to see."

"It wasn't perfect," Rollins said, marking his final notes on his paperwork for her, "but she's still in
there."

"What do you think?" Rumlow wondered, folding his arms.

Jack looked up from his clipboard, crossing his arms again. "Honestly?" he shrugged and Brock
nodded. "I don't know if she's ready to be here."

Brock hummed, watching the action over Jack's shoulder as training continued around the large
room. "I think she bullshitted her way home," he decided. "I needed to hear it from you."

Rollins nodded his agreement and threw a look over his shoulder to see Kowalski taking a seat
beside Allison on the floor off the mat. "I have no doubt she wants to be here," Jack considered,
"but I think it's too soon." He cocked his head, allowing, "The effort is there. I don't think she's as
strong as when she left, but it'll come back. The guys at the Farm aren't as hard. We can fix that,
fast."

"But..." Rumlow reached out.

"But she's hesitating," Jack finally admitted.

"You thought so, too," the Commander nodded.

"She's a first punch girl," he noted, "and she got it in, but it came way too slow. That was what, 7-8
seconds before she engaged?" Rollins shook his head. "She took more hits than she should have
allowed."

"She's off," Brock agreed. "She got the takedown, though. She finished strong. It's all that shit in
the middle I don't like. That's not our girl."

Jack shook his head in agreement. "It was her first day back, Bingo," he reminded him. "She just
needs some time."

"She doesn't have a lot of time to do it," Rumlow countered, moving a hand to rub at his jaw. He
looked his lieutenant in the eye, telling him, "We're not gonna let her fail, Jack."
"No," Rollins confirmed.

"I'll talk to Whitfield," Brock told him. "I want her to have access to treatment without Medical logging it. Get her cleared for today, but, after this, she doesn't go to sick call for anything." Jack nodded, in complete agreement. "We're gonna handle this, Jack. You watch her; work with her. Any deficiencies, we remedy ourselves. If she needs more time, we'll get her back to the Farm, if we have to. But for now, this stays between us."

"What do you want me to do about the paperwork?" he checked.

"Keep it up," Rumlow said. "We'll go at it one day at a time, as usual. But we both have to be in agreement for anything we send on. If we say she's not cutting it, we both better be fucking 110% sure we did everything we could to fix it. This is her life. We're not gonna let her down. Is that clear?"

"CFB," Jack confidently nodded, relieved to hear the conviction in Brock's voice.

"Send her to Medical," the Commander ordered, inclining his head toward Allison. "Make sure they put her through the concussion protocol and send her home for the day. She showed us everything we need to see."

"Yes, sir."

Apr 2013

Rollins didn't bother announcing himself, as he entered the locker room. He always knew who was out of rotation and where the ones who were on were at. He knew Allison would be alone, if she was in there. There weren't enough women in the division to warrant the size of the locker room, but he could appreciate the optimistic foresight the Triskelion designers had. He smirked to himself, at the humor of only five women sharing the area with space to accommodate 50.

He took quick glances down the rows of lockers until he found Addams. Straddling the bench in front of her open locker, she was waiting to see who was coming. Still in her PT uniform, she was slouched forward, resting her elbows on top of her legs. She was holding a disposable ice pack to her temple, but looked to have recovered from her session with Kowalski.

"They finally get you assigned to the appropriate locker room, Jackie?" Allison quipped, sitting up a little straighter.

Jack made a crisp left face to square himself to her. "Cute," he frowned, folding his arms and looking down at her. "How's your face, smartass?"

Allison took the ice pack off her head, rolling it around between her palms. "The face is fine," she shrugged. "It's the throbbing headache behind it that sucks."

Jack snorted, dropping his hands back to his sides and moving to sit on the bench, a respectful few feet away. "You put on a good show, though," he noted.

"Thanks," she smirked. "I live to entertain you."

"That's not what I meant," he scowled. "I mean, you almost pulled it off. But Bingo and me, we saw some things we don't like."
"You came into the women's locker room to give me notes?" she sarcastically doubted, putting the cold pack back in place.

"To see how you're holding up," he corrected, "and warn you."

Allison gave him a suspicious once over. "About what?"


"Hesitating?" she balked. "I'm not-"

"You're holding back," Rollins insisted. "Your first time in, and you waited. You never waited so long to start sparring, like you did today. It looked like your judgment was off, like you were trying to protect yourself instead of attacking. That's not you. Your style is aggressive and that's not what you were today. You were playing it too safe."

"Have you met Kowalski?" Allison laughingly gaped and threw out her hand for emphasis. "We don't call him 'killer Kowalski' because he's a cuddly little kitten."

Jack chuckled, his head bobbing in understanding. "I know," he agreed. "I tried to talk Bingo out of it, but..." He sighed, his smile dissolving and expression sobering. "The point is, you need to get squared away."

"I'm squared away," she promised.

She didn't come off as convincing as she should have. Rollins already knew he was right. He figured she'd bullshit her way off the Farm the first chance she got. Hell, he should've put money on it. Addams wasn't the type to stay there, whether or not she needed to. None of them were.

Physically, she looked good. Her hits were on target and the power was coming back, but there was something in the way she moved, or didn't. It would probably go unnoticed by most people, but not him and Rumlow. They had trained her from day one, building on the skills she had and honing her into a weapon. They saw the difference immediately.

"Listen, Al," Jack began, his eyes falling to his hands loosely folded in his lap. "I think you're gonna make it. Your numbers are steady climbing, your evals and shit look good. But there's something different up there," he pointed to her head, "and, if you don't know it, you need to figure it out, real fuckin' fast." He saw Allison work her jaw and swallow. "We'll help you out, me and Bingo, however we can; send you back to the Farm, do extra workouts with you, retraining, whatever." He pointed again. "But you need to get right in there. You need to get squared away. You copy?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "I copy."

Rollins watched her for a moment. She looked like a scolded child, head down and eyes on the perspiring ice pack she worked her fingers around.

"It's good to have you back," he told her, because it was true. "You had a lot 'a guys chompin' at the bit to go get you, when Bingo said we found you."

"You mean, a lot of guys disappointed there wasn't a fire team leader position open anymore?" Allison weakly joked, wiping some perspiration from the ice pack off on her towel laying on the bench in front of her.

"No," Jack snorted, shaking his head, recalling the argument that flared up as soon as Echo was
briefer that Addams' rescue was gearing up. "You should've heard everyone in Echo bitchin' that Delta was handling your recovery."

"I can imagine," she nodded, with a crooked smile.

There was a pause, while Allison seemed to assess the usable coolness remaining in her chemical ice and Rollins studied her before speaking up. "I heard from Bingo how they found you; the shape you were in. Read how bad they fucked you up," he admitted, a kind of softness in his tone he couldn't recall ever giving her before. He didn't think she needed to know he'd seen the video of her Duval had sent.

"The report's been sealed. Nobody has to know what happened, if you don't tell them."

Allison nodded, biting at the inside of her lower lip and, for the first time since he'd known her, dropping her gaze instead of looking him in the eye anymore, and it cut something inside him.

"We took care of it for you," Jack told her. "While Bingo and Rogers got you out, some of us stayed behind. It's all cleaned up for the official record, of course, but the message we left was clear. You don't fuck with our girl." He was careful not to slip and call her his.

Allison nodded again, her head ducking a little lower, plainly picking up on the sentiment behind his vague phrasing and meant to hide the humility dampening her eyes. She thumbed away a tear, before it rolled over her lashes. He didn't expect her to say anything. She didn't have to. He wasn't fishing around for praise or thanks. Jack just wanted her to know. She deserved to know; to sleep at night knowing no one from that hell hole would ever touch her again. The frailty he saw in her, in that moment, pulled at something in his chest and Jack slid down the bench to the end of her knees and hooked his arm around behind her shoulders.

"You're not alone, Al," he reminded her. "We'll get you through this."

Allison tipped her forehead into his shoulder, curling her hand over his arm to rest into the hug. In hindsight, as the Lt. Commander, alone with a female subordinate in the women's locker room, he probably shouldn't have reached out to her like that. But he'd seen grown men crumble from the trauma she'd been through and never come back. Addams didn't have to admit anything to him. Rollins knew enough of what it was like to deal with the aftermath of being held prisoner and tortured, and was familiar with the unintended isolation that comes from recovering away from your real support system. Allison needed the reassurance. He knew she needed to hear it; to feel it. She wasn't alone anymore.

Allison took and let out a long, slow breath, the closest to her crying he figured he'd ever see. After all, it was still him; the hard ass second in command of the division. Their relationship had been founded on mutual respect and had only recently evolved into the sarcastic friendship everyone saw. But there were no insults or taunts to trade. For a long, peaceful minute, Allison and Rollins were still, save for the occasional soothing sweeps of his thumb on her arm. He didn't think he needed to say anything else. He just hoped she believed him.

An awkward titter left Allison, as she cleared her throat and straightened up. "So, does that mean we're even?" She wiped a knuckle across the tip of her nose. "I save your life, you deliver some vengeance for me?"

"Ohh, the shit we did for you," he mused, recalling the egregious violence he and Delta had done in her name with a quiet chuckle and shake of his head. "We'll never be even for that, Princess."

"You're not so bad, Jack," Allison told him. A thin smile came to her, lightening the mood a little further, as she teased, "In fact, I'm gonna let all the guys know how good you are at hugs. Tell 'em
what a softy you are."

Rollins stood and turned to head back to the main aisle toward the locker room entrance. He stopped at the end of the row of lockers to look back at her and smirked, "No one will ever believe you."
Chapter 35

May 2013

"Alright, that's enough," Brock quietly decided, looking to Jack for his attention. He nodded his head toward Allison, working the heavy bag in the corner. "Cool her down and get her out of here."

"Sure," Rollins agreed, pulling at the tape on his hands.

"She's favoring her left today," Rumlow noted. "Put Whitfield on it, no later than the morning."

"You got it," he nodded.

"She's got two weeks left, Jack," he pointed out.

"She's gonna be alright," Rollins assured him.

The Commander nodded, thoughtfully. "I wanna be sure. I don't want to lose her."

"She's working too hard for that," Jack said, confidently.

"But if she pushes too hard..." he cautioned. "We can't take an injury. We can't loose ground."

Rollins nodded his understanding and his agreement. He pulled the last of the tape off and wadded it up, rolling it in his palms to throw into the trash can on his way across the training room. He eyed the timer on the wall minding the seconds left in Allison's drill. By the time it was counting down the last thirty seconds, Jack had come to a stop, positioning himself to catch the bag and put his shoulder into it for her.

"C'mon, Princess," he spurred her on. "Gut it out...Push...Finish strong."

The timer chirped its final notice and Allison dropped her gloved hands to her sides with a heavy exhale. Jack straightened up, letting go of the bag to reach down for her water bottle on the floor. He tucked the bottle under his arm, curling a finger for her to come over and hold out her hand. Addams obeyed, taking and holding a breath to reset herself while he went to work unknotting the laces at her left wrist.

"That's enough for today," he told her.

"What?" Allison balked. "I worked longer yesterday. I can still fight. I was just about to-"

"Bingo called it," Jack shook his head, pulling the glove from her hand and tossing it on the mat. He motioned for her other hand, but all she did was give him an indignant stare. Rolling his eyes, Jack grabbed her other hand, jerking it over in his hold to get at the laces, warning her, "Don't loose your venom on me. But for the record, he's right."

From the top of his eyes, with his attention turned down to her glove, Rollins saw her glance over at the Commander, muttering, "For the record, he's full of shit."

Jack snorted, shaking his head. He tugged off her glove with one hand and put her drink in her hand with the other. "More hydrating," he ordered, "less bitching."

Allison took a long drink of her water, kicking her gloves aside together. "I'm not tired," she grumbled.
"I know," he nodded. "But you have to pace yourself."

"I don't have time to pace," she argued. "I've got 12 days."

"Keeping track, huh?" he smirked, throwing a towel her way.

Addams grabbed the towel just before it caught her in the face, scowling at Rollins purposeful toss while she was drinking and, probably mostly, at his chuckling. She wiped at her face and checked, "Aren't you?"

"I'm aware of how much time you have left," he nodded. Pointing over at Rumlow, he added, "We both are. But the last thing any of us needs is an injury putting you off schedule."

"I'm on schedule," Addams nodded, undoing and shaking the wrap from her left wrist, letting it fall to the mat in a small pile with her gloves. "I'm gonna stay on schedule."

"Right," he dryly agreed. "Just humor us then, and listen when you're being given good advice and orders. Lemme see your hand."

With an incredulous look, she picked up her water bottle again and asked, "What?"

"C'mon," Rollins told her, folding his fingers back into his palm in the direction of her left hand to coax her. "Quit dickin' around." With her drink in her left, she held out her right. "The other one, smartass," he groaned.

Allison huffed, rolling her eyes, as she traded her bottle to her other hand and held up her left hand by her face, twisting it around for him to see all the angles. "What?"

"Keep it up. I'm gonna knock the sass right out of you," he tiredly promised, grabbing her wrist and pulling her hand to him. Jack turned her hand, studying it in the light. Seeing a bruise between the knuckles of her middle and ring finger, he questioned, "What's this?" When she had the nerve to say 'what' again, he tested the soft spot between the bones, pressing it between his thumb on top and middle finger below the bruise.

"Agh, you fuck," she hissed, trying to jerk her hand back.

"That's what you get, you little shit," he said, cocking his head in disapproval, keeping his hold of her wrist. "What'd you do?"

"Nothing," she frowned.

Rollins turned her hand, moving her fingers apart and eyeing the small purple stain on her skin that spread from the knuckle into the web between her fingers and touched along the sides of each. "Does Doc know what you did?"

"I didn't do anything," she insisted. "It's just a bruise."

"You've been favoring your left, all day," Jack pointed out. "You're not acting like it's just a bruise."

"Well, it is," she sneered, "so-" Jack pressed down again and she yanked her hand back. "God damn it!" she complained.

That time, he let go. "See Whitfield before you leave the building," he told her, in no uncertain terms.
"I'm okay," she promised, massaging the spot with her thumb.

"Then prove it," Rollins casually shrugged, "and see Whitfield before you leave the fucking building."

"You don't have to treat me like a kid," Allison told him.

"Fine," he allowed. "Then stop acting like a brat and don't make me repeat myself again. Go cool down and then get out of here."

"You know," she impatiently started, "between the two of you-"

"Roll your eyes," he dared, pointing a finger at her face, "one more fuckin' time..."

Jack's patience was being tried, the more she fought him about training. She had been working hard and, after a couple weeks back on the mats and in the gym with STRIKE, she was already showing incredible improvement. She had butted heads with him and Rumlow more than a few times already, frustrated by the restraint they tempered her sessions with. Addams was still being challenged, but the force and stress they applied to workouts and sparring was meticulously planned and executed to develop her strength and confidence while minimizing risk for setbacks. Rollins admired her determination. If only it didn't come through sometimes as pure obstinance to the program.

Allison swatted his hand away, apparently unhappy with the interruption. And it was the last straw he was going to take for her attitude. While she knocked his right hand down, his left came across her to grab her wrist. In one quick movement, he drew her arm to him, locking it into his side, and put his right forearm across her collarbone as his leg dropped in behind her knee, taking her down to the mat and taking some of the air out of her. He held her there, her arm still trapped under his and her shoulders pinned by his forearm, the weight of his upper body shifted off his hip to keep her down, as she seethed.

The maneuver stirred some laughter from the other operators nearby and earned Rollins a hateful glare from her. Her hand was on his forearm when he slipped it forward to her neck to lay the curve of his flexed wrist over her throat. Allison drew up her feet, planting her heels into the mat to try and raise her hips to buck him off, but Jack shifted his weight over her belly and gave his armbar hold a small rotation to put a stop to her effort. He saw the wince in her snarling lips and took the tension off her arm enough to relieve the discomfort.

He leaned in a little closer, his disapproval evident, even in his hushed tone, when he taunted her, "You're not tired? You can still fight today?" Beneath him, Allison tried to jerk out of his arm lock, but all it did was earn her another tweak of his grip. "Then why are you on your ass, Princess?"

"Fuck off," she hissed, her grip still firmly set, holding his arm back.

Jack's eyes flicked up, catching the hard look from Rumlow across the way. Rollins turned his attention back down to her, going on, not without sympathy, to order, "That's enough for the day, Ally. Cool down, get cleaned up, and see Whitfield before you leave the building. Copy?" Allison leveled her eyes at him, obviously still upset he'd gotten the better of her, and he relaxed his lean over her and his flexed wrist on her throat a fraction for her to breath more comfortably. But the authority returned when he insisted, "Do you copy?"

"Yeah," she begrudgingly relented. "I copy."

Rollins let loose of her arm, standing up to tower over her, as she swallowed a breath and seemed to
reel in her anger at him. He held out his open hand to her, waiting with an eyebrow cocked impatiently for her to accept his offer. She let out an unhappy huff, when she leaned out to slap her hand into his. His large hand curled around hers and he easily pulled her to her feet. Jack held on, keeping her at his toes, for a moment.

"You're pissed off," he quietly acknowledged, with a small nod. "That's good. Hold on to that. Bring it back with you tomorrow. Meet me here at oh-600, okay?" Allison nodded, stubbornly looking away from his eyes on hers. "Get that hand checked out, Princess," he gently urged. "We can't afford any setbacks."

"I'm okay," she assured him.

"I know," he conceded. Rollins tipped his head to reference Brock, still watching them. "We both do. You just need to trust the process, okay, Ally? I'm on your side, Princess. We're not gonna let you fail."

Allison nodded and he let go of her hand. "I know," she admitted.

"Good," he nodded.

Jack picked up her towel off the mat, snapping it at the back of her knee when she bent down to pick up her gear. He tossed it to fall on her back, as he went by and she called him a son of a bitch under her breath. He looked back over his shoulder, catching a glimpse of the smirk she sent after him. Back with Rumlow, Jack exhaled and shook his head.

"What the hell was that?" Brock firmly questioned, his arms folded across his chest.

Rollins turned to see Allison again, watching her walk across the training room toward the door. "Attitude adjustment," he casually reported. Brock was tracking Allison, too, and Jack offered, "Hand looks like it'll be okay. Just a bruise. Doesn't feel like anything's broken in there. She'll see Doc on her way out."

"We'll wait and see what Whitfield says," the Commander decided, turning to Rollins after Allison was gone, "before we put anything in the daily for today. If it's just a bruise, don't report it."

"Copy that," Jack nodded.

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June 2013

"Barrows stopped me this morning," Jack mentioned, walking down the hall with Rumlow.

Brock lifted his chin in a small nod. "What’d he want?"

"Asked if you’d said anything about Addams," he said. "Told him I didn’t know what he was talking about...because I don’t."

The Commander made a quiet growl of annoyance and swept his head. "Guy’s been barking up my tree all week," he muttered.

"What’s he want?" Rollins asked, pushing the call button for the elevator.

"He wants Addams, for his QRF on Insight 2."

"Thought you said you were considering putting her on Insight, anyway," Jack recalled.
"I can’t do that," Rumlow groused. “I put her on Insight and we get a weak link in Echo ’til we can get a replacement.” He cocked his head, admitting, “And whoever we get to replace her isn’t going to be as good as her.”

"True," Jack conceded, not that he was eager to have Allison reassigned to a post that would keep her on a helicarrier and away from the Triskelion for about 300 days out of the year.

"Besides," Brock went on, “I don’t like the idea of not having the Horsemen available for deployment and out from under my supervision.”

"Trying to get them quickly deployed, if her carrier is detailed someplace else, could be a big logistics problem,” Jack agreed, hoping his casual commenting would keep Brock steering towards keeping Allison off of Barrows’ team.

"That’s why I need her here,” Rumlow nodded, stepping into the arriving elevator and directing the AI to the parking garage.

"The only other option,” Jack noted, “is to have her resign from the Horsemen.”

Rumlow snorted. “She’d never do that. Not for something like this assignment.” His brow rose at the thought that, “Shit. We’d still have weak links in two teams then, if she did.”

“So, what are you going to do?” Rollins wondered, hoping, for his own reasons, that the request would be officially denied.

The Commander shook his head. “I’m gonna have ta tell him, no,” he answered, and Jack was inwardly relieved. “I need her here.”

Jack nodded, without further comment. He didn’t want to agree too much and he was happy he didn’t have to try and talk him out of reassigning Addams to Project Insight. Either would earn him a ribbing or lecture from his friend about fraternizing regulations, and he’d been enjoying a quiet couple of months of not getting shit from Rumlow about his interest in Allison. He’d been mindful about averting his gaze or looking too long when she was around and not giving her anymore attention than anyone else. It seemed to be working.
"I swear to god, ladies," Rollins loudly warned, trying to spur on Delta Team, "if you let these assholes win, you will never live this down."

Jack chuckled at the insulted commentary from his teammates and took a long drink of water. He gave Vandoren a clap on the back, as he stepped forward to the start line. While Rumlow waited for Echo's offering, Jack checked his watch, eager to have the day over with.

With the temperature hovering at around 104 with the thick humidity and sun in the air, it was less than comfortable conditions to be running quarterly physical fitness tests. Hell, it was practically inhumane. But STRIKE team members were used to working in miserable conditions anyway. So, when it came time for the bragging rights portion of the assessments, Delta and Echo squared off, their cumulative scores tying them as the top performers among the five STRIKE teams.

Rollins shared the Commander's concerns when he saw Allison step up to run the course for Echo. She'd already competed in an exercise with her squad, an hour earlier. In these conditions, it was unwise, at best. But Jack kept his thoughts to himself, trusting the medic would keep an eye on her. He moved closer to the front of the teams gathering around the runners for a better view, watching Rogers talk to Addams.

"Geez, Al," Rogers smirked. "No love from your guys?"

"Rogers, don't fraternize with the enemy!" Jack couldn't resist calling out, waving a hand to move him along.

"Be careful in this heat, Ally," the Captain thoughtfully worried, giving her arm a pat and taking her bottle of Gatorade for her, as he moved out of the way.

"Step up to the line," Rumlow instructed, over the sound of the trash and pep talks beginning to swell from the observing operators and Allison and Vandoren moved up to the beginning of the course.

"You gonna do this with your shades on, Princess?" Rollins hollered, stirring up the laughter from his men, not that he didn't appreciate how attractive she still was, sweating and her face a little red from the sun.

"Just for you," Allison yelled back, bending her arm behind her back to surreptitiously flip off the guys from Delta.

Brock gave the runners the ground rules and, judging the two soldiers ready, he yelled, "Go!"

The guys from Delta and Echo roared to life, shouting their encouragement for as long as they could keep sight of the competitors, before they turned in to the woods before the obstacle course. Jack managed to stop the wince he felt coming to his face when he realized Allison's hand had started bleeding on her descent on the rope from the platform raised 35' overhead. She had to be in pain, but she didn't stop, and he respected her a little more for it. Nevertheless, Jack stepped over to where Rumlow was standing and gave him the heads up about her hand.

When it was all said and done, Vandoren had fallen behind. He dropped out at the last station, barely getting through his 27th pull-up, while Allison made her 30. To rub it in, Allison finished
with a one-handed pull-up and flipped off Jack with the bleeding one. Her teammates took her
down from where she hung with her chin above the bar, her lips puckering a kiss at Rollins, as he
shook his head at her and scowled. He hated to lose a bet.

Allison was carried for several celebratory seconds, before Rumlow pointed for her to be put down
and barked for the medic to check her hand. She pulled off her sweaty t-shirt to wipe the sand off
of her arms, throwing it up over the pull-up bar while the medic flushed Allison's wound for a
better look. The polished black lenses of Rollins' sunglasses afforded him an opportunity to take a
look at her toned and tanned body, without giving himself away, before he glanced down at the
final notes Brock made on the scoring sheet.

Jack had a bet to settle and, on his way to meet Allison where she stood talking to the Captain, he
grabbed a bottle of water from a cooler, a little worried about how she might be holding up in the
heat. Rogers tipped his head for Allison to turn around. She twisted over her shoulder to see Jack
coming to a stop behind her and she turned to let him in to the conversation. She gave him a
friendly smile and he gave her a tight nod, as he handed her the cold bottle of water.

"Come to settle up?" she wondered, wagging her eyebrows up over the top of her sunglasses and
still smiling.

"Alright," Jack grumbled. "I think it was a setup, so I shouldn't...but I will." He dug into his pocket
and pulled out a wad of cash, thumbing out $100 and unhappily handing it over.

"Thanks, Jack," she nodded, folding the bills over and tucking them into her pocket. "Lovely doing
business with you."

"Piss off, Al," he smirked. "Drink your water."

"You guys made a bet?" Rogers asked.

"Hundred bucks said Echo would break the tie and win," Allison confirmed and twisted open her
water for a drink.

"You barely won that," Rollins persisted.

"Don't be a sore loser," Allison playfully pouted, poking a finger into his arm.

"Because you're such a humble winner?" he snorted and tapped his hand under the end of her bottle
as she drank, trying to spill it. Jack shook his head, conceding, "You did gut it out there at the end,
with your hand and all. Not bad, Princess."

"Your little pissing contest over?" Rumlow asked, coming up to join the group and looking
between Allison and Jack. He turned to Allison, tossing her shirt to her. "Don't leave your shit
hanging around. We're not your fuckin' maid service."

"Yes, Sir," she snickered with the others, draping the shirt over her shoulder.

"I saw that, by the way. What'd you get out of him?" Brock wondered.

"Hundred bucks," Allison answered, proudly, finding a clean spot on the bottom of her shirt to
wipe her brow.

"You fucking," Rumlow spat at Rollins, and Jack smirked in reply. "You only gave me fifty."

"He was just saying, you only get fifty 'cause you're not as pretty," Allison teased and Jack gave her
a friendly push in the shoulder. Although she wasn’t wrong.

"You bet against your own team?" Rogers laughed.

"Just on the last exercise," Brock argued, holding up his finger in correction. "I had to. He already had the action on Delta." He held his hand out to Jack, impatiently flicking his fingers for the bet to be resolved. "C'mon, ya cheap bastard. Pay up."

Rollins begrudgingly counted out another $50 and gave it to Brock, while Rogers realized, "Damn it. I should'a got in on this."

"And bet against your own team?" Allison feigned disgust.

The Captain held up his finger to correct her. "I don't do the physical assessments with them," he reminded her, while Rollins crossed his arms and watched with an amused grin. "I'm just here to watch on my own." Rogers shrugged, innocently. "So..."

"Slippery slope, Cap," Allison winked. She smugly added, "But I understand you wanting to trade up from Delta to the better team."

Rumlow looped a hand for her to look around, pointing out, "Watch your mouth, kid. It's three to one. None of your boys are in earshot to bail you outta this one."

"Something tells me, the safe bet is always on Al," Rogers winked.

"She comes through," Jack agreed, with a shrug.

"Careful, Jack," she playfully warned, giving him a nudge in the arm with her fist, "people might start to think you like me."

"I'm just saying you're consistent," he clarified, dropping his arms to his side and gesturing a hand up at her. "You're a Horseman for a reason, right?"

"No, Jack," Allison firmly shook her head. "I will not go out with you, so stop flirting, okay?"

The small group laughed out loud and Rollins smirked, "You'd be lucky to get a pity fuck and it'd be the highlight of your life, Princess." Although a pity fuck was hardly what he had in mind when he thought about her.

"Alright," Rumlow piped up. "Enough with the romance. You two are gonna make me throw up." He pointed for them to move on to the parking lot and end the day. "There'll be a copy of the fraternizing policy in both your emails in the morning."

Everyone laughed, heading to the lot after the other team members, and Rogers reminded the group, "You know, in this weather, it's important to hydrate." Allison took a swig off her water bottle and held it up in agreement and he went on, "So, who's buying tonight at Barny's?"

Jack pointed between Brock and Allison. "They've got all my cash. So, I guess, technically, that means already I am."

"Sounds about right," Allison nodded, giving him a sarcastically consoling rub on the back. "Better luck in October, Jack."

Jack quickly hooked an arm over the back of Allison's neck, tugging her down into a headlock as they walked. "I will take back every nice thing I ever said about you," he threatened, as Allison
wiggled free several steps later and he gave her a gentle shove away.

"I'm gonna make you love me, Jack," she promised, sidestepping to jump on his back and hug her arms around his neck, hanging from him like a cape with her feet kicked up behind her. If only she knew she already had.

"You got a little something stuck on you, right there." Rogers noted, pointing out Allison to Jack.

Jack tried to shrug her off, as he walked. He had to make some effort or gesture to keep up appearances in front of the troops. But she pulled up her legs to lock around his waist, when he told her, "If you're too tired to walk, get a fucking medic."

"When I have you? Never. You're my favorite agent, Jack," she declared. "Did I ever tell you that?"

Behind his sunglasses, he rolled his eyes. She was laying it on thick today. With her clung to him the way she was, it was driving him nuts.

"Bingo," he began, looking to Brock for help, as he hooked his hands to hang casually from Allison's arms across the front of his shoulders, not actually unhappy about her being the closest she'd ever been to him, "get this suck up off my ass."

Rumlow held up the clipboard in his left hand, gesturing helplessly at it with his empty right hand. "Sorry, Jack," he shrugged. "I got my own hands full."

Jack gave a small shake of his head, figuring Brock knew how Allison was unwittingly torturing him and that he was amused by Jack's situation. Fucking sadist.

"Tell me I'm your favorite agent," she prodded Rollins, tipping her head to his. "Say you love me, Jack. Sayyy it."

"I'd give my left nut for a gun, right now," Jack grumbled, with a shake of his head and a chuckle underlining the complaint, feeling compelled to say something. After all, he had an image to maintain. But he knew she wasn't giving up on teasing him, and he didn't necessarily want her to either. He scooped his hands under Allison's knees to shift her weight and carry her more comfortably. She gave him a squeeze and let her feet fall to his sides.

"You love me," she proudly decided, nuzzling her head to Jack's, when he muttered a defeated 'Yeah yeah'.

"This might be the most dysfunctional family I have ever seen," Rogers considered, with a chuckle, and Allison reached over from her perch on Jack to scold the Captain with a smack on the arm. But Jack couldn't agree more. She didn't let go and he didn't put her down until they reached the gravel edge of the parking lot and had to go in separate directions to their vehicles.

Aug 2013?

"You have got to be shittin' me," Jack complained, his head falling back against the headrest, pressing the brakes to a stop again.

He checked the clock on the dash and rolled his eyes. Traffic on the George Washington Memorial Parkway was crawling in the rain. The weather wasn't bad by any means; just depressing. It was only five miles from the Pentagon to his Foxhall Village townhouse. The merge from the Parkway...
to Washington Boulevard was excruciatingly slow, and for no good reason that he'd been able to see for the last five minutes. He was still a couple of minutes away from the next traffic report on the radio when he figured out what the problem was.

On the right shoulder of the road was a broken down car. The trunk was open and the hazard lights blinked in what was left of the evening light. As traffic crept past the disabled vehicle, the driver stood up from the far side of the car. Jack was on the brakes again, stopped for a moment, watching the rain soaked brunette throw a tire iron into the trunk and sigh, as she took out her phone and made a call. The woman looked up and down the road and seemed to dial a new number, obviously not getting an answer at the first.

Traffic moved again and Rollins gave the woman another glance as he went on. He could see the frustration in her expression. He looked at the clock again and groaned, this time at himself for pulling over to the side of the road. Traffic began to clear ahead, once he was past the white Eos on the side of the road. He would have been across the bridge and home in another 7 or 8 minutes, if he hadn't felt bad for the woman.

Shutting off his SUV, Rollins popped the door and slid out into the rain. He threw a side eye at the other cars that continued by, as he walked down the side of the road back to the other car. The woman noticed his approach and he held up a non-threatening hand in a half-assed wave and assurance he had good intentions.

"'Evening, ma'am," he offered. "What's the trouble?"

"Oh, uh," she stalled, maybe sizing him up and gauging his trustworthiness.

Jack caught sight of the flat tire on the back of the car and pointed. "Can I give you a hand with that?"

The woman looked down at the tire and raised her hands in a helpless shrug. "Sure. What the hell."

Rollins snorted to himself, with a small shake of his head. He gestured his intension to move past her and to the trunk of her car and she took a few steps back to let him. He grabbed the tire iron and took a knee beside the car.

"I know how to change a tire," she mentioned. "I just couldn't get the damned lug nuts off." He didn't have any trouble loosing the first nut and she sarcastically argued, "Yeah, well, I loosened them for you."

Jack chuckled and went on the next nut. The driver walked away for a moment, while he worked. By the time he had covered the 30 or so foot walk from his car to hers, the rain had already done its work on him. At least the BDUs were water resistant. If it were worth the effort, he could bitch at himself for leaving his cover in his office, clearly not anticipating the summer shower or chivalrous car maintenance. But he was surprised when the rain stopped above him. Rollins looked up, seeing the woman had come back to hold an umbrella over both of them.

"Probably a little late for that," he quipped.

"Better late than never," she smiled and Jack nodded, as he spun the freed lug nuts off the bolts and set them aside. "You in the Army, or something?"

"No, ma'am," he answered.

"It's just, ya know," she said, looping a finger towards him, "the uniform and the whole 'ma'am' thing."
Rollins grinned, with a bob of his head. "I work for SHIELD," he explained, adding, "Former Army, though."

The umbrella followed along, when he stood to go back to the trunk for the spare tire. Jack couldn't help his grin at her effort. She moved with him, back to the side of the car, and stood by while he traded the deflated tire for the new one. A few minutes later, the lug nuts were securely back in place and Rollins was packing away the flat tire and tools in the trunk.

"I can't thank you enough," she told him, as he shut the trunk lid. "You wouldn't believe how many people drove by."

"Yeah, I would," he smirked.

"I'm Libby, by the way," she offered, holding out her hand.

"Jack," he smiled back, giving her hand a soft shake. He gave a nod, noting, "You're all set. Have a good night."

Rollins turned to go, eyeing the traffic that crept by, making sure some inattentive jackass didn't clip him on his way back to his SUV. He unlocked the door, slid inside, and started the engine, turning on the heat. He wiped the water off his face with his hand and reached back to pull his seatbelt across him. His head snapped up at the sound of the gentle knock on his window. Rollins pressed the button for the window, putting it down about halfway with one hand and clicking his seatbelt in with the other.

He nodded at Libby under her umbrella, questioning, "Yes, ma'am?"

"I was thinking," she began, a bit awkwardly, "maybe I should get your number. You know, for roadside assistance. A girl can never be too prepared."

"For roadside assistance?" he repeated, plainly amused.

Libby grinned, shyly, explaining, "I usually don't do this sort of thing, but I feel bad for you going to all that trouble in the rain. I thought, maybe I could buy you a drink, or something, to say thanks." Jack was charmed by the offer, a smile coming to the side of his mouth, as she quickly added, "If your time's not, you know...currently occupied."

With a soft snort, Rollins told her, "No, not currently occupied."

"Well," she tittered, "maybe this weekend then? Or whenever. But definitely when I look a little less like a wet dog."

"Sure," he agreed, his head bobbing with a grin in place, as he found a business card in the padfolio on the seat beside him. Rollins pulled a pen from the pocket on the arm of his shirt and wrote down his cell phone number on the back. He handed it out the window, joking, "In case you get another flat tire."

Holding up the card for a moment, Libby snickered, shaking her head. She turned the card to read, "Lieutenant Commander Jack Rollins." She pouted, thoughtfully. "Sounds important."

"Depends on who ya talk to," he humbly shrugged.

Libby's grin broke into a wide smile and she laughed. "Well, I've already taken up enough of your important time," she decided, "Lieutenant Commander." With the business card still slotted between her fingers, she gave him a cheesy salute and Jack dropped and shook his head, stifling a
laugh. "My salute? No good, huh?" she smiled.

"I'm on duty through the week," he noted, nodding his agreement about her poor salute. "But we can work on it on Saturday."

She seemed pleased, as her smile widened again and she took a small step back from his door. "Saturday," she agreed.

He watched her in the mirror, until she was safely in her car. He got back on the road and headed home, eager for some dry clothes and dinner. On the way, he considered the woman he’d just met, wondering if he’d actually meet her if she used him number. She was pretty and certainly charming. He admired her nerve for coming back up to him to get his number. Jack decided he’d see her on Saturday, if she called, figuring he could use something to keep his mind off Allison and the way she was getting to him lately.
Sept 2013

“You still going?”

Jack wrinkled his brow in confusion. “Going where?”

“The hunting trip next month,” Brock coaxed. “The missus gonna let you out?”

“Fuck you,” Jack snorted, with a small shake of his head.

Beside him, shoulders slouched against the dirt mound behind him, Rumlow chuckled. “I’m just sayin’, big guy,” he shrugged, “you’ve been spending a lot of time with her.”

Rollins quirked up a brow, turning his head from his watch of the clearing to see Brock. “What? You jealous?” he smirked.

“I’m not having any cold nights without you,” Brock assured him. “Besides, you ain’t that pretty, you scarred up fuck.”

Jack chuckled, looking out ahead of them through his field glasses. He glanced down, checking his watch in the fading evening sun. He shifted on his elbows, settling into a slightly higher prone to get a better view.

“Who are we betting on?” Rumlow asked, his head lolling over to see Jack.

“Are you kidding me?” Jack laughed, giving a skeptical once over of Brock.

The Commander nodded, with a smug grin in the corner of his mouth. “Addams, of course,” he agreed.

“It’s gonna be a blood bath,” Rollins smiled.

“Why do we do this to them?” Brock mused, with a grin and a contemplative tilt of his head toward the sky.

“They gotta learn somehow,” he shrugged, setting his binoculars aside. He rolled onto his side, settling to rest back into the dirt and rock behind him. Folding an arm up behind his head, Jack conceded, “But it is pretty unfair. This round, anyway.”

Brock snorted. “We don’t actually feel sorry for them, do we?” he checked, lifting his chin to peek over the top of the natural trench.

“Not really,” Rollins fiendishly grinned.

This was the second to last night for the Gauntlet exercises for the new recruits vying for a spot on Alpha Team. The Division leaders were only observing this round. From their vantage point, they had eyes on the recruit encampment. The recruits were pitted against four members of Echo, tonight. Jack and Brock had attended the strategy session earlier in the day where Echo’s senior officers from 2nd Squad outlined how they planned to capture or “kill” at least one of the remaining four candidates.

It was a ballsy maneuver. Some of Allison’s teammates would get close enough to the camp to
raise alarm and, hopefully, get the recruits to split up in a knee jerk reaction. While the recruits would be responding to the encroachment, thinking they needed to rally their defenses and protect their little base of operations, Allison would slip into the camp from the west and choose her targets. Addams had been stalking the recruits for the better part of the day, stealthily moving behind them at a distance and, later, under the cover of a makeshift ghillie suit. Once the recruits camped for their meal before they would be presented with their next obstacle by the observers that linked up with them, she began inching closer through the clearing. It was a painstakingly slow process, but she had the patience for the work and, being the smallest on the team, she was the least likely to be seen.

Rollins and Rumlow had been tracking her progress, with field glasses, since they were finally able to spot her two hours ago. “She should be checking in soon,” Jack figured.

“I just sent a message over to Dennison,” Brock mentioned, tucking his phone away. He flashed a mischievous smirk at Jack, before reporting what the other observers saw. “He says they don’t suspect a thing. They’re just finishing chow and anticipating the briefing for their next task.”

”Ahh, the last supper for someone,” Jack swept his head, with a wistful smile and rise in his brow.

“Probably two,” Brock figured.

“You think?” he scoffed.

“You don’t?” Rumlow snorted.

Jack grinned, shaking his head where it lay on his arm. “She’s too nice. She likes all four of the candidates. She’ll take two, if they make it that easy,” he reasoned, “but she’ll make sure they all have a chance. Besides, they’ve still got another 2 exercises, 19 miles, and 37 hours to go.”

“How ‘bout we bet on the survivors then?” Brock suggested. “I’d be willing to put money on Fraser or Darden.”

Rollins nodded, thinking for a moment. “I’ll take Cartwright, for the win,” he decided.

”Cartwright?” he doubted, with a skeptical squint in one eye. “Really?”

“He’s good,” Jack shrugged, sticking by his choice. “I think he’ll surprise you.”

“Alright,” Brock accepted, with a bow of his head and a thoughtful pout. “I’ll take Fraser. Fifty bucks?”

”Fifty bucks,” he agreed, and they knocked fists to confirm to deal.

It was quiet for a couple of minutes, while they waited for Echo’s trap to be sprung. Jack changed positions, laying down again to watch the recruits and their observers across the way. He slowly scanned the high grass through his binoculars, looking for Addams again.

“So, what’s the deal with you and this...” Rumlow paused. “Is it Lily?”

”Libby,” Jack corrected, spotting Allison about 20 meters from the camp’s edge. “What about her?”

“Libby,” he repeated. “Right. ...What’s the deal? You skipped poker night last weekend. Must be getting serious.”
Rollins shrugged. “Went down to Norfolk for her brother-in-law’s birthday.”

“Spent Labor Day with her,” Brock coyly noted, “now family birthdays... When’s the wedding? I wanna know so I make sure to take the day off.”

A short kick of Jack’s boot across the ground flung some dirt over Brock’s boots. Rumlows only chuckled, clearly proud of getting a rise out of Jack, while Jack explained, “It’s nothing. You’d like him. He’s a combat search and rescue pilot with Carrier Wing 7.”

“A Navy guy, huh?” Rumlows considered, with a thoughtful pout. “I like ‘im already.”

Jack smirked, quipping, “When’s the wedding? So I can take the day off.”

”Alright, smartass,” he groaned. Brock sat up, turning around and taking up his field glasses for a look. “So, what? You gonna start bringing her around? If you’re going to all ‘a her shit...”

“And give you more ammo to try and bust my balls with?” Rollins scoffed. “Fuck that.”

”Pussy,” Rumlows chuckled.

”She’s a nice girl,” Jack shrugged. “You assholes would eat her alive.”

”Aw, come on,” Brock said. “Give us a little credit.”

Jack snuffled a laugh, shaking his head. Across the way, he spied the recruits straightening up and looking to the east. He panned back to where Allison was laying in wait, seeing her slowly rise to a crouch and slink up to the trees at the edge of the camp.

“Here we go,” Rumlows eagerly observed. “Last chance to change your bet...”

“Just give me the cash, now,” Jack confidently told him, watching the recruits scramble to grab their weapons, taking the bait to split up and rush toward the east.

Oct 2013

Rollins was just rounding the corner into the living room, when the phone stopped ringing. Libby had picked it up, tapping the speaker on and reaching it out for him to answer. It was a clever idea on her part, until he heard who was on the other end of the line.

"Rise and grind, mother fucker! Time to get some.”

"Excuse me?” Libby gaped, her face long with confusion, and looking a little mortified, as she looked up to Jack.

From the speaker, Allison caught herself, "Oo, shit!” They heard her clear her threat and continue, "I am so sorry, ma’am. Is Jack available, please?”

"Go ahead,” Jack said, tapping off the speaker and putting the phone to his ear. For a long moment, all he heard was Allison’s boisterous laughter and it made him smirk. "Way to go, asshole.”

"I am sooo sorry,” Addams promised, as she tried to regain her composure. "What is she doing answering your phone?”

"I was in the other room,” he shrugged. "What've you got?”
"Priority 1 recall," she told him. "Navy had a malfunctioning satellite fall in a bad part of town and need a recovery for the nuclear payload and their hardware, if it's salvageable. 30 minutes, briefing room 2 with Cap and the boys."

"Roger that," Rollins sighed.

"Hey, Jack" Allison remorsefully began, "again, I'm really sorry. I just- I popped into Communications for a tape and saw the activation come in; thought I'd have a bit of fun. That was-"

"Pretty damn funny, Al," he assured her, chuckling. "Don't worry about it. See you soon."

Jack ended the call and frowned at his phone for a moment. Libby was looking forward to a quiet Saturday together, after the long week at work she had had. His muscles ached after a little extra sparring before he left work yesterday. It had worked out some stress, but he was feeling a little rundown now. The last thing he wanted was to go back to the Triskelion and get on a jet to who the fuck knows where.

"Lib, hon, I'm sorry," he offered, turning around to face her again, "but I gotta go."

"I answered your phone," she winced, biting nervously at her thumbnail. "I shouldn't have done that, should I?"

"It's okay," he smiled, endeared by her worry.

"I just- I thought, if you missed it-"

"She'd have called back," Jack assured her, smoothing his hand down her arm and giving her a gentle squeeze to reassure her, as he passed by her on his way to the hall closet. “There’s always a call back.”

It was quiet behind him, while Jack shrugged his jacket on to his shoulders. "That was work that called, right?" Libby awkwardly checked.

He shouldn't have let the small snort escape him, but he was too amused by her question and the implication she was trying to keep out of it. "Of course, it was."

"I was just wondering," he glanced over his shoulder to see her shrug, "because the way she talked when she thought it was you..."

Tucking his phone and wallet into his pockets, Jack nodded. "Her name is Allison Addams," he told her, the charm of the whole conversation showing in the grin in the corner of his mouth. "She's one of the bosses on another team." Rollins walked back to where Libby stood in the living room. With his hands settled on her waist, he found it surprisingly easy to oversimplify who Allison was to him. "She's a colleague and a friend. She's kind of a ball buster, that's all," he explained. "Because of her position, there will be times that she calls me, and I'll call her. But that's all she is."

Libby smiled, a bit sheepishly, ducking her head. "She kinda sounds like she'd be fun to hang out with," she admitted.

Jack didn’t know how to respond, but he knew he didn’t want to have a conversation about Allison with Libby. Instead, he gave her a quick kiss and hoped the small discussion was over. "I gotta go."

But Libby stayed on topic, as she walked him to her door. "You know," she said, “you don’t really talk about your work friends. I’ve only met the other ones.”
"Well, they’re-“ Jack paused, debating how to proceed. “They’re kind of a handful.”

"You mean you all talk to each other like that on the phone?” she snickered, opening the door.

His brow rose in consideration. “Yeah, actually,” he conceded.

She laughed, asking, “What? Are you ashamed of me?”

Jack put a hand on her hip to bring her closer, snuffling a laugh, as he shook his head. The truth was he did enjoy Libby’s company. Like he’d said to Rumlow before, she was a nice girl. She was a good distraction from work; funny and kind. He enjoyed spending time with her and it hadn’t been lost on him how much time he was allowing himself to spend with her, after several relationships that were probably too short to actually use that word to describe them and despite his preoccupation with someone else. It was comfortable when Libby was around and, although he wasn’t expecting it, he was starting to like that.

"No,” he grimaced, with a snort and grin. “Where do you come up with this shit?”

Libby shrugged. “When will you be back?” she wondered. “Any chance of salvaging the weekend?”

Jack inhaled deeply, figuring, “Doubtful.” He pecked a kiss to her cheek, promising on his way out the door, “But I’ll call when I get a better idea of what’s going on.”

"Fair enough,” she accepted, with a wilting grin, the sight of which gave him an unexpected tug of guilt in his gut. “Be careful,” she said, with a wave.
"You're pretty much the worst date ever," Rollins decided.

Walking across the ballroom toward the green space, Allison gaped, "Me? How do you figure? You didn't even bring me flowers or pick me up."

"Yeah, no shit. The whole team left from the hotel together," Jack reminded her, reaching out to push open the door ahead of her. "You're lucky I let you ride with me to keep up the cover. And I figure because you're paying attention to some other guy the whole time we're here."

"He's the target, Jack," Allison chuckled, adjusting her voice to the lower volume of the outside patio. "You're lucky Penn, Fender, and I were free to make you guys look less obvious in a crowd."

Jack just considered himself lucky that he was paired up with Allison. He had nothing against the other ladies who stepped up to fill in on the op. They were good operators, in their own right. He'd go to war with either of them. But nobody did it better than Addams. Besides his own personal preference for her, Rollins liked working with her, for everything she brought to the table. Tonight, she brought it all in a long, black evening gown with a tasteful, yet enticing, split up her leg.

"I'm just saying," Rollins shrugged, tucking his hands into his pants pockets at the biting cold in the air. "Oh, fuck this."

He followed her as she headed straight for one of the heaters on the edge of the patio, taking advantage of the dimmer lights to go relatively unnoticed among the thin smattering of smokers and other guests that had stepped out for some fresh air. Jack saw a shiver go through her shoulders and Allison eyed the propane heater, frowning. "Is this thing even on?"

"Target's moving," the mission controller advised through the comms. "30 seconds to the door."

"Remember," Rumlow chimed in, "wait for the signal from our asset to verify the exchange has been made. Team 2 will secure the asset before Team 1 makes the approach on the target. Cover positions advise for go- no go."

The undercover operatives sounded off, in order. Jack spoke for him and Allison, confirming as "Charlie 2" that they were ready. Hearing everyone's "green" status, Brock gave his approval to proceed.

"Mission is go," Brock advised. "Mission is go."

"Target has arrived," the controller updated. "Southwest corner. Asset is en route. 60 seconds."

"You're always cold," Jack teased, with a stifled laugh.

"The exchange was supposed to happen inside," Allison grumblingly reminded him, crossing her arms over herself and running her hands up and down her arms to warm herself.

"Something spooked him," Rollins observed, with a frown. "Should be over soon." Allison rolled her eyes, apparently not entirely encouraged by his optimism. "Come here, darling," he mockingly offered, with a half-roll of his own eyes and the words dripping with annoyed sarcasm, opening his arm to her. "Don't say I wasn't a gentleman on our date."
It wasn't an entirely shameless ploy. She was obviously cold, and cold can be distracting. In the open and without armor, he needed her focused. Jack was carrying a weapon for her, but he didn't like scenarios like this that necessitated operatives being exposed to higher risks just for the sake of a cover. Especially her.

"You're such a dick," she smirked.

But Allison took a step closer anyway, tucking herself under his arm and snaking her arms around him beneath his suit coat. With a small tug of his jacket forward, Rollins covered her the best he could and folded his arm across her to help warm her. He shifted his feet to turn them a few inches, allowing Allison a view of the rendezvous location, as she rested her head on his chest. To anyone else outside, they were the romantic picture of a doting man and his cold girlfriend or wife.

"Thanks," she told him.

Her hand smoothed along his back to locate her gun in the paddle holster in his waistband at the small of his back. If it weren't for the comms device tucked in his ear, reminding him they were working, it'd be an ideal moment to enjoy. Another time in another place and maybe he could have let himself believe it was real. But the exchange was ready to take place, and Jack knew her wrapped up in his arms was just part of selling the cover to her and her hands were there to find and hold her weapon, not him.

"Asset has exited the building; on track to the rendezvous location," the operator in the TOC updated the teams.

"I've got eyes," Jack noted to Allison, tipping his head to rest on hers and running his hand up and down her bare arm not covered by his coat, trying to keep her warm.

The voice in the comms advised that the target and asset were beginning the exchange and Allison told Rollins, "This is a nice suit, Jack." She peeked at the label in the lining and Jack snuffled a laugh, with a small shake of his head on hers. "Very nice," she approved, with a small nod. "Good color, too. You should wear more suits."

"Shut up, smartass," Rollins smirked, giving her arm a small pinch. Not that he actually minded the compliment from her.

"No, seriously," Allison assured him, stifling a giggle.

From his vantage, Emery warned, "Charlie 3. Caution signal from the asset. Something's wrong with the exchange."

"Stay frosty," Brock urged. "Mission is still go, until we get the abort signal from our asset."

Addams and Rollins noticed the suspicious look around from the target and Allison turned her gaze up to meet Jack's. They sold the couple routine, Allison nuzzling into his collar, while Rollins bowed his head to the curve of her neck. He held his eyes closed for a long moment, pushing away the distraction of the perfume he breathed in; of his mouth being so close to her skin. He opened his eyes, setting them on the target again and keeping watch through his brow.

"Target's taking an aggressive posture," Jack whispered to Allison's ear, his shoulders tensing.

"Eyes open," Rumlow ordered. "Charlies, check your world. We may have another player."

"Charlie 3, check your six," the controller cautioned. "Variable entering your AO from the west entrance."
Rollins lifted his chin from Allison's shoulder for a better look, confirming to the TOC, "Charlie 2, verified."

"The fuck is he doing here?" Allison muttered, curling her fingers around the grip of her gun at his back.

"Eeeasy, Princess," Jack breathed, sliding his hand down the back of her arm to stop at her elbow near his side and his own gun secured in the shoulder rig beneath his suit coat.

While Rollins tempered Allison's irritation at the unanticipated arrival of the Bulgarian agent, Brock was on the channel again, telling the teams, "Nikolov is not sanctioned by NIS. Charlie 1, reprioritize on Nikolov. Do not let him engage the target or asset."


"He's at your 8 o'clock," Jack quietly told her, his eyes panning across the patio area, reassessing the situation. "Too many civilians. No shot. Keep your eyes on the Tango. If this goes south, I'll engage Nikolov, you sweep our six for any other players."

"Roger that," Allison nodded, still cuddled to his shoulder.


"Charlie 1, intercept Nikolov," Rumlow ordered, rapid fire. "Charlie 2 and 3, secure the target. Teams 1 and 2- go!"

Just as Rollins and Allison straightened to separate and make their approach to take the target into custody, a startled scream broke the relative peace of the outdoors. Allison stripped her gun from its holster on Jack, while they heard the traffic from Charlie 1 that Nikolov was armed. Jack raised his arm to come over her head, putting his hand between her shoulder blades to guide her down and away, as he drew his weapon from under his jacket.

Jack didn't have a shot. The panicked guests at the party scrambled for the safety of the hotel, crossing his sight picture. A small growl of frustration left him, his index finger impatiently hooked inside the trigger guard. He watched, unable to do anything from his position, as Nikolov's shot found its mark, sending the target spinning to the ground face first, while the channel was congested with the traffic of the other Delta operators on the perimeter teams responding into the hotel or toward the patio. Rollins found an angle on Nikolov and returned fire, as the rogue intelligence agent retreated backward to the edge of the green space. Nikolov turned, taking aim toward Rollins and Addams.

Everything happened at once. Addams had cleared their six and had shifted to engage Nikolov. Jack moved, grabbing Allison by the waist to pull her to him and turning his back. He pushed her down with his weight over her, shielding her to take the punch of the three rounds that beat into the armor on his back. The sound of Nikolov's shots was immediately overcome by a short hail of gunfire and the adrenaline fueled voices of his teammates advising that Nikolov was down and the target and asset were secure. It was all over in a matter of seconds.

Hearing confirmation that Nikolov was dead was the only reason Jack moved. He was the only protection she had. Training, instinct, and muscle memory had done their work. Now that the threat
was over, his mind caught up, realizing what could have happened. If he had read Nikolov wrong; been a half second too slow or continued to engage him instead of shielding Allison, Jack could have lost her. He let out his breath, straightening up and pulling her to sit upright with him by his arm hooked around her waist, feeling the pressure and pain starting to radiate from the points of impact from the bullets into his armor.

Allison turned on her toe and knee, twisting over her shoulder to see him, as Rollins arched his back and grimaced, growling, "Mother fucker." He took back his arm from around her and sat back on his heel, holstering his weapon under his jacket again. Jack put his hand on her shoulder to turn her to face him better, inwardly anxious to see that she was okay. Looking her over with a squint in his eye for his growing discomfort, he managed to keep control of his worry and simply ask, "You okay, Princess?"

"Yeah," she nodded, swallowing a breath. "Yeah, I'm okay."

Jack nodded his approval, with an unhappy sigh, but he was privately overwhelmingly relieved. He bent his arm up behind him, feeling for the cuts in his clothes down to his armor over where the pain was the sharpest. Allison stood, bending round his shoulder to see where his hand was pressed to his back. Rollins felt her hand run over his shoulder and spine to touch the rounds trapped in the Kevlar.

"You okay?" she worried, crouching again to be able to reach the lowest mark on his back.

"Fantastic," Rollins sarcastically nodded. Resting his free hand over his bent up knee, he complained again, "Fuckin' hell."

A gentle smile curled in the corner of her mouth, looking down at him. This was gonna hurt like a mother fucker in the morning. He let a soft chuckle escape him, a misplaced amusement at being shot twice in less than a year and for the comfort her grin gave him. She watched him with a critical eye, rubbing a firm hand round on the part of the vest over his shoulder blade to help massage away some of the inevitable stain no doubt already developing under his skin.

"So much for the suit, huh?" Addams snickered.

"Yeah," he snorted, with a tick back of his head. The operator in the TOC was doing a roll call of agents and Jack replied for them, "Charlie 2. Okay."

"C'mon," Allison told him, putting her arm under his to help him to his feet. "You sure you're okay?"

Rollins nodded and groaned, the inflamed muscles already knotting in his back underneath the impacts. "Yeah." He bent backward again, a wince crossing his face and his hand on Allison's shoulder to steady himself. "Didn't get through the vest."

"Guess you're not such a bad date, after all," Allison considered, slipping her arm around to the small of his back, under his suit coat, to reholster her gun. She kept her arm there, hugging against his side, as they walked back toward the ballroom entrance and quietly telling him, "Thanks, Jack."

Jack took in and let out a deep breath, wondering how long he had before she let go of him. With his arm draped around her shoulder, Rollins squeezed her back and chuckled, promising, "Anytime, Princess." He sent her ahead of him with a gentle hand at the small of her back, when he pulled open the door to go inside and meet the rest of Delta for the exfil.
There was a polite knock on the door, before the handle was turned to open it and a cautious voice questioned, "Jack?"

He was just pulling his Tac Job fleece overhead, working his jaw to ignore the deep ache the simple task gave him. He had a prescription for pain killers from the infirmary doc, but the hurt was helping him stay awake. He'd see how it went in the morning. Rollins looked up toward the doorway, seeing Addams peek around the side of the door. When her eyes found him in the room, her hopeful expression was her request to come in and he waved her over. Allison shut the door behind her and crossed the open space of his office, setting herself back against the face of his desk when he took one of the seats in front of it to put on his boots.

"You're still here?" he mentioned, stretching the laces of his boot a little looser to pull over his foot.

"On my way out," she told him.

She'd already changed into civilian clothes more suitable for the DC winter weather. Seeing her hair casually knotted up, in jeans and her STRIKE sweatshirt with her team's patch design emblazoned on the left chest was a decided change from the figure hugging dress from earlier, but somehow Jack preferred seeing her this way tonight. Something about knowing that was how she showed up for briefing and it being strangely reassuring to see her leaving the same way, after the night they'd had.

"Need something?" Jack wondered, throwing a quick glance up at her, while he cinched up his laces.

"I just wanted to check in with you, before I went home," Addams shrugged. "See if you needed anything."

Rollins gave a swept of his downturned head, knotting his laces. "All set," he told her. "Target's being debriefed by CS, AAR's been submitted, and cryptology has the data from the asset. We're done."

From the corner of his eye, Rollins watched the toe of her boot tap into the side of his, when she corrected, "No. I meant if you needed anything."

Nodding to himself, he looked back up at her to say, "No, I'm fine."

"You sure?" Allison pressed, a discerning squint in one eye. "Because just a few hours ago, some asshole tried t-"

"Ally, I'm fine," Jack insisted, with a shake of his head to try and send her off the topic.

"Jack," she gently began, and he turned his attention back to his second boot, with a roll of his eyes, "don't ignore the fact that Nikolov could have-"

"I'm not ignoring it," he assured her, slightly raising himself to rest his elbow on his knee and look up at her. "Believe me, every time I move, I am well aware of what that fucker tried to do tonight." He gave her a once over, adding what he figured she already knew. "He was aiming at you."

He saw the visible swallow and subtle nod, as she agreed, "I know." Addams planted her hands into his desk behind her, slouching against her straightened arms and letting her eyes drift down to the floor. "Hell of a night," she quietly mused.

Jack watched her for a moment, before he nodded once. "Yeah."
Her eyes flitted back to his and she noted, "But it didn't happen to me. He got you, instead. Even taking it in the vest, it still happened."

"I don't need to talk about it," he grumbled, a bit bored of the subject, but not unappreciative of her concern. "Don't need to share my feelings, or any other hippie shit. I'm fine. Just a little sore is all."

"You gonna be okay?" Addams asked, folding her arms comfortably across herself.

"Unfortunately, I'll live," he nodded.

Allison snickered and shook her head. "You're catching up, Jack," she pointed out, and he was happy for the levity to replace the worry in her tone. "Now, you only owe me one."

"Well, let's not go rushing into me returning the last favor," he dryly suggested. "Gimme a couple of days to shake off this last one, before you make me save your life again, okay, Princess?"

"Hey," she said, innocently holding up her hands and giving a sweep of her head. "You didn't have to. Nobody made you do it tonight. That was all you, bub."

"What was I supposed to do? Let 'im kill you?" he sarcastically smirked. "If I did, I'd still be behind that desk doing the fuckin' paperwork."

"Preferably, no," she smiled. Rollins chuckled and went back to tying his boots and she added, "I just wanted to make sure you're okay. You won't talk the shrink they're gonna make you see, anyway."

"Nope," he agreed, knotting the laces in his fingers with a sharp tug. "But, I'm fine."

Jack dusted a hand down the front of his jeans and sat up. Allison straightened up from the edge of his desk and stepped forward, reaching out her left hand to rest on his shoulder. The exhaustion finally taking over, Rollins breathed deep and slowly exhaled, relieved to be going home and that Addams was, too. She gave his tired muscles under her hand a squeeze and held on for a moment, in the quiet office. Jack bowed his head, turning his chin down to rest his cheek on the back of her hand. He didn't think about why he did it. Maybe it was just the weight of the sympathetic touch that drew him over. Maybe he was just tired and needed to rest.

Whatever it was, Addams didn't pull away from him. Her free hand smoothed across the back of his shoulders, as she turned toward his side. Allison inched in, slipping her hand down his right arm and bending to hug him. Jack carefully moved in his chair, reaching up to hook an arm behind her back and curl his right hand over her forearm, when her fingertips lightly ghosted past his throat and under his chin, as she took her other hand from his shoulder to cradle his head to her.

"You didn't have to," she softly reminded him, bowing down to kiss the top of his head and leaving her chin to set and linger there, her fingertips dragging a soft scratch through the side of his hair. She didn't mean it, he told himself. Not the way he wanted her to. Almost dying does funny things to people. That's all. It was the middle of the night and they were both tired, the high from the adrenaline long gone. There was a comfort in it though, that comes from letting your guard down and knowing you're safe with the other; the gratefulness that you made it through, when you probably shouldn't have. It was something he could never get from Claire or any of the others. They didn't understand. They didn't know how it felt to look Death in the eye and say, "fuck you". They didn't know the rush of being a breath from not coming home. They didn't know what it felt like to live life every day ready to die for someone else or a cause. And he could never explain how it felt; why he did it, the pride of scars and pain, how he craved the high; any of it to them.
Not that he'd ever really tried. But, fuck, he needed this, for however long she gave it to him. And it didn't stop him from wishing it meant as much to her as it did to him.

"I would have, anyway," he told her, feeling a weight in his chest from the simple assurance to her.

It felt like a lifetime, but it could have only been a matter of seconds. He let her go when she let go of him, giving him a warm smile, as her hand erased its earlier line across his shoulders when she stood up again. Rollins replied with an easy grin and subtle nod.

"Go home. Get some sleep, Jack," she gently urged. "You look so tired."

From the door, she made him promise to call her if he needed anything, even if he just needed to talk. He stayed in his chair, back to the door, for a long minute after it had closed. Rollins sighed and shook his head. Wiping a hand down over his face, he pressed his hands into his knees, gingerly pushing himself up to stand. With a low growl, he flexed his back to push away some of the discomfort of moving and reached over his desk for his keys.

Jack didn't go home. He drove to Libby's, like he'd promised her he would after work, letting himself in with his key and shushing and carefully stepping around the cat that came to purr and curl itself around his leg. He didn't bother with the lights. There was enough light from the moon outside to see his way upstairs.

Libby was still asleep. Without a sound, he sat down on the corner of the bed and took off his boots. The tightness and pain in his back made an involuntary groan escape him, as he stripped off his clothes and let them pile on the floor. He did his best not to disturb her, pulling back the covers slowly and sliding into bed. Already in the middle of the mattress, Libby instinctually cuddled up beside him. He pressed a kiss into her hair and she stirred. She hummed before saying his name and asking what time it was.

"It's after 2," he whispered to her. "Go back to sleep."

"It's so late," Libby sleepily noted, the words a little muffled as she nuzzled her cheek to his shoulder. "What happened?"

Jack considered telling her. She knew who he was to SHIELD. She knew the risks. But it wasn't the same. It wasn't worth the frightened worry he'd get from telling her he took three bullets meant for someone else tonight. It wasn't worth the time either of them would stay up, while she tried to needle and dote on him until she was satisfied he was okay. Besides, he'd already been over it with Allison, without the hassle of all the fearfulness and questions he'd get from Libby. It wouldn't be the same and Jack shook his head.

"Nothing, sweetheart," he promised. "Just had to do some paperwork."
Chapter 39

Nov 2013

"Hold the door?"

Jack pressed the button to open the doors on the elevator and Addams slid in, flashing him and the others in the car a grateful smile. She said her thanks and voiced her destination of the 23rd floor for the AI. She adjusted her backpack on her shoulder and watched the floors count up on the display for a moment, before Jack saw her give him a once over in his periphery. He cocked up a brow, to say he’d noticed, and turned his attention down to her.

"How ya holdin’ up?” she wondered.

“Fine,” he nodded, with a grin for her thoughtfulness to ask.

“You’re back today, right?” she checked.

After a few days of administrative duty and the mandatory visit with one of the shrinks, for being involved in the shooting in the hotel garden the other night, Jack was happy to be put back on the active roster. “I am.”

“Good,” she smiled, with a nod, stepping aside to let a couple riders out from behind her, when the elevator stopped. “The shrink get you straightened out? Have a good heart to heart?”

Jack simply raised a brow. “What do you think?”

Allison snickered and shook her head. “How’d the girlfriend take it?”

“Doesn’t know,” he admitted, with his gaze up on the elevator display.

He’d managed to avoid discussing the incident with Libby, so far. Jack was mindful to be dressed, in some way, whenever she was awake around him to conceal the deep bruising from where his body armor had caught the bullets Nikolov put in his back the other night. Libby always had a gentle touch and, when she had run a hand across his back or hugged him, it wasn’t anything that he couldn’t just set his jaw against to hide the tenderness and sting of the injuries.

Beside him, Allison gave a disapproving click of her tongue and sweep of her head. “Shame on you,” she smirked.

“D’you tell your boyfriend?” he threw back at her.

“That nothing happened to me at work that night?” she innocently quipped. “Yeah, he knows.”

Jack snuffled a laugh, shaking his head. “Smartass.”

Allison snickered, as she and Jack both stepped aside to let another rider out. “Chickenshit,” she muttered.

“Excuse you?” he deadpanned, but it didn’t drop the grin from her face.

“You heard me,” Allison assured him, lifting her chin at him. “Why didn’t you tell her?”

Rollins gave a small shake of his head, smirking at her giving him shit. “Not the type. She doesn’t
need to know,” he said. Jack made a point to look down at Allison again, adding, as the elevator came to a stop at her floor, “They aren’t all made of steel like you, Princess.”

Allison wrinkled up her nose at him, before proudly smiling and heading out of the elevator. “See ya later, Jack,” she waved.

Nov 2013

"I'm gonna do it," Jack decided.

Brock looked up, peering over the top of the file folder in his hands, wondering, "What are you gonna d-" Rumlow snapped the folder shut and sat up in his seat, dropping his boots to the floor. "Ohh, no." He shook his head, with an incredulous scowl pulling down his brow. "No no no no no. Not this again. Don't even think about it."

"I'm doing it," he casually affirmed. "I mean it. I'm done dickin' around."

Rumlow tossed aside the file, leaning onto his arms on his desk with his chest pressing into the edge. "What've I told you?"

His head ticked back, as he dared, "You gonna write me up?"

"You know it's against regs," Brock firmly reminded him. "How many times do we have to go over this, Jack?"

"Nobody'd have to know," Jack reasoned out loud.

"I'd know, numb nuts," Rumlow frowned, pointing back at himself. "And who do you think is in charge of disciplining your dumb ass when it gets out? Me, that's who."

"It doesn't have to get out," he knew, if Brock could just keep his mouth shut.

"And when you fuck this up and piss her off?" Brock pressed, his brow rising expectantly. "Huh, smart guy?"

Jack's eyes raked down Brock. "Who says it'd get fucked up?" he challenged, damn near insulted.

"Are you fuckin' kiddin' me?" he begged, Rumlow's face twisting in an impatient grimace, flipping his hand out at Jack. "You want me to start listing names? How many girls you gone through in the last few years, huh?"

"That's a low blow, Bingo," Jack said. His brow knit down in disappointment of the unfortunately on target remark and he pointed a finger at his friend. "That's fuckin' dirty, and you know it."

"Tell me I'm wrong," Brock casually invited, throwing both hands out wide and resting back in his chair again.

"It'd be different," he frowned.

"Oh, that's rich," Brock nodded, with a derisive smirk. He waved a hand Jack's way, before pointing his elbows into the arms of his chair and steepling his fingers. He crossed an ankle over his knee and sarcastically urged, "Please, enlighten me."

"Hey, fuck you, man," Rollins scowled. "Thought you were my friend."
"I am," he nodded. "Which is why I'm telling you, don't do it."

"You wanna know why it'd be different?" Jack asked.

"Yes."

"You wanna know?" he checked, a subtle nod daring Brock to keep trying his patience.

"I have never wanted to hear anything more in. my. life," Rumlow promised.

"Alright."

"Go on then."

"Would you shut the fuck up?" Rollins spat.

He was quiet, just for a moment, before his grin broadened to a Cheshire Cat smile and Rumlow said, "Lay it on me."

Rollins opened his mouth to speak, but stopped. He cocked his head, annoyed at Rumlow trying to keep the last word, and glared at the Commander for a moment. 'I fuckin' hate you, you know that?"

Across from him, Brock sat up again. "I'm sorry," he offered, his face sobering and hand gesturing over to Rollins. "Go on. I'm serious. Let me hear how it'd be different."

"Because it's her."

There was a brief silence between them, both men staring and waiting to see who spoke first. Brock cracked, a snorting breath falling out of his smiling mouth. He blinked, shaking his head. Rumlow looked around, thoughtfully, and Jack knew what was coming.

"That's it?" Rumlow checked, the hint of laughter not quite gone in his voice. "Because it's her? That's all you got? ...The fuck does that even mean, man?" Chuckling, he slumped back into his chair. "You gotta do better than that, Jack. This is your career, here. And hers."

Rollins knew he wasn't crazy. He sat up, resting his elbows into his knees to explain. "It's her," Jack repeated. "Everything about her is different."

"You fuckin' sap," Brock muttered, with a shake of his head.

"I'm serious," Rollins argued. "You know who wouldn't get pissed about disappearing for days, or a couple weeks, on assignment? Her. Who's not gonna bitch about call outs in the middle of the night? Her, because she’s done it. She gets it. There's no lies, no bullshit." Nodding to himself, he figured, "That's what the problem always is. Everyone else just ends up bitching and bustin' my balls for being late again somewhere, heading off without warning, or keeping secrets. Even the ones I tell 'em that I work for SHIELD; bitching and complaining, all the damn time. But not her; not Ally."

“She knows what it's like,” Jack insisted. “I'm tired of these girls, overreacting and freaking out, because every scratch might as well be a bullet hole to them. I don’t want to dumb it down and play it off anymore, like what I do is nothing. I deserve someone, for once, who understands this shit and why we do what we do how we do it. And that’s her.

"She's smart," he started listing, "she's got a helluva sense of humor, and don't get me started on
that body of hers. There's so much more in common here than with any 'a those other women. I'm
telling you, Bingo, she's perfect."

"What about Libby?"

Rollins had to pause, caught off guard. He hadn't expected her to come up in the conversation. Not
that he hadn't considered her in this equation before. Libby was a safe bet. As close to comfortable
as he had ever been with any of the women he'd dated since Claire. There were things they shared
and a kind of understanding they had about who he was and what he was with SHIELD. But he
never saw himself letting her in completely; reading her in about who he was for HYDRA. With
Allison, he wouldn't have to. She was already there with him.

For as good as things were with Libby, he knew she was just a stop gap; someone he'd never be
truly honest with. She wasn't the type of person to approve of the real him, regardless of how little
or much she believed it was just a job or he could try to convince her SHIELD and HYDRA were
basically the same. She was too squeamish for the details of his work for him to talk about most of
his assignments, anyway. But Allison knew. She understood.

It's why he could let Libby go, if he had the chance. The one thing he needed to be whole again
was some truth. Lies destroyed his marriage. It's what made him keep everyone since Claire at
arm's length. The dishonesty in his life. One lie or many, in every aspect of his life since he signed
on with HYDRA. He'd give up Libby for the honesty he'd always gotten from and knew he'd have
with Allison. After that night in the hotel garden, so close to losing Allison and his chance for a
little understanding, he knew he'd give up anything for it.

"Jack," Brock sighed, shaking his head. "I get it. It makes sense. But, come on, let's be realistic
here. It can't happen. Think about it."

"I have," he assured him.

"Hear me out, buddy," Rumlow said, holding up a hand for his patience. "Say she says yes, you
two start dating. You really think you can keep it a secret? There's no grab ass in these halls that'd
go unnoticed, my friend. There's eyes everywhere. And, supposing you do keep it in your pants
while you're on duty, what am I supposed to do if you two break up?

"All of a sudden," he went on, "maybe you got some vengeful ex-girlfriend on your hands, runnin'
her mouth, looking to string you up, huh? You know what I'd have to do to you? What I'd have to
do to her?" His voice took on a new level of seriousness. "We're talking about two of my best
operators, taken offline and, in all likelihood, drummed out 'a this division, maybe even out of the
agency. Out of both agencies, actually. ...Is she worth all of that to you? Would you give up your
rank and career, for her?"

"I'd fuckin' give my life for her," Jack firmly reminded him, holding a hand out, gesturing away
from him toward nothing, referencing the memory of the bullets he shielded her from just last
week.

Brock didn't have a quick response. He sat there, in his chair, studying Jack, while Rollins waited
for Rumlow to throw his next blow. Rumlow drew a hand down over his mouth, rubbing his hand
back and forth over his chin, seeming to think before he spoke again.

"Jack, listen," he implored, letting his hand fall to his lap. "I get it. She's a beautiful woman and,
yeah, she's not like anything else you've ever had. But I can't let you do it. We need you both. This
close to Insight launching? We're looking at going online ahead of schedule. I need your head clear
and all hands on deck.
"Besides," he added, his voice dropping to a tone of concern and reminding Jack, "she's got that banker, or whatever the fuck he is. She's had that guy around for awhile. You really think she'd walk away from whatever she's got going on and risk her career for a fling? ...She's a tough sonuvabitch, but she's still got a heart to break. If you didn't give a shit about that, consider how squared away that girl is, Jack. This job's in her blood, just like you and me. What would she do without it?"

Rollins sat back in his chair, slowly. He let out a long breath. As much as he hated to admit it, Rumlow was right. But it didn't stop the feeling in his gut that he and Allison could make it work. They had similar backgrounds and sense of humor. There was a kind of sympatico, when they worked together on missions. They'd gotten so much closer as friends, after Cabinda and Bangui. The banter they shared kept him on his toes and he liked the shit she gave back to him. He couldn't fathom doing anything to hurt her, and he could imagine everything with her.

"Could you deal with being the asshole that took all of that away from her?" Rumlow pressed, with surprising sincerity.

"I don't want to do any of that," Jack conceded.

"Then leave her alone," Brock earnestly told him.

Jack looked up at him and shifted in his seat. "What am I supposed to do, huh?" he wondered. "I see her damn near everyday. The closer we get to Insight launching, the more Pierce is jerking us around; sending us out on his little errands... She keeps pulling assignments with Delta and-" He stopped his string of complaints, for a frustrated breath. "She's driving me fuckin' nuts, Bingo." He clenched his hand. "It's killing me. Right there, in front of me. I can't look at her; can't touch her or tell her. You don't know what it's like."

Rumlow gave a small nod, but was silent for a moment, as he looked back at Rollins. "It's a game to her, Jack," he assured him, but not without a subtle underline of sympathy. "She's fuckin' with you." Rumlow straightened up in his chair, pushing aside the folder on his desk, with a quiet sigh before noting, “It’s late. We’re done for the day.” He met Jack’s gaze again, telling him, “Go home to Libby. Give her another look. Maybe there’s more there than you’re giving her credit for. But, trust me, big guy...leave Addams alone. It’s not worth the damage it’d do, to everyone involved.”
Dec 2013

"Hey, Jack!"

Rollins looked up from the supply inventory in his hand.

"Lancaster is looking for you," Greer said, tipping his head back toward the door out of the hangar.

Jack let out an inconvenienced breath and nodded. He passed off the list to Dennison, telling him, "Finish this up. I'll be right back."

"No problem," Dennison nodded once.

Rollins turned away from the line of gear and ammo lined near the downed ramp of the Quinjet. Checking his watch, he muttered a profanity at the thought of how his stepping away to meet the Colonel might delay his team's liftoff. Walking through the corridor away from the flight line, Jack couldn't figure what Jim Lancaster might need him for. Not when Rumlow was onsite.

The secretary outside Lancaster's office told him to go in, as soon as Rollins entered the outer office. He nodded his thanks to the older woman and went in to the next office, after a quick knock to announce himself. The head of the Northern Colorado installation was seated behind his desk and stood when Jack came in. He extended his hand across the desk, in lieu of exchanging salutes, and motioned for Rollins to take a seat.

"Jack, good to see you," Lancaster smiled, easing back down into his seat as Rollins sat.

"Same here," he nodded. "What can I do for you, Jimmy?"

"There's been...a situation," he said, folding his hands in front of him on his desk.

Jack's chin raised and brow wrinkled slightly, curious about what he meant. "What kind of situation?"

"There's a traitor inside SHIELD," Lancaster told him.

"There's a shit ton of 'em, Jimmy," Jack smirked. "You're looking at one. Wanna try a bit of specificity?"

Jim snorted, nodding along. "Does the name Scott Lucas mean anything to you?"

Rollins shrugged, with a thoughtful frown. "Never heard of him. Is he the guy?"

"He's a Technical Engineer on Project Insight," Lancaster explained. "And he's the tip of the iceberg."

"How's that?"

"He was persuaded to give us a list of names of his co-conspirators," Jim elaborated. "People he was in league with to disrupt Insight and expose HYDRA within SHIELD. He gave us 23 names, but we have a feeling there's more. What he was talking about doing couldn't be done with so few. We've started bringing in some of the people he named, trying to figure out how far this goes and get ahead of the plan."
"Sounds like you've got it under control," Rollins noted. "Why tell me?"

"Because, of all the players in this conspiracy he named," he began, "the most surprising, and dangerous one, was Brock Rumlow."

It took a moment for him to process the name. Jack blinked, an incredulous smirk coming to his lips, when he said, "You're fucking kidding me, right? You don't think-"

"That's why you're here, Commander," Jim told him, the casualness of the conversation disappearing quickly. "That's why you're all here."

"Sir?" Jack questioned, bristling and his tone becoming defensive, not just for his friend and team, but for himself.

"Tell me, Jack," Lancaster invited, "have you noticed anything unusual or suspicious about Cmdr. Rumlow?"

"For fuck's sake, Jimmy," Rollins grimaced, "you can't honestly think that Bingo would betray HYDRA."

"So, is that a no?" he pressed, studying Jack carefully.

"God damn right it is," he nodded.

"Any unusual changes in his demeanor?" Lancaster went on. "Has he made any concerning comments, directly or in passing?"

"No," Jack firmly answered.

"How’s his personal life?" he wondered. "Any new acquaintances or relationships? I understand it’s been a long time since Evy was around. Anyone new recently?"

Rollins’ patience was wearing thin. "No one regular, that I’m aware of," he said, through a tight jaw. Although, at this point, if Brock even had introduced him to someone lately, he was having his doubts about whether or not he’d share that information with Lancaster now.

The Colonel held his hands open, palms to the ceiling, excusing himself and his line of questioning by saying, "I have to ask, Jack. It's a precarious situation we're in here. A man confesses a plan to dismantle everything that we've worked for 70 years to see thrive and names a high ranking officer; a man capable of inflicting serious damage to this organization, as one of his allies... Well, we have a lot of questions."

"He confesses," Jack repeated, with a sneer. "I know how confessions come, Jimmy. You beat the shit out of guy long enough and he'll tell you anything you want to hear; anything to save his own ass. Especially some engineer with no training."

"Duress creates desperation," he conceded. "That's why we'll be asking the Commander our questions personally."

"Oh, come off it, Jimmy," he argued. "Brock's no more a traitor to HYDRA than you or me."

"Then he has nothing to worry about," Lancaster airily agreed. "In the meantime, you'll assume command and carry on with STRIKE Team Delta's assignment."

"Carry on wi-" Jack shook his head. "You're really doing this," he realized.
"Lancaster nodded. "Cmdr. Rumlow is already in custody. You and your squad will continue to Kiev and follow the mission outline. We'll conduct our interrogation and see for ourselves where Bingo's loyalties lie."

"And then what?" Rollins asked.

"Any threats to HYDRA's security will be eliminated," he answered. "You know that. If we have to, we'll orchestrate an acceptable explanation for the loss of the Commander; something tragic to stir the troops at SHIELD or a reminder for the ones with HYDRA, if we find any credibility to Lucas' claims." Lancaster gave him a discerning once over, before asking, "Is there anything else you have to say about Rumlow?"

Jack inhaled an even breath. "No, Sir," he swept his head.

Seeming to pick up on Jack's hostility, Jimmy added, "Jack, you know I don't want to do this. But whatever happens now is up to Bingo. He's been a good soldier for years. If he still is one, he'll be back with the squad as soon as possible." He rested back a little further into his chair. "Until we figure this out, I expect you to keep this conversation in the strictest of confidences, report any suspicious behavior or comments, and continue to perform your duties admirably."

"Yeah," Jack nodded, rising from his seat. "Sure."

With his fist raised to the door, Jack hesitated. He shook his head at himself and knocked, dropping his head to listen for an answer. He heard the direction to come in and opened the door. Inside the office, Jack twisted around to make sure the door latched behind him. Rumlow looked up from his paperwork, watching Jack cross the open space of his office to stand in front of his desk.

"Have a seat," Brock offered, gesturing with the end of the pen in his hand toward one of the open chairs in front of his desk. He turned his attention down to the papers on his desk again, seeming to look for where he’d left off before adding a signature to one page and saying, “Thanks for taking care of inspections this mornin’. I’m a little behind.”

Jack watched him close one folder, put it aside, and open another. “No problem,” Rollins nodded. There was a short pause, before he checked, “Anything else I can do to help?”

“No,” Brock swept his head. “Thanks though. Just a lot of emails and bullshit to sift through.”

Rollins studied Rumlow as he worked, for a minute. He hadn’t heard from Lancaster, or anyone else, about the findings of Brock’s detainment and subsequent interrogation. Looking at him now, Jack didn’t see anything he didn’t always see from his friend, except he looked noticeably tired. He hadn’t seen him this run down in awhile. But figuring what he had just been through, the exhaustion was understandable.

As Brock turned to the next page of the file he was reading, Jack found the nerve to ask, “So, what the fuck happened in Colorado?”

Rumlow stopped, the point of the pen in his hand lifting ever so slightly from the paper he was signing. Brock exhaled, laying down his pen and moving, slowly, to settle in to a deep lean back in his chair. He rubbed his fingers back and forth across his mouth and chin, giving Jack a discerning once over.

“Lancaster didn’t talk to you?” he carefully questioned.
“He did,” Jack’s nodded. “That’s why I’m asking you.”

Brock slowly nodded. “I’m kinda curious to hear what Jimmy had to say,” he said, “before I give my version.”

That was fair, and Jack told him, “He said you and some engineer from Insight were planning on outing HYDRA and bringing the whole thing down.”

Brock nodded again, agreeing, “That’s what I heard, too.” He looked Jack over again. “What do you think?”

“That he’s full of shit,” he bluntly answered.

“Thank you,” Rumlow sincerely said.

“Because that’s the truth, right?” Rollins pressed. “Because you’re not a traitor, are you?”

“I’m not,” he swept his head.

Jack looked him in the eye, judging for himself. He gave a single nod, accepting what Brock said as truth. He read the subtle relief in Brock’s expression and felt a little guilty for ever doubting him. “What happened out there?” he asked.

“Got the shit beat outta me, that’s what,” Brock snorted, although the noise didn’t sound amused by any means. Jack smirked anyway, at his friend’s lopsided and tired grin. “Fuckers cracked a couple ribs,” he complained and waved a hand limply up the side of his neck, “cut me up and kicked me around.” He sneered, shaking his head, muttering, “Fuckin’ cocksuckers.”

“You alright?” he checked, catching sight of a newly scarring cut and some bruising near Brock’s ear that disappeared down the side of his neck and under the collar of his BDU shirt.

“Fine,” he growled. “Not that they weren’t tryin’. ” He sat forward again, moving gingerly, and took up his pen. “Havin’ a hell of a time breathing, though. If you don’t mind, I think I’m gonna take a few steps back for a day or two, let you take the lead on things.”

“Sure,” Jack understood. “Not a problem.”

“Something’s wrong, big guy,” he warned. “I don’t know what, but I feel it. Somethin’ ain’t sittin’ right.” The Commander shook his head. “This bullshit with this mook from Insight, the names he dropped.”

“Do we have a problem?” Jack asked.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, scratching at the side of his jaw. “But I gotta find out.”

“What do you need?” he offered.

Rumlow shook his head. “Nothing from you, for now,” he told him. “Lancaster’s overseeing this. We’re keeping it small. Might need some help straightening this out later, though.”

“What are you going to do?” Jack wondered.

“Run down the people this rat named,” Brock firmly told him. “See who’s playing for who and do some fuckin’ work, if we have to. This close to Insight launching? We can’t take any chances, and the brass knows it.”
Jack nodded his agreement. “Think you’ll find anything?”

“I don’t know,” he tipped his head in consideration. “It’s kind of a hard story to swallow. Personally, I think this engineer, or whatever the hell he was, panicked and started running his mouth, making up whatever he could to try and save his own ass. Some ‘a the people he named, like me?” Brock smirked, with a dismissive snort. “Come on.”

“The hell was he thinkin’,” Rollins shook his head, “naming you?”

“Panic? Misdirection?” Brock suggested. “First name that came to mind that might take some ‘a the attention off him? Who knows? And he’s dead now,” he added, “so it’s not like I got much to follow-up on. Just the list he gave.”

“Who’s on it?” Jack wondered, thinking this was a perfect time for Rogers to be named.

But Rumlow shook his head, saying, “I told ya, Jimmy’s playing this one close to the vest. We won’t be releasing anything from the investigation of the list, until it’s time to deal with that particular problem. The fewer people that know, the better, for now. But trust me, you’ll be one of the first to know.”
"Who's the girl? She's pretty."

Jack lifted his chin, forgetting the money in his hand to look over to where Allison inclined her head. "Oh," he distractedly said, returning to thumbing out a couple of bucks to tip the bartender. "Libby."

"Libby?" Addams repeated, trying it out. "That sounds a little sweet for you. Giving up on girls with names that sound like strippers?"

Rollins shrugged, considering she might be right about Libby and pocketing his cash. "Need a normal one every now and then," he reasoned. "Balances out the crazy."

"Thought you liked 'em crazy," Allison teased, giving him a nudge in the arm, from her perch on the bar stool.

"It's getting a little old," Rollins admitted, with a quiet laugh.

It actually was. Women who were only compatible with his lifestyle for so long, ones he didn't find a deep enough attachment to to really tell them who he was and what he did for a living, pretty young things wanting more of his time than he had interest to give. The bachelor life wasn't always what it was cracked up to be and ever since Claire, he was more than a little gun shy to let anyone in that close again. That's why he gave Libby a shot. It was getting old.

"You mean," she corrected, "you're getting a little old? Can't keep up?"

"Oh, I keep up just fine," he winked, taking a sip of his whiskey double. Swallowing, Rollins shook his head, giving Allison a quick once over while she was looking across the room at Libby. "Nice dress, by the way. BDUs out at the cleaners?"

Allison laughed. "Believe it or not, Jack, I'm a girl. We wear dresses, sometimes."

Jack hummed, with a nod. "Just wondering where you're hiding your weapon," he mused, with a fiendish grin.

He knew better, but a couple of stiff drinks and the party atmosphere had him feeling playful. And it was a nice dress. He figured she'd spent a few good dollars on it, the way it perfectly hugged her curves proving it was worth every penny. Jack didn't try to hide or excuse himself when she caught him looking.

"Eyes up here, Jack," she told him, pointing a finger at her face. "I'm not dumb enough to shoot myself in the tits. So, don't even think that's where it is."

"Leave it to the imagination then?" Rollins suggested, quirking up a brow.

"Whatever gets you through the night," Addams shrugged, smiling in front of her drink.

Jack lifted his own glass, taking a sip as he drank in the sight of her smile. God, he loved her smile. Just a second's worth of it could change his whole day.

"How come you and me were never a thing?" he had to wonder, giving her a leisurely once over.
"You mean, besides you never asking?" she snorted.

Rollins hummed, with a single nod. "A pretty thing like you," he considered, "and so absolutely lethal. You could pull a man's beating heart right out of his chest and he wouldn't even complain, but only because it was you."

She'd already done it to him, she just didn't know it. Rollins' jaw tightened a little, when she gave a subtle lift of her chin to guide his focus toward Rumlow across the room, saying, "Thank you, Jack, but rules are rules. Command frowns on fraternization. And I've got too much to lose."

He nodded to himself, trying to think how many times he'd been on the brink of telling her; of pissing on regulations for once and just taking the chance to ask her to dinner with him. They both had a lot to lose, but god damn if he didn't think sometimes that she was worth the risk. Rollins turned his gaze from Brock back to Allison. Her reminder and the glimpse of Rumlow in the crowd shut him down.

"So, where's you're banker then, or whatever the hell he is?" Jack asked, not that he really cared.

"He had a conference to attend," she casually explained, before taking the last drink of her cocktail.

"Probably enjoying his vacation from you," Rollins smirked, falling back on his sarcasm to distract himself from thinking about that she had come to the Christmas party alone and wondering what kind of an asshole would let her.

"So, Libby. How're you getting her to stick around, again?" Allison asked, jerking her thumb towards his date. "Shock collar?"

"Cute," he snorted, in spite of the bit of insult he took from her comment. "So, what's he see in you anyway?"

"See," she began, with a discerning squint in her eye, "you're trying to get under my skin, but, the sad truth for you is, you won't be getting under anything of mine, Jack." A mischievous grin curled the side of his mouth at the thought of being under or over her and, with a devilish smile, Allison added, "But you are more fun when you're drinking."

"Smartass," Rollins chuckled, proudly, into his drink. He always did like going a few rounds with her. "You mean to tell me he actually likes you mouthin' off and pushing him around?"

"Actually, he was in the Navy," Allison casually noted. "He gives as good as he gets. He keeps up."

"A squid, huh?" Jack considered, cocking up a thoughtful brow and giving the banker a little more credit than he ever had before. "Think that makes him tough enough to tolerate all your lip?"

"Ohh, Jack," Allison smiled, giving him a soft pat on the arm, his eyes momentarily drawn down to her touch. "It just might be my lips that keep him around. But you'll never know."

Rollins chuckled at her wink, shaking his head. Fuck, she was killing him tonight. "Careful you don't fall from that pedestal you got yourself on, Princess. It's a pretty far drop."

"Honestly, Jack," she playfully sighed, "I don't bring him around because I don't want you to get jealous. I mean, he's not even here and you can't stop thinking about him. Imagine if you actually met."

"Right," Rollins scoffed, with a wicked smile. "I'd break him in two."
"I don't know, Jack," Allison teased. "He's a pretty tough guy."

Jack put his hand down on the bar, leaning in close to look Allison in the eye and quietly promise, "Whoever he is, he ain't bigger and badder than me, sweetheart."

"Hate to break it to you, Jackie," Allison purred, with pouting lips, giving Rollins a once over and running her finger along the back of his tie to grab it by the end, "but he'd be the baddest motherfucker in the valley." She snapped her jaws at his chin, slow to bring her lidded eyes back up to his from his mouth and smiling back at him.

Rollins nodded, moving back slowly and smoothing a hand down his tie to loose it from around her finger. He wondered for a second if she knew what she did to him. His eyes still set on hers, Jack took another sip of whiskey. "Let me know when you want to trade up."

He left it at that, not trusting himself to bend the rules of their little game any further. Rollins walked away, giving Rumlow a clap on the arm and a quick grin with his nod 'hello', as the two men passed each other. He rejoined Libby and the group of his teammates and their wives and girlfriends he'd left her with to get his drink. Jack was too late to hear the end of the story Dennison was telling, but smiled while the others laughed. He slipped his arm around Libby's slender waist and bowed to dot a kiss on her shoulder when she leaned into his side.

As the group’s conversation carried on, Jack took a casual look around over the edge of his glass at his lips. He caught sight of Addams speaking with Rumlow and he did a small double take. Jack’s posture involuntarily stiffened, studying the two talking and trying to decide what the conversation was about. He was keenly aware of how unprofessional he and Allison had been behaving at the bar and wondered now if the Commander had seen. The pair looked friendly enough, their expressions and demeanor not fitting the mold of an officer disciplining a subordinate. Rollins relaxed a little, tuning back into the conversation in front of him and flashing a small grin at the loving squeeze of Libby’s arm around him.

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Dec 2013

Sometimes a guy just needs a drink alone, even if he can't be by himself. Barny's was on the way. It was only a few turns to deviate off his regular path home and the noise would be a welcome distraction. The moderate crowd of a Tuesday night was sufferable.

Set up on a stool near the end of the bar, Jack took his whiskey neat and kept to himself. In his pocket, his phone buzzed, notifying him that Charlie Team's Second Squad had submitted their AAR for review. Rollins wouldn't bother with approving the report until the morning, but he opened it for something to occupy a few minutes of his time.

"Hi."

The unfamiliar voice made his jaw set. Jack turned his eyes to his left, taking in the attractive, auburn haired woman perching herself on the stool beside him. She wore a pleasant smile and her green eyes were bright and hopeful.

Jack gave her a subtle nod, out of courtesy. "Hey."

She stuck out her hand, eagerly offering, "I'm Celeste."

Rollins wasn't in the mood to entertain, but shook her hand nevertheless, simply telling her, "Jack." and going back to his phone.
"I couldn't help but notice you look a little serious for so early in the week," she noted. "What's on your mind?"

Jack looked over again, a grin flinching politely into the corner of his mouth for her effort. Beyond her, he clocked the trio of women, in their smart business suits and skirts, sipping candy colored cocktails and failing miserably at trying not to stare at their friend. He turned his attention back to Celeste and nodded to himself. "Nothing to worry yourself over," he told her.

There was a time he'd play the game; let her get the win for crossing the room to pick him up. Before Libby, if he had seen her first, he probably would have made the move and charmed her away from her girlfriends for a night. But, regardless of how pretty or playful she was, he wouldn't do that to Libby, even if different circumstances had him in a different mood tonight.

He'd stopped at the bar figuring the sooner he got a drink the better. It was a long day. Routine bullshit wasn't the problem. He had enough work to keep him occupied, but he was nagged by the calendar. It was a year to the day that he'd failed in Cabinda; that he'd lost his friend and got his scar. Rollins didn't realize for a moment that he was rubbing the side of his jaw, feeling the jagged line that dropped from his lip.

"So," she smiled, lightly touching a fingertip to the subdued patch on the sleeve of his BDU jacket lying on the bar under his arm, the back of her fingers grazing his forearm in the process, "SHIELD, huh? What do you do there?"

Ahead of him, Jack smirked at the subtle eye roll from the bartender. The man turned to the shelves of liquor to tidy up some and Jack shook his head, "It's classified."

The curtness in his tone didn't dissuade the woman, who smiled and nodded approvingly. "Sounds exciting," she mused, and Jack rolled his own eyes, taking a sip of his drink.

"Yeah, something like that," he muttered, unlocking his phone again. Jack tipped his hand to turn the screen enough for him to keep reading, but assuring the inquisitive woman beside him could not.

She pointed a finger at his glass, asking, "Whiskey?" He gave the question a distracted nod and Celeste pressed her luck. "How do you take it?"

Rollins let out a quiet exhale, lifting his eyes from his screen to look tiredly ahead. "Alone," he answered, dryly.

Beside him, there was a soft huff, as she finally took the hint. His head lolled to the side, giving her an unquestionably uninterested, if not mildly annoyed, expression. She leveled her eyes, grabbed her purse and drink, and slipped off the bar stool to go back to her friends. Jack took up his glass, finishing the last of the brown liquor in one swallow and tipping the tumbler to the barkeep nearby to signal he was ready for another. The bartender came back, grabbing the bottle of Jameson on his way.

With a smirk, the bartender observed, "Cold, but effective. She'll be licking that wound for an hour or so."

Rollins watched him pour the next drink, grumblingly deciding, "I seriously doubt that."

"You okay, Commander?" the barkeep casually wondered, twisting the bottle to finish his pour.

Jack took up his drink and nodded once. The bartender caught on and gave Rollins an understanding smile, before moving down the bar to another customer. With his attention back on
the screen in his hand, Jack found where he'd left off in the report. He read for a few more minutes and was finished.

Rollins backed out of the report, locking his phone and setting it aside on his jacket. The assignment was simple enough. He only needed to read it once to know they'd done it right. He turned his attention down to the tumbler in front of him, giving it a twist under his fingertips. Next to his arm, his phone buzzed in a call. He picked up the device, staring at the name on the screen before deciding to answer.

"Yeah."

"Hey."

Jack grinned at the easy reply. "What can I do for you, Princess?"

"Where'd you get off to?" she asked. "I hollered at you in the garage."

His brow pulled down in thought, not recalling anything. "Must not've heard you."

"Obviously," she sarcastically agreed. "You got out of there pretty fast. Everything alright?"

"Yeah," he said, his glass paused just in front of his lips to answer before a drink. "What'd you need?"

There was a pause, before Allison spoke up again. "I was thinking about what day it is," she carefully offered. "I remember."

Jack nodded to himself. Of course, she did. She seemed to always know what was going on, with her team or anyone else she knew. Not that he didn't appreciate the call. If there was one person he didn't mind hearing about it from tonight, it was her. He even brushed off Rumlow's invitation for company. Brock had picked up on Jack's mood, before formation even started, and gave him room for the day. Rollins probably should have taken up his offer for a little extra sparring at the end of the day, a healthier outlet for the stress than what he was up to on his own, but he had already made up his mind before lunch about how he'd end the night.

"Where are you?" Allison asked.

He didn't see the harm in telling her, "Barny's."

"You out with Libby?"

"No."

There was a hum from the other end of the call, before she told him, "I just got home. Let me change and I can be there in 15."

"Don't worry about it," he shook his head and took a sip.

"Jack," she complained, with a gentle sigh. "An anniversary like this, nobody should-"

"But I'd rather," he interrupted.

"Drinking alone is a little cliché, even for you, don't you think?" she teased.

He smirked at the sarcasm, his head bobbing in agreement. "Cliché. Classic. What's the difference?" he quipped, and her subtle laugh put a smile on his face, in spite of himself.
"Why don't you let me come down there and-"

"It's alright, Princess," Rollins assured her.

The lull was a bit longer, before she pointed out, "You know it wasn't your fault. ...You don't have to be by yourself. You've got friends who are here for you."

"I appreciate it, Ally," he nodded. "I do. But not tonight."

"You are a stubborn son of a bitch, aren't you?" Allison decided, and he could pick out the smile in her voice.

"Yes, ma'am," he proudly agreed, taking another drink.

"Do me a favor?" she checked.

Jack set down his empty glass. "For you?" he grinned. "Name it."

"Go see her, Jack," she said. "Go see Libby. You don't have to tell her, but you should have some company tonight, okay?"

Rollins considered the empty glass on the bar. In the pause, Allison added a "please" and he nodded to himself again. "Sure, Princess."

He could hear the satisfaction in her voice, when she thanked him and told him to take care of himself. When he hung up the phone, he stared at it in his hand for a long minute. The bartender came back down and asked I'd he needed another drink. Jack shook his head, asking for the check instead. He unlocked his phone and sent a message to Libby, asking what she was doing.
“Dammit,” Jack complained, through grit teeth, pressing the fingers of his left hand to the back of his neck.

“What do you want?” The man put up his arms, ducking behind his palms open and turned to Rollins.

Jack pulled his hand back, eyeing the blood on his fingers. “You little fuck,” he growled, reaching down to grab the man by the front of his shirt to yank him back to his feet.

“Please,” he begged. “I have a kid with my fiancé.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Rollins ordered, shoving him to sit in the chair. “For god’s sake, be a man.” He looked over his shoulder, at hearing Haney come back in to the room. “D’you find it?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, holding up his hand to show Jack the department issued M&P that every SHIELD Security Officer carried.

Jack wiped his hand back along his neck again, feeling the sting as the cut there was pulled under his touch. He glanced down at the corner of the coffee table. He nodded for Haney to look as well, noting the streak of blood there. Rollins and the man had fallen, when Jack tackled the man as he tried to run when he discovered the two men waiting in his apartment for him. Jack’s neck had caught the corner of the table, when the man shot his arm up under Jack’s jaw, trying to shove Rollins off of him. Without further direction, Haney disappeared into the kitchen to find something to clean up the evidence.

“Tell me about your friend Scott Lucas, Sergeant,” Jack ordered, as he pulled a pair of latex gloves from his jacket pocket.

“He- He’s a technical engineer with Project Insight,” the man said, gulping down a breath. “I’m assigned to physical security of the Insight servers. I’d see him coming and going. We’d say hello, bullshit about baseball, or something. That’s all. I don’t know the guy, I swear.”

“What do you know about HYDRA?” Rollins wondered, adjusting the wrist of the glove he’d just put on his left hand.

“HYDRA?” he questioned.

Jack cocked his head in annoyance, insisting, “You know why we’re here.”

“I know you guys are finished,” he spat, raking his eyes down Jack.

Rollins grinned, pulling on his other glove. “There we go,” he smirked. “Finally, a bit of spine.”

“Fuck you,” the man sneered.

“Atta boy,” Jack nodded along, in mocking approval, glancing to see Haney coming back with a bottle of cleaner and a few paper towels.

“Go ahead and kill me,” the man shook his head. “I’m not gonna give you pricks anything.”
“Relax, Sarge,” Rollins casually told him. “We’re not going to kill you.” He held his hand back for Haney to pass him the man’s gun. Shifting it to his right hand, Jack thumbed off the weapon’s safety and bent down to point the barrel up under the man’s chin, telling him, “This is a suicide.”

“Jesus Christ,” he breathed, his eyes widening with fear and sweat beginning to show on his brow, as Jack asked him about HYDRA again. It was quiet for a long moment. The only sound in the dimly lit apartment coming from Haney’s footsteps back into the kitchen to put the cleaner away and the man’s ragged breathing.

“Shh,” Jack quietly coaxed. “Calm down.” He reached out his free hand, picking up the picture frame on the table next to the man’s chair. He tilted the picture into the light from the kitchen to see better, figuring, “This your kid?” The man nodded and Jack handed him the frame. He pressed the gun a little harder, lifting the man’s chin a little higher, offering, “Tell me who else is involved...and you’ll get to see your boy grow up to play little league, maybe finally get around to marrying his mom.”

Rollins felt the subtle push back on the gun, as the man swallowed, his dampened eyes strained down against the stiffness of his posture from Jack’s threat, staring at the photograph of his fiancé and son in his hands. “No,” the man said, giving a tight shake of his head. “What you’re doing? What HYDRA’s doing?” He shook his head again. “No one’s safe. I’m not talking. Not when there’s a chance we can still stop you.”

Jack gave a small nod of understanding and a disappointed click of his tongue. In one quick movement, Rollins grabbed the man’s right hand and jerked it up to hold next to his own, simultaneously pulling the trigger. The man’s jaw fell slack, as his head dropped forward and lolled over to rest near his shoulder. Jack put the gun in its owner’s right hand, curling the limp digits to wrap into place around the grip and over the trigger before letting the hand fall into the man’s lap. The body and gun would be found resting in a natural way and the hand would test positive for GSR, after Jack had forced the man’s hand onto the gun at the last second. The scene was perfectly set.

“Let’s get out of here,” Jack told Haney, inclining his head toward the apartment’s patio door.

“Thought he’d do it,” Mark shook his head. “The way he tried to run? Didn’t think he had the nerve not to.”

“Me, too,” Rollins agreed, pulling open the sliding glass door.

He slid the door shut, just as there was a knock on the apartment’s front door and a worried voice asking if everything was alright. They waited to take off their gloves until they’d let themselves out the gate of the privacy fence around the patio and had shut it behind them. Haney and Rollins walked away through the parking lot and around the block to where Haney was parked. They wadded their gloves up and stuffed them in the paper bag of the drivethru they had hit up for dinner. Haney added the paper towels he’d used to wipe up Jack’s blood and crumpled the bag down to throw away somewhere away from the crime scene.

While Haney started the car, Rollins took out his phone to call Lancaster. In a way, Jack was relieved and a little optimistic to not have gotten any new names to report. Maybe they were actually tightening the loop and the conspiracy to overthrow HYDRA inside SHIELD wasn’t as worrisome as they originally thought it could be. Several names had already been scratched off the list of suspects, all of them confirming HYDRA’s suspicions of them by refusing to give up their fellow traitors. While HYDRA cleaned house, nobody made any moves against them. Maybe they had already dismantled the plan enough to stop it.
As Haney drove them back to DC, Jack considered how quickly things were being handled. Lancaster was orchestrating the response to suspected breaches, while Rumlow was backgrounding and trying to verify the others on the list Lucas had given them. A few duplicate names had been squeezed out of dying men by Lancaster’s handpicked enforcers. Targets like them, ones named by multiple sources, were dispatched passively or from a distance, to limit suspicion of any others. One was put down by Addams just the other day, a middle aged man who worked at a SHIELD data archive site in Virginia, set up to look like a heart attack after she’d slipped a toxin into his daily coffee at Starbucks. A few soldiers, working in the same squad were scheduled for a training accident tomorrow. At the rate they were going, and barring any new discoveries, there wouldn’t be any more names on the list by the end of the month.

Jan 2014

Jack curled his fingers a little tighter, when he felt the brown paper bag shift in his grip. Rapping the knuckles of his free hand on the office door, he hummed to himself, wondering if it was as bad as he heard. From the other side of the door, he heard the muffled approval for him to come in. Rollins shut the door behind him, as Allison shifted to settle back into her chair.

"Holy shit," he sarcastically marveled, approaching her desk. Jack sat down in one of the empty chairs in front of her, giving her a critical once over. "Still sick? I heard you looked like the living dead today, but- Fuck. That's an understatement."

She looked miserable. Her uniform was squared away, as always, but there was a tiredness in her eyes, a touch of paleness to her skin, and a little redness at the tip of her nose. Jack wasn't without sympathy for her choosing to gut it out at work. He shouldn't have taken the swing at her, but, considering why he came to her office in the first place, it'd be even more out of character if he didn't.

Allison leaned back a little further, kicking her boots up onto the corner of her desk to cross her ankles. "You're such a charmer, Jack." Allison feebly smiled, with a small clearing of her sore throat. "Did you walk all the way down the hall just to pay me compliments?"

The paper bag he had brought in was resting on his knee as he sat. "Just got back from the range," he told her. Jack reached out to set the bag on her desk, as far across as he could stretch without actually leaving his seat. "Came to pick up the paperwork, while Bingo's out of town, and drop this off."

"Poisoned?" she smiled, with a discerning squint in one eye.

"Of course," Jack shrugged, as if she should know better than to ask. He cracked a smile and...
moved on. "How are the stats coming?"

Allison crinkled the bag closed again, putting it aside. "Ready for the printer," she said, reaching over to click a couple of icons on her screen. The printer warmed up on the long, wooden cabinet behind her and Allison asked, "Having fun pretending to be the big boss, Lieutenant Commander Rollins?"

Rollins' head ticked back and his shoulders shook with his suppressed chuckle. "Has it's perks," he nodded. "But Bingo can keep all the fuckin' paperwork and bullshit."

She smiled, glancing over her shoulder at the progress of her printing, Allison's chuckle stirred up an uncomfortable sounding cough. She cleared her throat, when the small fit passed, and quipped, "You always did get off on telling people what to do."

He pointed at her, giving her a knowing look, saying, "Easy there, smartass. I bring you soup, out of the kindness of my cold, dead heart and, now, I'm doing you a favor, coming down here instead of making you come to the briefing room at 1600."

"I don't have to go?" she checked, and Rollins was amused by the hopefulness in the question and her expression.

"I don't want your diseased ass hacking and breathing all over me," he scoffed, standing up to walk around her desk when the printer stopped.

"Oh, thank god," Allison sighed.

Rollins gathered the pages off the printer, giving them a quick once over as he fanned them in his hands. "Just eat your damned soup and keep whatever plague you're patient zeroing for to yourself, alright?" he told her, looking down at her with a crooked grin. He would just make some notes from her paperwork and add her parts for her to the quarterly assessment meeting between the STRIKE team and squad leaders, when it was time to address Echo’s performance.

Allison puckered her lips. "Give us a kiss, Jack," she teased.

He wasn't sure how he kept a straight face, but he was proud of himself for not taking her up on the offer. It was probably the disappointing reality that he knew it was just a joke. But he couldn't help the mischievous thought of what would happen if he did it. Hell, even as obviously sick as she was, he still considered it. There was something endearing about the little bit of vulnerability he saw in her when she snifflted.

"Don't even try it," Jack playfully warned. He reached down, palming his hand over her head, and gave her a soft push away. "I'll call the fuckin' CDC to quarantine your ass, if you do."

"You'd be stuck in there with me," she winked, stifling the small cough her laughter provoked.

Fuck. She was just twisting the knife in his gut now. How could she make the idea of being stuck in quarantine with her, of all places, sound so god damn appealing? Allison had no idea how cruel she was.

Jack grabbed an empty file folder from the box beside the printer and shuffled the papers inside, as he checked, "You're what, four more days in rotation?"

Instead of speaking, Allison shook her head, with a pathetic frown, and held up her hand, splaying out all five fingers for her answer. Rollins hummed and nodded, thoughtfully. She didn't need to be here, but she was too stubborn and dedicated not to be. But she especially didn't need to be
deployed in the rundown state she was in.

Walking past her, he gave her arm a gentle smack with the folder, telling her, "Let me know if you get an activation before then." Headed for the door, he pointed back at her with the file, and added, "I'll pick up any ops for you with your guys, 'til you're back on your feet again. You know my numbers. Call me."

"What would Libby think," Allison mischievously wondered, picking at her nail, "me calling you in the middle of the night, for a...duty call?"

Jack snorted, shaking his head. "That's cute, but she knows better than to ask questions. Even if it's you calling in the middle of the night."

"Huh," she marveled. "Well, ain't I special."

"You're somethin'," he sarcastically agreed. "If you're still alive by Friday, game's at my place, since Bingo's gone. Feel better, you plague rat."

"You do love me, don't you, Jack?" she smiled, her head lolling to the side to see him open the door.

Rollins opened his mouth to say something, taking a moment to look back at her, but stopped. Here was a perfect opportunity to admit it, even if she thought it was a joke. He snorted, shaking his head at her, knowing there'd be no coming back from it, if he did. Jack settled on, "Shut up and eat your fuckin' soup, Princess."

"I love you, too, Jack," Allison called after him, as he stepped out of her office.

As the door swung shut behind him, Jack smiled to himself, yelling back, "Shut up. Soup."

He liked the sound of those words coming from her, even if she was just being a smartass.
"Oh, my god. Are you going to actually sit at the table and have breakfast with me?" she teased.

Jack had a habit of rushing out the door. His time as a Ranger and his service with SHIELD had him hardwired to wake up every day at 0500, without an alarm. Rollins never slept in, even out of rotation; even after a late night. If he wore out through the day, there was always coffee or a quick nap when he was at home, if it was absolutely necessary. And he was never late. He always had time to get in his run and still have time to shower before morning formation.

But the mornings he woke up next to Libby always went the same way. On days they both had to work, she’d wake up early with him and dress to have time to get herself home and get ready for the day. If he was at her place, he'd whisper for her to go back to sleep, and fail at least once to get out of bed without her pulling him back. He didn't mind. Getting in his full run was second place for waking him up, compared to a morning roll in the sheets with Libby.

Libby changed the program on the coffee maker to 5 a.m., when Jack started staying the night. She joked that if he wouldn't eat breakfast, he at least needed to hydrate. Some mornings off she stayed in bed, but mostly Libby got up anyway, just to spend a few minutes sipping coffee at the counter with him. It was all he had time for when he was working. When they had a morning off together, he'd stick to his routine, having mapped out a 3 mile path around her Cherrydale neighborhood, and make a quick breakfast for himself long before her alarm woke her up. He’d have some more coffee while she ate whatever she, or sometimes he, made for her.

Jack smirked, with a quiet snort of amusement ticking back his head. "Don't get your hopes up."

He looked up from the mission briefing that had come into his phone, seeing her walk across the doorway between the kitchen and dining room. The cat jumped down from where it had been laying on the windowsill to go follow her and circle around her ankles. Rollins' mug was empty on the table in front of him and the dishes from his breakfast in the sink an hour ago. He had just hung up from answering an activation call on his last day of his three day liberty. He had started reading the first page of the target’s dossier when she had come downstairs.

Libby walked back across the doorway, with a mug in her hand and cat at her heels, and Jack sat back in his chair to watch her pour herself some coffee and listen to her offer, "Are you still hungry? It's so cold out, I was thinking about making some waffles, but not if I'm the only one eating. Too much effort for one person."

"I don't have time for waffles," he told her. He sighed at seeing her pause and shoulders fall a fraction, before she put the pot back on the burner.

"Thought you were off today," she mentioned, turning to the refrigerator to get cream for her drink, sounding more disappointed than she seemed to be trying to let on.

"I was," he nodded, scrolling up the picture of the disavowed SVR agent SHIELD was making a grab for.

"Key word there, was," she grumbled.

Rollins turned his attention to Libby again, while she stirred her drink. "Sorry. They literally just called, before you came downstairs."
She threw a glance his way, with a crooked smile. "A likely story." She tapped her spoon on the top of her mug, wondering, "So, what's her name? The girl you're going to see when you leave me for this-" Libby stopped to make quotation marks with her fingers. "-mission."

Jack smiled, shaking his head. "Trust me," he assured her, "you've never heard of him."

"So, it's a him, huh?" she quirked up a brow, ahead of her first sip of coffee. "That makes things interesting."

Reading his phone again, Rollins nodded. "You wouldn't believe," he chuckled.

Libby came into the room, putting down her mug and picking up his to take back into the kitchen. "You got time for one more?" she checked, stepping over the cat.

Jack hummed, as he finished reading a line. "Yeah. Got time for that."

He read on, hearing her open the drawer for a clean spoon so she could add sugar to his coffee for him. A minute later, she brought him his drink, tapping the spoon on the lip of the mug before handing it to him. She set the spoon into her cup, giving it a couple lazy swirls, as she sat down along the next edge of the table. Rollins felt her gaze on him and ticked his eyes up to see her through his brow. With the fingertips of one hand on the end of the spoon, she rested her chin into the palm of the other, just watching him read. She flashed an innocent grin, making a short apology before taking a sip from her mug.

"What?" he wondered.

"Nothing," she shrugged, sliding the spoon away from her with her thumb for another sip.

Jack let his shoulders roll back, locking his phone and setting it down on the table. "What?"

"Nothing," Libby insisted, with a smile, holding up her free hand in surrender, while she put her mug down.

He eyed her over the edge of his mug, while he started his second cup of coffee for the day and she reached down to scratch the top of the cat's head. "I said I was sorry," he gently reminded her. "I'll be there next time your sister invites us down."

"Jason's home this weekend," she mentioned, looking down at her index finger balancing her spoon on its end in her mug.

"Ah, shit," Rollins griped, his head lolling to the side in disappointment of missing the visit. "You didn't say that."

Libby shrugged, "Suze wasn't sure if he'd make it or not." She limply grinned. "Like it'd have made a difference this morning?"

"No," he admitted, taking up his phone when a timetable update chimed in, "but now I really feel like shit for missing it."

Rollins liked her brother-in-law. They'd met when he and Libby first started dating. Jason was a career Navy pilot. He'd been married to Libby's sister for several years and they moved to Norfolk from Florida in the Spring, when he transferred to the Nightdippers. The combat search and rescue captain had been most recently flying off of the Ike, in the Mediterranean, before training on the new MH-60S he'd be flying sent him to San Diego. Rollins and Jason had clicked when he and Susan had visited Libby on a short visit home from training. With a love of fine cigars and a long
list of good deployment stories to trade with Jack's, they ended up bullshitting away most of the afternoon, while the sisters tended to the Labor Day barbecue festivities Libby was hosting.

The spoon clinked sharply into the side of the mug, as she let it fall, startling the cat and sending him scrambling out of the room. "So, you're saying you're disappointed because you won't see Jason?" she gaped. "You don't like my sister?"

Jack looked up from his screen, quickly. "The fu-?" he grimaced. "No. Where'd you get that from?"

"Well," she gestured an indignant hand up at him, "you weren't disappointed about missing today until you heard he was going to be there."

Rollins leveled his eyes at her, flatly figuring, "You're shittin' me, right? You don't actually think I hate Susan."

Libby was still, staring back at him for a long moment, before she cracked a smile and admitted, "I'm just fuckin' with ya. But you should see your face."

Jack pointed a stern finger her way. "You should be ashamed of yourself, you know that?"

She grinned, from behind her coffee. "Should be," she agreed, "but I'm not." Jack shook his head and took a drink of his own coffee. "He's home though," she noted. "He'll finish up the rest of his schooling with another squadron in Norfolk. We can all catch up another time."

"You know I am sorry, right?" he checked, glancing up from his work. "I know you hate that drive by yourself."

Jack was acutely aware of how work interfered in his personal life. It wasn't just the women in his life who suffered for it. There were probably just as many friends and family who he'd let down by missing one thing or another. It was something he'd been particularly mindful of after Claire. And his experience with Claire made him keep a close eye on how people reacted to his disappointing them.

Libby waved her hand. "No, I know. It's okay," she smiled. "I just like watching you squirm."

"Aren't we all?" Libby reasoned.

"And after I've been nothing but nice to you," he tutted, with a sweep of his head.

"I'm nice," she pouted, sticking her lower lip out.

"I didn't say your weren't nice," he corrected, tapping to the next page of his briefing packet. "And don't pout," he told her, before another sip off his mug. "Nobody believes you're actually mad."

"I might be," Libby suggested. "Maybe I'm mad I gotta drive to Norfolk by myself. Maybe I'm mad about you getting called away on your day off again. You're supposed to be on three days liberty, you said. They can't call you in again so soon."

"They can," he nodded, still skimming the dossier. "For this, they can."

"Why?" she questioned, crossing her arms to rest on the edge of the table. "Because you're popular?"
"Because I'm popular," he distractedly agreed, as he frowned at what he was reading about the circumstances for Kuznetsov's unceremonious separation from the Russian intelligence agency.

Rollins’ familiarity with the target would be helpful, and a valid excuse for pressing him back in to service a day early to attach him to Bravo’s 1st Squad for this mission. He'd come across Alexei several times before and was more than a little surprised to see the agency was cutting off one of their top spies. That he was accused of going off the reservation and committing two unauthorized killings didn't seem to add up, but the Russians always did have a unique way of running their counter-intelligence service. Maybe Kuznetsov had outlived his usefulness or maybe just pissed off the wrong guy in the food chain. It was always a little hard to tell with them. Whatever it was, SHIELD was right to try and turn a guy like Alexei asset for themselves, before the CIA or anyone else could pick him up or someone took him out.

"You're not even listening," Libby dryly noted.

"Hm?" Jack looked up. "Sorry, sweetheart. What were you saying?"

"Nothing," she said. "Just wondering how long you'll be gone."

"Couple of days," Rollins guessed. "Shouldn't take more than that. Just gotta go find a guy."

"A bad guy?" Libby asked, with a snicker.

"No," he shook his head. "Don't think so. Not this one."

"When are you leaving?"

Jack turned his wrist to check his watch, while he took a long drink. Doing a little math in his head for how much time he'd need to draw his gear and get to briefing with the rest of his temporarily assigned squad, he figured, "In about fifteen minutes." He didn't have to look up from his phone to know what she was doing, when he heard her quietly sigh. "No pouting," he reminded her.

"I'm not," she told him.

He smirked at the lack of conviction behind the promise and swallowed the last of his coffee. Rollins put down his mug and reached over the corner of the table to take hold of Libby's wrist. He pulled her by the arm, while he finished reading the last detail in his briefing notes. Libby gave a small petulant whine, but didn't put up any resistance, standing up and shuffling a step when she couldn't stretch from the edge of her chair anymore. Jack locked and turned down his phone on the table, inching back his chair and tugging Libby to fall in his lap. Her hands folded limply in front of her and he wrapped his arms around her.

"Are you still pouting because I'm going to work?" he checked.

"No," she frowned.

Jack gave her a squeeze, pressing, "Is it because you're delusional and think I hate your sister?"

"No."

"Then what?" he invited.

Libby sighed, reluctantly telling him, "Because...I really wanted waffles today."

Jack's shoulders shook with the laughter he held back. "Because you wanted waffles?" he
chuckled, his head dropping, with a shake, to her shoulder.

She gave in to her grin, adding, "And to spend a Saturday with you."

Libby put her arms around his neck, when Jack nuzzled into the curve of hers, mumbling another apology while he nibbled kisses on her skin. "I'm sorry, Lib. I'll make it up to you, when I get back."

"If they don't call you in again," she grumbled, combing her fingers back through his hair.

"I promise," he assured her, curling the hair away from her shoulder and continuing to trail kisses up to her jaw.

"Well, you got a few minutes before you go," she reminded him. "Why don't you start making it up to me now?"

“You gotta be fuckin’ kidding me,” Jack grumbled.

“Somethin’ wrong, big guy?” Brock looked over, his eyes shifting from Rollins’ phone in his hand up to meet Jack’s scowl.

Pocketing his phone, he unhappily explained, “Lancaster’s got work for me tonight.”

“On Valentine’s Day?” Rumlow snorted. “Looks like Jimmy’s taking being a dick to a whole new level.”

They shared a smirk and Jack shook his downturned head, with an aggravated exhale. The elevator stopped and the pair of operators stepped backward in the car to make room for the new riders coming in. It’d been a few weeks since Lancaster had given him an assignment. He figured, between him and Haney and a tragic “training accident”, the loose ends in the plot to expose HYDRA inside SHIELD had been tied up. But here he was, leaving work for the day, with dinner plans with Libby and a name and address of a traitor to silence.

“She’s gonna be pissed,” Jack muttered.

“Who? Libby?” Brock wondered, arching up a brow. “You guys got plans for tonight, huh?”

Checking his watch, Jack nodded. “Dinner reservation in an hour.”

Rumlow nodded, with a short hum. The elevator opened to the second level of the garage and Jack and Brock started off towards the parking spots reserved for the STRIKE Division leadership. Brock gave Jack’s arm a hit with the back of his hand for his attention.

“Ay. Why don’t you let me do it?” he suggested.

A bit skeptical of the offer, Rollins asked, “Really?”

“Yeah,” Rumlow shrugged, indifferently. “I got no plans for the night. Send me the info an’ I’ll take care of it.”

“You sure?” he double checked, trying not to sound too eager to give up the job.

Brock gave him a confident nod. “Yeah. And then you’ll owe me one.”
Jack took out his phone, forwarding the target's info to Rumlow’s as they walked. “I appreciate it,” Rollins told him.

“It’s no trouble,” he assured him. Brock took out his phone and confirmed with a nod that he received the details, adding, with a smile, “Happy to help.”
"Where's Addams?" Rumlow asked, looking around the operators gathered round the tables and resting against walls and pillars eating lunch.

Jack swallowed his mouthful of burger and jutted his chin for the Commander to look over his shoulder. "She's still on the line," he pointed out.

"The hell's she doin'?" Brock wondered.

"Fuck if I know," Rollins shrugged, wiping a napkin over his mouth.

Rumlow turned back around, telling his lieutenant, "Go bring her in. There's less than a half hour left for chow."

Jack nodded and picked up his paper plate and other trash. He stepped over the kicked out feet of operators on the ground and weaved his way through the picnic tables to drop his garbage in the can and tell the FNGs assigned to the grill to make another plate. While he waited, his shoulder leaned in to the side of the range control building next to the grill, Rollins watched Addams across the way take a shot with her rifle down range. A couple minutes later, Rollins was walking back across the field to the firing line.

Ahead of him, Allison sat on a shooting mat on the long concrete pad, her ankles pulled back and crossed and her rifle supported across her raised knees while she sent out a trio of shots. He squinted from behind his sunglasses, making a study of what she was doing to her rifle while every other STRIKE member assigned to weapons quals today was eating lunch and enjoying their hour break. The closer he got he realized she was making adjustments to the scope on top of her weapon.

She seemed preoccupied with her work and he announced himself with a quick jab, saying, "Lost your touch already?"

Allison snorted softly, not bothering to look up from her work. "Why don't you head down range and find out for yourself?"

"Here," Jack said, making a small gesture of the plate to be sure it caught her eye when she looked up at him. He held his right hand open, offering, "Trade ya."

Addams seemed to be debating giving him her rifle for a moment and Rollins flicked his fingers back into his palm, insisting with the impatient rise in his brow from behind his sunglasses. Allison sighed and handed up her gun. Jack gave her the plate and took a knee beside her.

"Poisoned?" Allison checked, peaking underneath the bun to see the toppings on her burger.

"Only one way to find out," Jack suggested, tweaking a screw on a small bracket.

"Cheers," Addams smiled and bit into her sandwich.

"It'd kill you to eat with the rest of 'em and do this later?" Jack asked, giving her a side eye look.

Speaking around the food in her mouth, Allison told him, "Wanted to get this zeroed in first. I'da caught up in a few."
"Interrupting my bullshit time," he grumbled. "Making me wait on you hand and foot, so Bingo won't bitch about everyone getting a break and staying on schedule."

"Knew you didn't actually care," Allison chuckled, nudging her elbow into his side, "you self-serving bastard."

"Pain in my ass," Rollins mumbled, taking a look through the scope.

Truth was, he'd have brought her something to eat even if Brock hadn't noticed she wasn't with the rest of the squads qualifying today. Jack had a line of sight on her since he sat down for his own meal. He was keeping track of the time and wouldn't let her get away with skipping lunch, if she didn't join the others on her own. He noticed she was stubborn sometimes about finishing whatever she was doing her way. This was obviously one of those times.

He straightened up and held the rifle out to Allison. "Put down your sandwich, Princess, and see if that's better."

Setting her plate aside, Allison dusted off her hands and put her ear muffs back on. She grabbed the weapon and Jack pulled up his own hearing protection from his neck and settled them over his ears. Allison aimed and took a shot. Her bullet found the target's center and she was satisfied that the new scope was tightly in place.

"You're welcome," Rollins sarcastically preempted, taking off his ears, as Allison laid down her rifle and took off hers.

"I'd have finished it myself in another minute, before you came along," she pointed out, as Jack folded a leg under him and sat down, reaching out to examine the old scope lying on the mat beside Addams. Picking up her plate again, she added, "But thanks."

"Don't mention it," he smirked, with a nod. Rollins let out an annoyed groan, when Allison shifted and leaned her back against his. Not that he actually minded, but there was a level of sarcasm he kept up, when she did shit like this, that helped him maintain at least some bearing as her senior officer. "Comfortable?"

"Not bad," Allison shrugged.

Jack set down the old scope and asked, "What'd you change it out for, anyway?"

Answering around a mouthful of food, she explained, "Bad seal. Noticed it fogging up last week in Bolivia."

"Weather down there'll always give it away," Jack reasoned.

Allison gave no indication of moving while she ate. Checking his watch, Jack figured, fuck it. He kicked out a leg and drew up his knee, shifting against the back pressing into his and letting his head rest backward. Rollins heard Allison snicker when she tipped forward at the unexpected weight of his head on hers.

"Comfortable?" she asked, squaring her shoulders to push back.

"I was, till you opened your trap," he quipped, a subtle shake in his shoulders from his quiet laugh. "You're cuttin' in to my nap time."

"Walked all the way over here to bring me lunch?" Allison mused. "Poor thing. You deserve a rest."
"Exactly," Rollins agreed, obnoxiously pushing back into her for a couple of seconds to stretch out both legs and cross his booted feet. He folded his arms and shut his eyes behind his sunglasses. "Now, shut your hole. I've got 20 minutes left and I intend to take them all."

"You think I'm gonna sit here for 20 minutes while your ass-"

"Hey," Jack cut in, bumping an elbow backward into her side and settling his head onto her shoulder. "You started it."

"Fine," Allison consented. "But I'm telling everyone we slept together and it was the most boring experience of my life."

Rollins' eyebrow quirked up at the notion and he snorted. "If you were that lucky, 'boring' would be the last word you'd think of."

"Mhm," she hummed, chewing her burger. "Whatever you say, Jack."

Mar 2014

“For fuck’s sake,” Jack complained. “The fuck d’you think you’ll get out of him you didn’t get before?”

“It has to be done.”

He wasn’t surprised by Lancaster’s less than hospitable reply, considering Rollins’ own gruff tone. Jack didn’t understand the ongoing suspicion. HYDRA’s secret was still safe. No one had made even the vaguest semblance of a threat or action to follow through on the assassinations and arrests the traitor from the Insight team had told them about in his confession. Through his own assignments to eliminate threats, Rollins hadn’t uncovered any new names or information to add to what HYDRA had already found. He was dumbfounded, and more than a little pissed, the second time Rumlow was taken for “questioning”.

“We’ve got it handled, Jimmy,” Rollins growled, his grip tightening around his phone. “We’re checking off names and it’s still quiet. There hasn’t been a new lead in weeks.”

“That’s exactly what the problem is,” Lancaster told him.

“What weak ass, bullshit tip do you have this time?” Jack challenged.

“There’s no tip,” he said. “No list, no memo, no messages. Nothing. And that’s why we’re concerned. This investigation never grew much bigger than the initial confession from Lucas. We find it hard to believe that such an elaborate conspiracy could be so small and have any chance of success. There has to be more, Jack.

“Finding the rest of the traitors has been Rumlow’s job,” he went on. “He hasn’t brought us anything new. Considering he was named in the original list of traitors, we’re naturally concerned that the reason we haven’t found any new information is because he’s hiding it from us.”

“I don’t know what they put in the fuckin’ water up there,” Jack shook his head, “but you guys are out of your god damned minds.”

“We’re still friends, Jack,” Lancaster flatly said, “but I’m going to remind you who you’re talking to.”
Rollins’ jaw set, as he nodded to himself. “With all due respect...Sir,” he forced himself to say, “there is nothing to substantiate your concern or warrant taking Cmdr. Rumlow into custody again. I see him everyday; talk to him everyday. There is nothing suspicious about his comments or demeanor, inside or out of the Triskelion. Cmdr. Rumlow performs his duties without question or hesitation, and has even participated in threat eliminations to protect the organization and cover. There is no credib—“

“Your opinion is noted, Commander,” Lancaster dryly assured him, “but Command’s decision to question Rumlow stands. I appreciate your candor, Jack, but, like we discussed before, if Rumlow has nothing to worry about then he has nothing to worry about.”

“Yes, Sir,” Jack agreed, through a tight jaw.

“We’ll be finished with him soon, Jack,” he promised, “one way or the other. While he’s gone, you’ll assume command at STRIKE, as usual.”

“And what should I tell the team about his absence?” Jack pressed.

“I believe there’s something coming for Delta in the morning,” Lancaster told him. “With your squad deployed, Rumlow’s absence won’t be noticed by the other teams and squads. If Bingo has been telling us the truth, he should be back in DC by the time you and your men file your AAR.

“Enjoy the rest of your night, Jack,” he offered. “Should be close to quittin’ time for you, on the east coast. We’ll talk again soon.”

“Yeah,” Jack grumbled, unceremoniously hanging up the phone.

Rollins stared at the phone on his desk. He rubbed a hand across his chin and sat back in his chair, with an irritated exhale. It had only been a few hours since Brock had been gone. He and Rollins had gone out for lunch and were pulled over by DC Police. They both knew Jack hadn’t done anything wrong and were immediately on edge. When the officers approached Jack’s SUV, they didn’t go through the routine of a traffic stop. Instead, they immediately asked Rumlow, by rank and name, to step out of the car. Jack and Brock shared a wary look, but Brock gave him a subtle raise of his hand, directing him to stay put.

Rollins watched, as Rumlow complied with orders to remove his sidearm and knife and leave them in the car with Jack. He was acutely aware of the hand on the gun of the phony cop outside his window. Rollins tracked them in the rear view mirror, as the one officer escorted Brock to the back of the patrol car. When the Commander was secured in the back seat, the second cop gave Jack a smile and a nod, telling him he could get back on his way.

It went against his instincts not to fight or intervene. He knew he’d technically done the right thing by obeying Brock’s order to do nothing, but he regretted it. Especially now, knowing why HYDRA had taken his friend. His attention shot over to the phone ringing on his desk and Rollins snatched the receiver out of the cradle to answer with an irritated, “Yeah.”

“Update on Echo, Commander,” the operator from Communications began. “Prisoner has been collected from the Avengers and delivered to the Raft. Orders have been received for the next assignment and Echo Bravo 1 is en route to link up with the rest of the squad. ETA 1730 Kilo.”

“Thank you.”

Jack hung up and sank back into his chair, scrubbing his hands up and down his face. He let out a tired sigh and checked his watch. Sitting still in his office wasn’t helping his aggravation. Rollins
sat up, pushing his chair back from his desk to stand. He decided to go burn down the last hour of his day in the gym.
Chapter 45

Apr 2014

"Onward, Buttercup! There's fuckery to spread!"

Rollins looked up through his brow, his face still turned down to the After Action Report in front of him on the podium. Echo's first squad had just come in from a sortie. Jack had taken care of the debriefing, while Rumlow was upstairs with Pierce for a meeting. It wasn't necessarily surprising who had made the absurd statement, but the enthusiasm behind it, for 0715 hours, and the chorus of rambunctious agreement was.

"The fuck is wrong with you people?" Rollins wondered, scanning over the surprisingly chipper operators, before his eyes settled on Allison, the source of the rallying cry.

"It's Friday," Allison beamed, walking up a few steps toward the front of the room to answer for the squad, while the others made their way to the locker room.

"It's the ass crack of the day," he pointed out, "and you idiots just landed 40 minutes ago from four days in the jungle."

"Ah," she began to agree, holding up a finger to note, "which puts us on three days liberty."

Jack shook his head, arguing, "Still doesn't explain the ruckus. You just wrapped up a night op."

"Slept on the ride home," she told him. "We're all cocked, locked, and ready to rock." Allison jerked her thumb behind her. "You should come with."

There was something in the mischievous grin she wore and he had to ask, "And what fuckery is to be had?"

"We're gonna get drunk and play paintball all day," Addams smiled. "See how high we can get the body count."

An amused snort left him and Rollins shook his head. "Paintball?" he checked. "Against civilians?"

She nodded. "Don't you think you're going in with an unfair advantage?"

"Ordinarily, yeah," she knew. "But we're going to be drunk, so, you know, it's not that big of an advantage...sorta." Jack quirked up a skeptical eyebrow and she admitted, "Okay, fine. Not really. It's still gonna be a slaughter."

"That's pretty fucked up, Princess," he smirked. "You know that, right?"

Addams nodded, looking suspiciously proud. "Come with us," she suggested. "We could use an extra guy, help even out the fire teams. We've got an odd number while DiAmato has his wrist splinted."

"Some of us have to work for a living," Rollins told her.

"Then catch up when you're done," Allison shrugged.

Jack smiled, shaking his head. "Gotta admit," he said, "sounds like fun."

"Get some exercise, a little fresh air. Work out any pent up aggression..." she prodded.
“Fine,” he relented, with a grin, closing the folder in front of him on the podium.

Allison’s squad was responsible enough to pack into just a few cars and use designated drivers for the day. Apparently, they had done this before and kept track to make sure everyone took a turn driving so no one missed out on the shenanigans. When Jack showed up to join the mayhem, his top tier operators were holding up well and surprisingly still on their game. A quick inspection of his troops found only dust, some grass stains, and a few badge of honor scuffs and nicks where jeans and t-shirts didn't protect, but no paint.

When Jack checked in to rent his paintballing equipment, he couldn't help his proud smirk at overhearing the group ahead of him turning in their gear and complaining about getting their asses handed to them. The manager shook his head, when Rollins told the kid at the register which group he was joining. Luckily, the guy had a good sense of humor about the whole day. He said it was good for business, because people were dumb enough to buy more games, thinking they'd get their revenge.

"Hey, where you guys from, anyway?" the manager checked, while Jack waved off the kid trying to hand him a face mask. "Army? Marines?"

"Nah," Rollins shook his head. "Just some friends blowing off steam."

"Commander," Allison stuffily greeted, coming up beside him to give a half-assed salute and a smack on the back of the shoulder, before sniggering at herself.

"LT," he casually replied, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth at the extra enthusiasm the day drinking had given her already and jutting his chin to answer Mickelson at her heels nodding his hello.

"Yeah," the manager sarcastically nodded, "just a bunch of precisely coordinated, crack shot friends out enjoying the weather, with funny nicknames like Commander and Lieutenant, right?"

Jack smiled, with a confident nod. "Exactly."

"Terms of endearment," Eric chimed in, faking a nut punch at Jack that earned him a real, albeit pulled, punch in the arm.

"What do they call you?" the manager asked, jutting his chin to reference Mickelson.

"Princess," Eric beamed and Jack put his boot to Mick's ass to move him along.

"I like it when you play rough," Mickelson winked, dusting a hand over the back of his pants.

The kid at the register insisted on the mask for Jack, citing the rules posted on the wall behind him, but the manager relented, deciding, "I have a feeling he's not gonna need it."

"If he let's anyone get him in that beautiful mug 'a his," Mickelson teased, giving Rollins' cheek a smack, "he deserves it."

The three STRIKE operators chuckled, stepping aside for the next customers to pay. Allison tugged on Jack's elbow, telling him to hold still. She took his chin in her hand, turning his face down. Jack snorted at her using the polished black lenses of his Oakley's to redo her hair. With her hair knotted up again, she flashed him a cheesy smile and slipped her hands into the crooks of his and Eric's elbows to bring them along with her to join the others.
Watching her work the key into the lock, Jack shook his head, his shoulders moving with suppressed laughter. Muttering a string of curses, Allison stopped mid-sentence and scowled at the key stuck halfway in the lock. She stared, maybe pouting, when the key was stuck in the bolt. Jack straightened up, putting his hands on her shoulders to move her aside and prop her up into the same lean he's just left in the corner of the door frame. It took a second to pull the key back out of the deadbolt and Rollins figured it was best if he oversaw the keys from here on out.

"You're a little bit of a handful," he decided, with an amused snort, "aren't you?"

"Two handfuls," she proudly corrected, holding up as many fingers.

Rollins smirked, trying the next key and giving it a turn to throw open the bolt. He thumbed to try a new key to unlock the handle, finding the right one on the second try. He pulled back the keys and turned the handle, reaching over with a hand to guide her to straighten up before he pushed the door open. From the few visits to her place for poker nights, Jack knew where to drop the keys on the table in the dark apartment before his hand found the light switch beside the door.

Allison grimaced at the new brightness from the hall light and swatted a hand into Jack's arm as a kind of limp punishment. "Dammit, Jack," she frowned.

"Easy there, Princess," he warned, with a chuckle, as if the blow could have even done any damage.

She tugged the strap of her backpack off her shoulder, dropping it by the leg of the table by the door. Rollins shook his head, grinning at the wobbly step that made her put her hand on the wall, as she started for the living room. She looked like she'd make it to the couch and Jack left her to go to the kitchen. Opening the fridge, he took out a bottle of water, before catching up with her in the living room.

Allison had made herself comfortable in the arm chair at the end of the coffee table, her feet tucked under her and leaning into the corner of the chair. Twisting the cap loose, Jack handed the bottle to her. She eyed the offering and then shook her head, saying she wasn't thirsty.

"You spent all day drinking and sniping civies in the sun," he reminded her, "and four days in the Columbian jungle before that. Drink the damned water, Princess, or you'll be too dehydrated and hung over to breath in the morning."

"Fine," she rolled her eyes, taking the bottle off his hands. He nodded his approval, while she stared down the plastic bottle at him as she drank. "Happy?"

"Indescribably," he dryly told her. "Nothing gives me greater pleasure than taking care of your drunk ass." Rollins pulled his keys out of his pocket, checking, "You good?"

Allison hummed into her next drink. "5x5," she nodded, giving him a thumbs up.

Jack smirked, his head ticking back with amusement of her assessment. "Like hell you are." He shook his head. "Get some rest, ya lush. You've only got two days liberty left to sleep that off."

Headed for the door, he stopped, looking back to see her peeking around the side of the chair at him, after she'd complained, "What, no kiss goodnight?"

Rollins blinked, a little thrown by the comment. "Not tonight, sweetheart," he grinned. "Pretty sure you've got a headache."
"But you do love me," Allison nodded, with her cheek against the side of the chair, "don't you, Jack?"

He could see it from where he stood, the hint of redness in her eyes from the drinking and the last few days of work catching up with her. He'd never seen her drunk before. At poker nights and at Barny's, she always stayed straight enough to get herself home. There was the flirting he'd come to accept as nothing more, but there was a new charm to it, so late at night and her somehow so delightfully drunk. Rollins walked back to her, crouching to balance on his toes next to her chair. He layered his arms on the side of the chair, looking at her while she snickered at him.

"You...are-" Jack paused, shaking his head. "You are fuckin' killin' me," he sighed, with a weak grin. "You know that?" She swept her head, as if she didn't know, but her lip-bitten grin gave her away. "Yeah, you do," he decided, reaching out to brush aside some stray hairs from her forehead with the back of his fingertip.

"Yeah, you do," she confidently repeated, but as an answer to her own question.

"I do," he admitted, reasoning she'd never remember the confession. "You have no idea how bad I've got it for you."

"You know what I think?" Allison wondered, her voice hushed almost to a whisper and her eyes leveled with a kind of seriousness that was nothing short of amusing.

"What's that?" he asked, an endeared grin pulling back the side of his mouth, as he lowered his chin to rest on his arms.

"I think it's just like in the movies." He asked what she meant and she explained, "That you call me Princess because you can't say 'I love you'."

"Is that so?" Rollins smiled.

She gave him a confident nod. Allison settled her chin on top of her fist, wondering, "Do you tell Libby you love her?" Jack nodded and she went on, with a furrow of concentration in her brow. "Is that why you can't say it to me, because you love her more?"

"No," he shook his head. "I don't love her the way I do you."

"Because you an' me, we got a bond, Jack," she figured. "You and me, we've been through some hell."

"We have," he agreed.

Allison gently touched a fingertip to the jagged line that reached down to his jaw, giving a small nod. "We got scars."

"We do."

"That means something," Allison confidently said. "We've bled for each other, you know? You an' me."

"You an' me," Rollins seconded.

"That's how I know you love me," she told him.

He sighed, resenting a little that the conversation would probably register as a dream to her, if even
at all, but mostly that the conversation likely didn't carry the same meaning for her as it did him. Nevertheless, he promised, "I'd do anything for you."

"I know," Allison nodded, tipping her cheek to her hand.

It was quiet for a few long seconds, before Rollins nodded to himself. There was no confession from her or anything else to make him stay. She only sat there, her soft eyes staring back at him. His balance shifted from the arm of the chair, readying himself to stand, as he told her, "Goodnight, Princess."

Jack stood and her eyes followed him up. *Fuck it,* he thought. He leaned down, lifting her chin with a soft touch of his fingertips. Jack pressed a kiss to her forehead, feeling her hand curl gently over his wrist. When he straightened up, her hand still rested on his arm and he shook his head at himself. He wouldn't have done anything more than that, for the state that she was in and the fact that they both had someone else. There were rules, in more ways than one.

"Goodnight, Jack," she replied, with a warm smile. He grinned in kind, a little suspicious that she was proud she'd gotten him to confess. Jack's thumb swept lovingly along her jaw, before he turned to go and her hand slipped from his arm. On his way out, he told her to lock up behind him and reminded her to drink her water.

Outside in the hallway, he stopped, tipping his shoulder into the wall with a heavy sigh. Over his shoulder, he heard the deadbolt slide back into place and looked down to see the thin sliver of light from beneath the door go out. Jack tiredly wiped his hand down over his face.

"The fuck are you doing?" he muttered to himself, his downturned head shaking slowly again.

He pushed off from the wall and headed back to his car to go home for the night. He had to be at work in the morning and, if he slept at home instead of going to Libby's like he'd promised, he could get in an extra few minutes. He figured it was better if he slept alone tonight, anyway.
Chapter 46

The message didn’t wake him up, but he had a feeling it was sent early enough that it was meant to try. If it had been a half hour earlier, it would have succeeded. As it was, the activation notification had beat them and his alarm. He’d already been in his office for a few minutes, before it buzzed in to his phone. Even if it had, he wouldn’t have been mad about it. Whatever time of day it came in, it was still funny as hell to him.

Jack was feeling a little tired this morning. He was out last night for a late dinner and drinks, with Libby and some of the guys, celebrating on their last night off before he started back to work on the next rotation. He really could have used that half hour or so he missed out on to sleep or get his morning run in to help him get going for the day. His phone buzzed on his desk and Rollins picked up the device, smiling at Libby’s text affectionately wishing him a happy birthday and good day at work, jokingly congratulating herself that she was the first to tell him. He snorted quietly, sending back a quick thank you and telling her to go back to sleep, letting her think she’d won, before he was going to try to get to the cafeteria for a coffee before briefing began.

With his phone in his hand and his messages open, Rollins tapped the message that actually said “happy birthday” first. The video made just before sunset in a grassy clearing of some woods began to play. The air was so still, not a single tree branch or stalk of tall grass moved and he could hear crickets chirping. That was the scene, for almost a minute, before Allison’s voice piped up from somewhere unseen, complaining, “I don’t think he’s coming. It’s been, like, two hours.”

From somewhere else, Solomon asked, “You told him, right?”

Again, there was no one on camera, but Allison warily pressed, “Miiick?”

Mickelson’s voice argued, “I thought DiAmato was supposed to tell him.”

There were several overlapping groans and profanities, before Allison griped, “So much for his surprise party. Let’s get out of here, guys.”

From the foreground to the back of the field, a dozen different shapes rose from the grass to stand in ghillie suits. Everyone was muttering complaints and gathering together. The camouflaged body closest to the camera knocked back the hood of their suit to reveal Allison’s disappointed face as she walked up to grab the camera from where it’d been recording.

“Oh, well,” she sighed, joining the rest of her fire team and holding the device out at arm’s length for them to all crowd into the shot with her. “Happy birthday, anyway, boss.”

Off to the side of the frame, Mickelson popped cans of smoke in each hand holding them overhead, as a subtle breeze slowly pulled the red and white billows aside behind them. The team, out in Virginia for three days of field training and obviously putting their down time and gear to good use, waved or flipped him off, yelling their mostly inappropriate birthday greetings over one another. The video ended with DiAmato facetiously smacking Mickelson in the back of the head and chided him for “forgetting” to tell Jack about his “surprise party” in the background, just before Allison gave the camera one last middle finger and a wink.

Shaking his head, Jack’s shoulders shook with the laughter he snuffled. There was a knock on his office door, as it was simultaneously pushed open. Rollins was just backing out of his messages
“Nah,” he swept his head.

“You sober?” Brock checked, with a smirk. “Or you still feelin’ it from last night, old man?”

“Good to go,” Rollins assured him, with a confident grin.

“After some coffee,” the Commander threw in, moving aside to let Jack through the door. “On my way downstairs for some. You want?”

“Does a bear shit in the woods?” Jack quipped, watching Brock pull his door shut behind them.

“We got time,” he assured him, turning to head down the hall for the elevators. With one last glance at the phone in his hand, a faint grin came to him as he pocketed the device. Rumlow apparently noticed and asked, “What’s that about?”

Jack shook it off, thoroughly intent on keeping the video to himself and avoiding any kind of ass chewing or criticism from the Commander that could be garnered from Allison’s message. “Just a birthday text.”

“Libby?” Brock figured. The short hum Rollins gave in reply was vague enough to answer his question, but not specific enough to throw him off. “I like her,” he nodded, reaching out to press the call button as they stopped at the elevators. “She’s a good kid.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, glancing out the windows of the hall and across the Potomac.

“You sure you’re good?” Rumlow pressed, pulling Jack’s attention back inside to him.

His brow creased down in mild confusion. “Yeah. Why?”

“Cause you’re still smilin’,” he smirked. The elevator chimed and the doors slid open to an empty car. Stepping inside, Rumlow teased, “Get a birthday bj or somethin’ this morning?”

Jack snorted, shaking his head. “No,” he chuckled. “She didn’t even wake up when the phone rang.”

“Well, don’t look at me,” Brock warned him, before directing the elevator AI down to the cafeteria.

Rollins chuckled, giving his friend a shake of his head. Maybe he had been grinning. Jack hadn’t noticed, if he was. And if he hadn’t noticed, he sure as hell couldn’t say why he was. He knew they were talking about Libby and, yeah, her message had put a smile on his face, but if he was honest, with himself or anyone else, he’d have to say it was Allison’s video that was sticking with him. The planning of the whole gag, the effort to get it in while they were in the middle of three days of hard training, and the commitment to being a smartass it took to get up just after four in the morning to send the message and try to wake him up, or at least make sure her and her team were the first to greet him in the day, was impressive.

“Seriously, though,” Rumlow noted, “you’re in a surprisingly good mood for oh-what-the-fuck-30 on a Monday.”

Rollins gave another noncommittal hum. He couldn’t argue with the assessment. He just couldn’t say for sure why. Allison and her troops had gone above and beyond with their birthday wishes, but
it didn’t take anything away from the loving sentiment that underlined Libby’s text. He appreciated them both, in their own way, but that he even considered comparing the two gave him a twinge of unexplainable guilt.

The elevator was slowing for their stop and Jack asked, “Ya ever been in love?” the question leaving him, before he even realized he was going to ask it.

"What, you mean, like, sober?" Brock smirked, and Jack nodded once, with a chuckle to cover his feeling of awkwardness at having asked. "Yeah," he admitted, stepping out of the elevator and leading the way down the hall, “maybe once or twice."

"It comes out of nowhere," Jack considered. "One minute, you're fine being alone, and the next minute, someone else is inside your head. Nothing’s about you anymore."

With a thoughtful sweep of his head, Rumlow agreed, “Ain’t nothing like it.” Jack caught the once over Brock gave him from the side of his eye. “I’m happy for ya, big guy.”

Jack hummed again, giving a subtle nod of acknowledgment. “Yeah,” he said, figuring his friend thought he meant Libby.

Passing through the cafeteria doors, Brock gave him a clap on the shoulder, telling him with a grin, “C’mon. My treat. That way you can’t say I didn’t buy you shit for your birthday.”

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"Thinking about taking a couple days off," Rumlow quietly mentioned.

At his side, Jack matched his silent heel to toe steps with the Commander's pace, as they moved down the corridor. They came to a T-intersection in the hall and Rollins inclined his head to tell Brock the direction they needed to go to find the galley and to signal he'd clear left. The men turned out and secured the hall, falling back into step and moving toward the hostages.

"What for?" Jack asked, keeping his voice down.

Brock gave an almost imperceptible shrug, nothing that would even have raised the sight picture of the rifle tucked into his shoulder. "I dunno," he casually said. "Just feelin' a little burnt out lately."

Rumlow raised his hand to signal their stop. Pieing the next corner, he signaled that they had arrived and he had eyes on one sentry. Brock lowered his rifle, easing it behind him and drawing his stun baton without a sound. The two Delta operators crept up on the unsuspecting mercenary, as he listened to instructions at the galley hatch with his back turned to their approach. When the man answered and turned away from the door, Rumlow was waiting.

He stunned his target, keeping a tight grip on the front of the man's gear and holding him upright, ensuring the man was unconscious and didn’t need further attention. Brock slowly let the man down to the deck and secured his baton. As Rumlow transitioned back to his rifle, Rollins lowered his and pulled off his backpack. The Commander covered the galley door, while Jack carefully set the breaching charge in the center of the hatch. He backed away, shouldering his pack again and taking up the detonator.

Jack armed the switch, as he continued their whispered conversation. "Where to?"

"Fuck if I know," Brock said. He lifted his chin and twisted his neck, resetting himself on his
With a soft hum, Rollins nodded his understanding. On the comms, Rogers spoke up and Rumlow acknowledged that STRIKE was in position. They shared a look that was more annoyed than surprised, when Romanoff didn't check in right away. Jack gave a subtle shake of his head, moving to the side and out of the blast zone for the explosive. He flipped off the safety on the detonator and waited.

"Any chance you might miss and nick Sitwell?" Jack casually wondered.

He looked over, catching Brock's grin and quick glance off his sights at him. "Not interested in unemployment," Rumlow chuckled.

"A hundred bucks?" he offered, with a malicious grin.

"Not even close," Brock smirked back.

"Hate that prick," Jack muttered, turning his attention back to the hatch ahead of them.

Sitwell's arrogance didn't work for Jack. He didn't think he'd earned the right to be smug about anything. Sure, he was in the know about HYDRA's presence in STRIKE, but only through the privilege of being Pierce's lapdog for his proximity to Coulson and other key SHIELD loyalists to keep an eye on. But damn if Sitwell didn't throw his weight around any chance he got. Jasper Sitwell hadn't done any respectable work to get where he was, in Jack's eyes. And he'd rather leave him to the hijackers than do anything else. That weaselly little bastard.

Rogers gave the signal. Simultaneously, the Delta Team operators hanging on rappel lines down the side of the ship took their shots through the portholes and Rollins thumbed the plunger to blow the door. Rumlow took down his target in one silenced shot. It was all over in a matter of a couple efficient seconds.

With his rifle back in hand, Jack and Brock did a protective sweep of the galley to verify all the threats had been eliminated. Their teammates from the side of the boat withdrew to the main deck and Rumlow and Rollins set to work, quickly standing up the hostages and cutting them free. It was Jack's luck that as they moved down the line of hostages, he ended up in front of Sitwell.

Rollins paused for a moment, irritated by the sight of Sitwell's expectant look up at him. When Jasper held up his bound hands and cocked an impatient brow at Rollins, Jack let out a quiet, but aggravated, sigh and yanked Sitwell's wrists up to cut the cable tie off of him. He swiped his knife down through the tie at Sitwell's ankles and was a little pleased with himself for the nervous start the seemingly reckless maneuver gave the suited man. He didn't bother to help Sitwell up the way he had the other hostages he'd freed. Instead, he moved around Rumlow to get to the next officer, giving her a quick reassurance that they would get them all out of there safely.

They gathered the freed hostages at the door, instructing them to stay behind or between the two of them at all times and to obey any orders they were given to the letter. Brock led the way out of the galley and back into the short maze of the ship's hallways, leading them turn by turn up to the main deck. Jack cleared corners and watched their six as they moved, until they met up with the rest of their Delta squad and got them to the ship's lifepods. When the last of the hostages were secured and away, Jack and Brock relaxed, while the rest of the team posted up to secure the rally point.

"He's probably gonna file a complaint, ya know?" Brock smirked, tugging to adjust the rifle sling behind his neck.

Rumlow snorted, shaking his head. "He'll be even more pissed when the complaint goes unanswered, collecting dust on my desk."

"You're really going on vacation?" Jack checked, a little surprised. Rumlow used as little personal time as he did.

Brock nodded to himself, scanning the deck while they waited for Romanoff and Rogers. "Been on too many night missions, lately," he tiredly mused. He turned to Rollins, joking, "Need some sunshine. I forget what it looks like."

"Pussy," Jack smirked, halfheartedly shaming his friend.

Rumlow laughed. "Could use some 'a that, too," he quipped, wagging up a lascivious brow. "Maybe I'll hit up a beach; charm some tanned brunette back to my bed."

Rollins nodded his approval of the idea. "Copy that," he grinned.

They looked up at the wind forced down by the repulsers of the Quinjet starting its descent for their extraction. Jack's attention was caught by movement in his periphery and he turned to watch the Captain and Black Widow walking their way. He couldn't help but notice the soot on their uniforms and faces.

"You're late," Jack sarcastically noted at Natasha. "Run in to a bit of trouble?"

Romanoff flashed a mischievious smile and rolled her eyes over to him. "Nothing I couldn't handle," she assured him.

Rollins nodded, amused. He pointed at a particularly dark smudge of dirt on her cheek, telling her, "You got a little bullshit on your face, right there."

She playfully smacked his hand away, looking ready to sass him back, before she caught a disapproving scowl from Rogers directed at her. Her expression fell and mouth shut. Jack looked between the two of them, curious about what she had done to piss Rogers off and a little disappointed Romanoff wasn't playing anymore.

“What’s that about?" Brock asked, looking after the others, as they all filed up the Quinjet’s ramp.

Jack shrugged, without an answer. “Beats the hell outta me.”

Rumlow gave a sweep of his head and nudged his elbow into Jack’s arm to move him along. “Fuck it. Let’s get out of here.”
Jack checked his watch, walking into the briefing room. A couple of chairs were already occupied and Rollins nodded as his greeting to the operators waiting for him. He passed them each a small packet of papers, on his way down the aisle to the podium at the head of the room.

“Hey, boss. Is it true?”

Jack nodded, saying, “Details forthcoming.”

It was enough of an answer to hold them over. Jack shuffled his paperwork into a neatly squared pile and stood behind the podium to wait. The call out to the STRIKE team and squad leaders ordered them to muster for briefing within the next 10 minutes. At the back of the room, the door opened and a few more operators trickled in. They formed a line on their own, waiting their turn to collect their copy of orders from Rollins. His attention was drawn up to the door again, noting Addams coming in to the room and down the aisle.

"Good morning, sunshine," he smirked, at her obvious lack of enthusiasm.

"What the fuck is so good about it?" she grumbled, scuffing to a stop in front of him and holding out her hand for a copy of the rotation.

Jack passed her her copy of the pages, shaking his head. "Not a god damn thing," he said. Allison scanned the first page of the schedule and notes and adjusted the strap of her bag on her shoulder. "You look like shit," Jack decided, reaching past her to hand Jacobi a packet of paperwork.

"Thanks, Jack," she sarcastically smiled, cocking her head angelically to the side and batting her eyelashes. Her smile dropped to a deep frown and she called him, "Dick."

"Don't scratch me, kitten," he snorted. "I didn't wake you up."

With a sigh, she went back to the pages in her hand and agreed, "No." Allison looked back up, hopefully wondering, "Got any coffee?"

"You just called me a dick," Rollins reminded her, handing off another pair of packets to the arriving squad leaders for Alpha Team. "What on Earth makes you think I'd get you a coffee?"

"Is this flexible?" Franklin asked, taking his copy from Jack.

"No," Rollins shook his head, turning his attention from Allison. "The first 24 hours are locked in. We'll reassess after that, but for now, count on this being your life for the next three days."

"Awesome," Franklin rolled his eyes.

Allison smiled back, when Franklin gave her a nudge on his way to find a seat in the room. "So, that's a 'no' on coffee then?" she checked.

"Unless there's a sign on my back that says 'Allison's Bitch', that would be a 'no' on coffee," he confirmed, panning his gaze over the room and doing a quick head count to see how many, if any, team leaders were missing before he could start his briefing.

"Got a pen?" Allison wondered.
“What for?” he asked, turning his attention down to adjust his papers on the podium beside him.

“I wanna make that sign you mentioned,” she smiled.

"Nice try, Princess," he smirked. The door shut behind the last operator Jack was expecting. He leaned down to fold his arms on the podium, jutting his chin at her and telling her, "You got 10 seconds to get AIS or I won't buy you a coffee in the chow hall after this."

"Throw in a donut and I'll do it in 5," she counteroffered.

"Ass in seat," Jack swept his head, looking down at his briefing notes. "1...2...3..."

From the tops of his eyes, he watched Allison slink into a seat at the second table back. Jack straightened up and looked across over the room, with a subtle nod to himself, concentrating on his tone for the delivery. This was Rumlow's job. He should be giving the news and orders, but the Commander was still en route to the Triskelion with Rogers. Jack quietly cleared this throat and the hushed conversations in front of him stopped.

"Good morning," he began. "For those of you who are unaware of the reason for this morning's Division call out..." Jack paused, doing a quick assessment of confused and curious faces to gauge how many men still didn't know. "At approximately zero-3-4 hours, Directory Fury was shot by an unknown assassin. Director Fury was transported to George Washington University Hospital where staff pronounced him dead at 1-oh-3 hours." There was a subtle murmur among several of the operators, as Jack continued, "At this time, Secretary Pierce has assumed command of all SHIELD operations. The Triskelion and all personnel are under SecCon 4 until further notice."

Rollins held up a copy of the squad deployments, as he said, "You've all been given a copy of the rotation for garrison duty and all non-deployed operators are being recalled for assignment. Note that squads assigned for garrison are ordered to be mission ready at all times. Have your people see the quartermaster and armory for any kit they need for the next 72 hours, minimum."

Jack shuffled the copy of the schedule in with his other paperwork, noting, "From here on, all STRIKE Division operations and missions are run out of the Triskelion. Those squads assigned to standby are expected to be deployable within a fifteen minute window. No STRIKE operator is allowed off post or outside of this facility without direct approval or assignment from Commander Rumlow." The subtle noise in the room returned, with a noticeable air of complaint about it.

"Welcome home," he concluded, "for at least the next three days."

Who Jack was within SHIELD notwithstanding, he always had liked Fury. He may not have always agreed with some of the Director’s decisions, but he respected them, and him. They got along as well as two men in their respective positions could. There was a casualness the three of them enjoyed, when Jack, Fury, and Rumlow bullshitted after business was done. While he shouldn’t have been surprised the hit had been ordered by Pierce, he certainly hadn’t been expecting it. Not this soon, anyway.

Somewhere down the line, Rollins understood Fury would be a problem. A lot of people would. With Insight ahead of schedule and the assault on the Lemurian Star almost interrupting the placement for one of the Insight satellites, Jack could understand HYDRA Command’s concern and wanting to remove larger obstacles to their plan sooner rather than later. Still, Jack was a little remorseful that Fury was gone.

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“Walkin’ in late to his own meeting,” Rollins muttered.

“Some kind ‘a power move?” Rumlow quietly sniggered, before straightening up from his lean on the arm of his chair near Jack’s.

“He’s too short to have any kind of power,” Jack snuck in, as Sitwell was pulling back a chair for himself at the head of the conference table.

Jack caught the eye roll from Barrows across the table, as Sitwell thanked them for coming but didn’t apologize for his tardiness. “The Lemurian Star,” Jasper began, folding open the leather padfolio in front of him on the table.

“What about it?” Rumlow tiredly asked. It’d already been a long morning for STRIKE, with Fury’s assassination barely 6 hours ago. Without Pierce, or any other fan of Sitwell’s, on hand, there was nothing keeping the STRIKE staff and Insight SpecOps leaders interested in good behavior.

“Does anyone know where Romanoff was during the operation?” he asked, looking pointedly at each man around the table.

“She was below deck,” Brock answered, “securing the engine room.”

“Anyone else wanna take a guess?” Jasper arrogantly invited.

Barrows lifted his hand from where it rested on the table, broadcasting his intention to speak before mentioning, “I’m a little confused about what me and my guys are doing here, if we’re going to be talking about the Lemurian Star recovery.”

“Insight Special Operations is here, because the Lemurian Star was the final step in getting Insight operational,” Sitwell told him. “That ship was carrying the last satellite needing to be launched to complete the global targeting network.”

The rise in Barrows’ brow told Jack that the snideness of Agent Sitwell’s tone was not going over well, and Jack shared the sentiment. “We all know what the Lemurian Star was carrying,” Jack noted.

Rumlow suggested, “Maybe you’d like to be a little bit more direct and get to the point of calling this meeting, Agent Sitwell.” Brock rolled his hand over, making a lazy gesture to the others at the table. “We all got other things we need to do today.”

Jasper pulled a file folder out from underneath his padfolio and tossed it to land and slide to a stop near Rumlow. Brock put a pair of fingertips on the corner of the folder to pull it to him, as Sitwell explained, “While you and Capt. Rogers were preoccupied with Batroc,” the large monitor on the wall lit up with a running list of drive and file names ticking down the screen, after Sitwell made a couple presses on the control panel at his seat, “Agent Romanoff was in the Lemurian Star’s comms center, hacking into the ship’s mainframe and copying the hard drive.”

After a cursory glance under the cover of the folder, Rumlow pushed it aside to Rollins. Jack left it alone, keeping his attention on the monitor, while Sitwell continued, “Without anyone keeping an eye on her, she managed to rob us blind.” Jack looked back to Sitwell, who was looking back and forth between him and Brock. “In short,” he said, “you fucked up.”

The remark got immediate and sharp reactions from the two STRIKE Division officers. Brock’s hand went up to stop Sitwell, as his brow knit down in angry offense, telling him to, “Wait just a damn minute.”
Jack sat upright in his chair, leaning forward on an arm on the edge of the table and staring down Jasper, daring him, “You wanna try saying that again, you ungrateful sonuvabitch?”

“She wouldn’t ‘a even been on that boat,” Rumlow argued, “if you hadn’t let Batroc-“

“Your men,” Sitwell interrupted, practically ignoring their complaints to point the next proverbial finger at Barrows, “failed to maintain the physical security of th-“

“Unless you had some intelligence specifically threatening a hijacking in the middle of the fucking Indian Ocean that you were withholding,” Barrows countered, “the security forces on that ship were adequate for the mission. They were there to secure the payload, not defend the boat against 25 heavily armed mercs.”

“Your men failed to maintain the physical security of the Lemurian Star,” Jasper firmly repeated. “Forensics and Cryptology reported there was an access attempt on the drive Romanoff stole yesterday at 1626hrs, from inside this building. If Romanoff, or anyone else, decodes the drive, they’ll have access to everything; Zola, HYDRA’s deep cover agents inside SHIELD, Project Insight. All of it.”

“You said the drive is encoded,” Brock noted. “What level of encryption are we talking about?”

“The highest,” Agent Sitwell answered.

“So, the algorithm will protect the drive,” Rollins pointed out. “We just have to get it back.”

“Who tried to access the drive?” Rumlow asked.

“Director Fury,” Sitwell replied. There was a heavy pause in the room. “And now, to clean up your mess,” Sitwell panned his gaze across everyone in the room, “we had to eliminate Fury. Do you have any idea the questions that’s going to raise? And this close to Insight launching?“

Ignoring Jasper’s questions, Jack asked, “Where’s the drive now?”

With a cocky tip of his head, Sitwell said, “That’s the $64,000 question.”

Although his curiosity had been piqued as to what exactly transpired between Fury trying to open the files on the stolen thumb drive and his death, Rollins had to brush it aside for now. As an afterthought, he and Rumlow had been advised this morning of the HYDRA Special Forces team that had been sent out to intercept the Director, after he left the Triskelion the day before. Neither of them was surprised the team had failed and taken several casualties in the process.

He and Brock both shook their heads, picking apart the after action report about the chase through DC before the Soldier was reactivated to track down Fury and finish the job, complaining about the flaws in the plan that they saw as glaring, but that HYDRA Command had somehow overlooked or underestimated. He could understand using a HYDRA team, so Fury couldn’t recognize anyone, but it meant using people who had little to no knowledge of their target, with no preparation time, and no idea how hard Fury alone could make their job. Delta would have known, and gotten a hell of a lot less attention from the press and public in the process.

Rumlow shook his head, with a subtle turn to address Jack, saying, “It wasn’t on him last night. His personal effects were inventoried at the hospital.”

“It could be anywhere between the Triskelion and Rogers’ apartment,” Rollins understood. “He had, what? 8-plus hours between trying to access the drive and the hit.”
“You two care to share with the rest of the room?” Jasper sarcastically invited.

Brock shot Sitwell an irritated look, before giving his attention back to Rollins. “Get a team over to his place,” he ordered Jack. “Go over every inch. DC police found his car ditched, early this morning. Have Forensics recover the car and do the same there. Check any comms or transmissions he may have made from there, as well. Put tails on Romanoff and Rogers. If one ‘a them has the drive, I wanna know where they are at all times.”

Rumlow looked across the table to Barrows and his men, adding, “Redouble your security on those carriers. Two factor authentication on anyone in or out of that bay, until we get those ships in the air.”

Jack had his orders. Rollins was already on his feet, turning out to move away from the table and get to work. His Insight counterparts were rising to do the same.

“We’re not finished,” Sitwell noted, with an edge of insult in his tone.

Jack checked over his shoulder, at the remark, seeing Rumlow moving to stand, as well. Quirking up a brow at the agent, Brock invited, “Were you not done bitching?” Jasper didn’t reply in the short pause, before Brock started to move again to follow the others out and added, “Because we got shit to do, to make sure nothing else gets fucked up.”

Rollins smirked on his way out the door, at the flustered exhale he saw from Sitwell.
May 2014

“Pierce is nuts,” Haney muttered.

“Enough,” Rollins said, pressing the elevator call button and giving a nod to the security camera on the wall, his signal for the tech in the tactical operations center to bring the elevator to them.

“You think we can pull this off?” Emery pressed. “I mean, 10 guys agai-“

“I said, that’s enough,” Jack grumbled, rolling his shoulders and cracking his neck.

“He’s fuckin’ nuts,” Haney shook his head. “We need more guys. We-“

“We need a fucking elephant tranquilizer,” Emery decided.

Jack turned over his shoulder, cocking up an impatient brow. It wasn’t that he didn’t have his doubts, but he knew there was nothing to do about it but follow orders. Pierce probably wasn’t wrong for wanting Rogers in custody. After Fury was assassinated, Rollins saw the change.

The Captain was uncharacteristically quiet. He saw a difference in his posture. Rogers was on alert; defensive. Rollins knew something had changed, beyond mourning Fury. Rogers was suspicious. Of what, no one knew.

“Lock it up,” he told them. “Get ready.”

Rollins knew they were right, but it didn’t do anyone any good to agree. They had to focus on the plan, half-assed and rushed as it was. But Pierce hadn’t given them any time. They needed manpower and equipment, neither of which they had time for. The Secretary had called the instant Rogers left his office, issuing the order to capture the Captain before he got out of the building directly to Rumlow. This was the best they could do. They would have to make it work.

The elevator chimed its arrival and Jack turned back to face the doors. He took a deep breath, as the doors opened. He and his partners were the last to arrive. Ahead of them, Rumlow and the others were already in place, surrounding Rogers in the car. Rollins and his guys stepped in. The other HYDRA agents moved around, making room for Rollins and his partners to get into the car. Jack gave a bullshit destination to the AI, requesting a stop at Records, as he turned his back on Rogers, like he were any other passenger in the elevator. The doors closed and the car began its descent again. From behind him, Rollins heard the Captain speak up.

“Before we get started...does anyone want to get out?” Rogers asked.

Rollins inhaled, setting his jaw. *Fuck.* Rogers knew. There was no use waiting. He grabbed the stun baton from his side and turned on the Captain.

May 2014

“How the hell’d we miss him?” Jack muttered against his fist, frustratedly staring out the window.

“Think he knew about the tracker?” Haney wondered, as he drove.
From the back of the SUV, Rumlow figured, “He’s got somebody helping him.”

"He couldn’t have known about the tracker on the thumb drive,” Rollins agreed, shaking his head. Dropping his fist from his chin, he twisted in his seat to see Rumlow behind him. “Got anything?”

Jack gave him some time to answer, seeing him looking intently at the tablet in his hands. “Fuckin’ Romanoff,” Brock finally said.

“What?” Jack scowled, the change of expression pulling with a sting at the recent abrasions on his cheek that were still closing since the fight in the elevator.

The Commander turned the tablet around for Jack to see. On the screen was a still image from a security camera inside the store the signal had come from. They were hidden under a sweatshirt hood and a ball cap in civilian clothes, but there was more than one good angle to the cameras in the store to see Romanoff and Rogers coming and going, their faces plainly recognizable, even with the Captain behind a pair of phony glasses.

“Mother fucker,” Rollins growled, as Rumlow took back the tablet.

Shaking his head, Brock complained, “Should’ve known she’d be helping him. That’s how he knew to ditch the uniform, too.”

“You’re fuckin’ kiddin’ me, right?” Haney hoped, throwing a quick glance back at Rumlow.

“No,” the Commander flatly answered, and Jack turned back around in his seat with an aggravated exhale. This was getting more complicated at every turn.

“Even without the trackers,” Jack grumlingly considered, “we could have locked him down in about three hours. But with the fuckin’ Widow helping him...”

“We’re screwed,” Haney decided.

“We’re not screwed,” Brock firmly argued. “We just need to catch up.”

“Catch up,” Jack thoughtfully repeated, under his breath, his unfocused gaze out the window again. He rubbed his chin, knowing, “They’re not on foot. Not any more. We got close. They know that. They’ll need to be faster; widen the gap.”

“Not dumb enough to catch a cab or bus,” Rumlow seconded. “They can’t use plastic and I doubt either of them is carrying the cash to get them where they’re goin’ fast.”

“Steal a car,” Jack reasoned to himself. He turned to Dennison in the back seat, telling him, “Have them start watching for stolen vehicle reports. Anything remotely close to the mall, since 1430 hours.” Dennison was already taking out his phone to call the TOC, and Rollins added, “Get a list of the license plates and tap area traffic and toll cams north and east of here for any hits. Maybe we can cut them off before they get there.”

“Where they headed?” Dennison asked.

“New Jersey,” Brock said. “And so are we.” He gave Haney’s shoulder a clap, telling him, “Get us back to the Triskelion.”

Rollins took the handheld radio out of his jacket pocket, directing the other vehicles in the chalk to return to the Triskelion with them for redeployment.
“Jersey?” Haney questioned. “The hell would he go to Jersey for?”

“The intel Romanoff stole from the Lemurian Star,” Jack recalled. He looked back at Brock. “If they broke in to those files...”

“Cryptology says she didn’t,” Rumlow swept his head, still looking over the tablet. “But she’s got the source. Used one of SHIELD’s malware tracers to triangulate it.” Brock met Jack’s gaze. “They’re gonna find Zola.”

“If they get there first...” Jack warily began.

“If they do, we can buy a little time,” Brock assured him.

“You got a plan B?” Dennison checked.

“B and C,” Brock nodded, taking out his own phone to make a call.

May 2014

Rollins tightened up the sling on his rifle, shuffling to the back of the jet with the rest of his squad, minus Capt. Rogers, of course. Rumlow punched the button to lower the ramp of the Quinjet, while the pilots were still making their descent to the ground.

The Commander turned to his men, telling them, “Sweep the area. Airborne has thermals overhead. If they see anything glowing or moving, we run it down. We’re not done until I see enough body parts to make two wholes. Understood?”

A chorus of firm “Yes, Sir”s came, just as the jet touched down. The squad deplaned, fanning out in four man search teams and moving up on the crater that had been the pseudo munitions building of Camp Lehigh housing the dozens of data banks that made up Zola.

Overhead, the additional Quinjets that escorted Delta’s transport hovered, checking the area with their FLIR. There was nothing but a pile of rubble in the crater, after the missile strike. By the time Rollins and the others arrived, there wasn’t much smoke to contend with. There was little left about the disused facility to burn, anyway. Climbing carefully down into the pit of the debris, Brock led the way. Jack stopped, taking a scan along the debris field and across the rest of the camp in the spotlights on the jets sweeping the area.

Below him, Rollins noticed Rumlow had stopped. Over the comms channel, the controller in the TOC was advising the jets weren’t picking up anything on the infrared that wasn’t wearing a beacon. Jack watched the Commander looking at something on the ground in front of him.

Rumlow raised his head, saying over the channel, “Call in the Asset.”

Brock looked up, catching Jack’s gaze before turning to climb back up out of the crater. Jack met him halfway, asking, “What is it?”

Taking a look around for himself, Rumlow let out an irritated sigh. “There’s footprints down there,” he said, with a quick tip of his head to where he’d been standing. “Leading away from the impact site.”

“How many pairs?” Jack checked.
“Only one,” he said. “A man’s.” Brock shook his head, turning back to Rollins to say, “But that
don’t mean anything.” Opening up his mic again, Rumlow ordered, “Delta zero-one to Control.
Have airborne expand their grids. I want a five mile net from ground zero. They’re on foot. Find
them. Continue to run facial recognition on any and all open sources and security cameras.”

“Fuckin’ hell,” Rollins muttered, his eyes still scanning the area. “You think they both made it
out?”

“I don’t know,” Brock shook his head. “But until I see something that tells me otherwise...”

Jack nodded, thumbing on the safety of his rifle. From impact to their arrival, Rogers and
Romanoff, had approximately 17 minutes lead. Presuming they both escaped immediately and
were relatively uninjured, they could have covered a lot of ground on foot, maybe hitchhiked a ride
or stolen a car, by now. For enhancements from the serum, Rogers alone could be miles away.

“Think five mikes is enough?” Rollins wondered.

With a small shrug, the Commander conceded, “If one or both of them is injured, yeah. If
Romanoff is injured, he won’t leave her.” He nodded to himself, still on the lookout. “It’ll slow
him down. We might catch up.”

“If she didn’t make it,” Jack considered, “her blood trail or body’ll point the direction toward
Rogers.” Panning his gaze around the rubble, he shrugged. “Unless she’s still in here.”

Shaking his head, Brock told him, “I don’t think she’s in there. There’s a void down there,” he
explained, with an incline of his head. “Down by where those tracks are, but there’s nothing in
there.”

“Only one set of footprints though,” he reasoned. “Maybe she didn’t make it there in time.”

“Yeah,” Brock allowed, with a subtle nod. He turned to step out of the rubble and onto the grass,
adding, “But we need to know for sure. Let’s get a recovery team down there. I want the area
around the void excavated and a path cleared back to Zola. I want confirmation that there’s a body
in there or there isn’t.” He looked Jack in the eye, telling him, “Eliminate any doubts. I can’t go
back to Pierce with wishful thinking.”

“Yes, Sir,” Jack agreed, with a nod.
May 2014

“It’s fallin’ apart.” Rumlowswept his head, dropping his fist from pressing against his chin and uncrossing his arms.

“Fuckin’ amateurs,” Jack groused, just as displeased listening to the traffic in the TOC.

“They’re gonna be all over the goddamn news,” Brock complained. He stepped forward to the controller closest to him, ordering, “Mobilize Delta 2Alpha and 2Bravo for intervention. Notify Motor Pool, squad transport; whatever they got ready to roll, and armor for the prisoner. I want play by play updates for these jackasses, until we get on scene and take control.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Jack fell in to step, keeping pace with the Commander’s quick strides out of the command center and toward the elevator banks. “You sure we should be stepping on those toes?” Rollins checked.

“The Asset’s support team—“

“Is failing, miserably,” Brock growled, pushing open the stairwell door. “In every way possible.”

“I’m not arguing,” Jack agreed, rushing down the stairs after Rumlow, “I’m just saying, Pierce—“

“Doesn’t know what the fuck he’s doin’, when it comes to Rogers,” he said. “We’ve been behind, every step.” He threw open the door to the 26th floor. “We can’t lose him again.”

They turned down the hall for the armory, breaking through the door to find some of their squad mates in the queue grabbing weapons and gear and others hurrying in behind them. Everyone ran for the garage. They rolled out within minutes of the order, four SUVs, a handful of motorcycles, in case they needed the maneuverability in a pursuit, and an armored personnel carrier to contain Rogers.

Barreling over the Triskelion bridge into downtown DC, the vehicles rode with lights and sirens herding people out of their way. The operators made their weapons ready and made final adjustments to their hastily grabbed gear. The voice in their ears from the TOC advised them that Rogers and Romanoff had split up. There was an unidentified civilian involved, helping the Captain and the spy. The controller gave clothing descriptions, locations, and directions of travel on the three targets. The Asset was moving to reacquire Romanoff, while what was left of the support team was still engaging Rogers.

“Jesus Christ,” Rollins muttered, setting his jaw at hearing the TOC glossing over civilian hazards and potential casualties on the bridge and the roadway below.

“This is out of hand,” Brock said, over the squad’s local frequency.

“Arrival- less than one minute,” the TOC advised, giving final directions to the drivers to catch up with Rogers.

“Standby,” Rumlows ordered over the comms.

Jack sent the bolt forward on his rifle, making the weapon ready. He took off his seatbelt, letting his hand hover by the handle on his door, ready to hit the ground running as soon as the vehicle
slowed enough for him to get out. He inhaled a deep, measured breath, his eyes leveling and searching the road ahead of them, scanning the faces of the civilians that ran down the road as his squad charged up it.

“Go! Go! Go!” the Commander barked through the comms.

Rollins and his men bailed from their SUV, as it slid to a stop. Jack clocked Romanoff leaned into the back of a silver Bronco and a rifle at her feet. Dennison and his men had her covered, as Jack continued the approach on Rogers from the left flank. Brock came up with his team from the right.

"Drop the shield, Cap! Get on your knees! Get on your knees!” Rumlow yelled, his pistol trained on the Captain. “Get down! Get down!”

For whatever reason, Rogers looked like his fight was gone. Jack didn’t expect, and he certainly didn’t trust, that it could be this easy. Rogers let the shield fall from his arm and slowly raised his hands, as the operators moved to surround the trio of targets.

Rumlow kicked at the back of the Captain's leg, telling him, “Get on your knees! Now!” Rogers fell to his knees, his hands still raised in surrender. “Don’t move.”

Brock holstered his pistol, while Jack and his men moved up to cover him and close off any path of escape for Rogers. Jack stopped, just off the Captain's shoulder, his sights trained on Rogers’ head. Rumlow took a pair of handcuffs off his belt. They would do until the men on the APC approached with the shackles.

Overhead, a news helicopter hovered, with a view of the whole scene. Rumlow glanced up over his shoulder. Turning back to his work, he told Rollins, “Put the gun down. Not here.” Jack hesitated, knowing he had the best position for the shot to put down Rogers if he tried anything. “Not here,” Brock repeated, and Jack took a step back, lowering his weapon.

He signaled for the arrest team to come in from the APC and take control of Rogers. Rollins inhaled an even breath to temper his adrenaline. He knew Rumlow was right. The public execution of Steve Rogers on national TV was the last thing anyone wanted. But until the Captain was shackled and secure in the personnel carrier, Rollins was still on edge, not believing for a second that Rogers would give up without a fight. That wasn’t the man he knew. It wasn’t the soldier they’d trained. He watched, with a wary eye, as the Captain was guided to his feet and escorted to the transport vehicle.

May 2014

“How the fuck are they always one step ahead?” Rollins hissed, stabbing a finger at the open back of the APC.

Somewhere between the arrest and arrival in the alley, Rogers, Romanoff, and their friend, a man facial recognition in the TOC identified as Sam Wilson, a former pararescue, had escaped. Jack had been pissed since the moment they opened the back of the prisoner transport and found Emery unconscious and a hole cut through the bottom of the steel floor of the vehicle. Emery’s partner was gone, along with the three prisoners.

Rumlow put up a hand and gave him a warning glare, before he threw a look over his shoulder to see if any of their men were close enough to hear. “Calm down, for fuck’s sake,” he growled.

“You’re gonna tell me to calm down,” Jack argued, “when-“
“The fuck else m’I s’posed to do, huh?” Brock growled. He shifted his weight back, turning to look around the alley, wiping a hand down over his mouth. “We’re running out of time,” he muttered.

Rollins’ eyes ran over the faces of the squad. Like him, they were a mixture of confusion and anger over the escape of Rogers and his cohorts. They had no ID on the soldier who was in the back of the APC with Emery and the prisoners or how they had even known about the order for Delta to intercept Rogers and take over where the HYDRA SF team had failed.

Rumlow turned his back on the APC, standing shoulder to shoulder with Jack to quietly tell him, “Take Bravo Team to the bank and meet the reclamation team. Secure the Asset, until Command can get the rest of his support team on site to relieve you. I’ll catch up.”

“Where are you going to be?” Jack questioned, moving to fall in beside him as Rumlow walked back to the SUV.

“Somebody’s gotta explain this cluster fuck to Pierce,” Brock flatly answered. He pulled open the front passenger door, pausing to give Jack a once over. “Unless you wanna do it...”

Jack smirked. “No, thanks.”

Rumlow snorted. “Get to the bank,” he told him. “I’ll meet you there.”

“Yes, Sir.”

May 2014

Jack slipped his phone back into the cargo pocket on his left pant leg. His lips flinched to the side in a quick frown, irritated by the afternoon’s events that landed him at the disused federal savings bank and forcing the call he’d just made to cancel dinner with Libby. He knew her too well to believe she wasn’t disappointed. He heard it in her voice, despite the smile he could tell she was trying on.

“Damn,” he muttered, giving one last look across the metal doors of the bank’s lobby entrance.

Rollins turned for the doorway beside the empty teller windows, turning to the right into the corridor to the vault in the back of the building. The programmers from Dover had taken up residency two days ago, when the Asset was set loose on Fury. They needed a place secure enough to go unbothered and that may be able to contain Barnes, in the event of a breakdown. The vault gate was opened for Rollins, without needing to make the request, and promptly locked again behind him.

Jack stood off to the side, his teammates spread out around the room to keep an eye on the Asset, while the techs calibrated their equipment and made repairs to the Soldier’s damaged metal arm. In his ear, the controller advised that Rumlow and Pierce were arriving.

Rollins spun around, hearing metal falling and the clamor of the techs, seeing the technician who had been working on the Asset’s arm roll and tumble away to the floor from his chair. His weapon snapped up, as did the rifles of his teammates around the room, the sights of his rifle immediately lining to the Asset’s face and the safety thumbed off in one fluid movement.

Barnes didn’t move. He sat on the edge of his seat, his fists clenched and chest heaving. Jack didn’t blink, staring at his target and trying to read him, looking for anything that might broadcast his next move. But there was nothing. He only stared back at him, maybe even through him.
There was something off about him. Jack hadn’t seen the expression the Soldier wore since the crash in Lom. He was disoriented, almost dazed, like he wasn’t in the vault with them. Rollins blinked, lowering the barrel of his rifle for an unobstructed view to study the man in front of him.

“Hold,” Jack ordered, slowly moving his rifle to hang by its sling in front of him, his hand still on the grip, just in case he was wrong. He didn’t take his eyes off of Barnes, when he told the Program staff to wait outside.

“Boss?” Emery questioned.

“Standby,” Rollins maintained, as the doctor and techs hurried out of the vault. “Hold your positions.”

Watching the Soldier, Rollins began to relax. He’d seen this before. Yes, the programming was compromised and clearly failing, but Barnes wasn’t completely free. It would be awhile. He would need time to orient himself and understand whatever was going through his head. The only thing that concerned Rollins was how quickly the breakdown had come. He knew from his time with the Program that they were nowhere near exceeding the operational window for the Asset’s programming. With no signs of any major trauma, Jack was confused about what could have triggered Barnes’ regression.

For the next few minutes, it was silent. Barnes never moved and Jack had withdrawn his hand from his weapon.

Behind him, Jack heard the lock and handle of the vault gate being opened. He turned his head to see Secretary Pierce and Rumlow walk in, followed by the Program staff close at their heels and the rest of Pierce’s escort. Brock sent Jack a look, seeming to be a little wary as to why his men were holding weapons on Barnes. Pierce walked past Rollins, gesturing with his raised hands to settle the room and Jack motioned for the guns on the Asset to be lowered.

Jack watched with interest, as Pierce ordered Barnes to give a mission report and the Soldier failed to respond. He shifted where he stood, moving to see around Pierce and watch the Asset. There was a twitch; an involuntary leveling of Jack’s eyes at the back of Pierce’s head, as the Secretary drew back and struck Barnes across the face for not answering him a second time. No one else seemed to notice his reaction and Jack inhaled to reset his pulse.

He had little respect for the way Pierce did business, at times, and the Secretary was trying his tolerance now. Rollins didn’t expect the latent sense of camaraderie from being the Asset’s support team those years ago. Feeling his jaw set, his eyes ticked over to Rumlow. Brock’s expression told Jack the sentiment wasn’t his alone. He turned his attention back to Pierce as he pulled over a stool to sit at eye level and continue speaking to the Asset.

As Jack listened in, he understood how the break had happened. It was Rogers. For all the science and technology put into the Program for decades, the failsafes and contingencies, no one had considered or planned for this; for Barnes to literally come face to face with his past. How could anyone have known?

The Secretary ordered Barnes to be wiped. Pierce had said his piece to the Soldier, finding nothing but confusion and questioning in the replies from Barnes. Rollins knew it was coming, but he had never been around to see it for himself. Rumlow had, and Jack saw the discomfort in the way his friend moved, turning away and his gaze drifting downward as the techs stepped forward to put the Soldier back into the machine.

Rollins turned his attention back to Barnes, as the techs lined his arms on the chair and put a rubber
mouthpiece between his teeth. With a couple touches of the control panel by the chair, the tech activated the restraints to clamp over the Asset’s arms, as a new whine and hum sounded from the machine.

The wounded confusion was gone from Barnes’ face, replaced now with what Jack could only describe as defiance. The Asset’s breathing turned deep and Rollins was transfixed by the scene, admiring the newly found will in Barnes. The arms of the machine shifted forward, lining itself to the Soldier’s head before closing on the sides of his face. Rollins swallowed, swearing he could feel the electric current that went through the machine in the air, as the Asset cried out in agony. Pierce turned his back on the scene and started for the door, seemingly completely unaffected. Rumlow followed him out, but not before giving one more look to Barnes from over his shoulder as he went. Barnes continued his pain-filled screams and Jack felt a shudder go down his spine.
Chapter 50

May 2014

"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 to tell the truth. SHIELD is not what we thought it was. It's been taken over by HYDRA."

“Fuck me,” Rumlow breathed out.

Jack took his eyes off the speaker in the hall ceiling above them, his gaze leveling as it met Rumlow’s. Brock looked over his shoulder and around the handful of teammates he and Jack had been walking with. Over the building PA, Rogers was still talking.

“Alexander Pierce is their leader. The STRIKE and Insight crew are HYDRA as well.”

Turning to Jack, Brock ordered, “Get upstairs. Pierce is with the Council. Stay on him.” He motioned for everyone to keep moving, adding, “We need to get to the Insight control room, lock it down.”

Rollins motioned for Greer and Cephas to follow him upstairs, splitting off from Rumlow and the others to sprint down the hall and down to the east elevators in the tower.

“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.”

The longer Rogers went on, the higher Jack’s pulse went. Running through the halls, Jack and the others juked and pushed past agents dumbfounded and looking up to listen to the Captain’s speech.

“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.”

No one tried to stop them. Maybe they didn’t realize who they were, too in shock to see anything other than uniforms and gear running by. Maybe they thought they were SHIELD Security or SF soldiers who would protect them. Jack impatiently watched the numbers climb on the elevator display, telling his men, through a tight jaw, “Weapons holstered, ‘til we see what’s going on up there. Let Pierce control the Council.”

“If he can’t?” Cephas wondered.

Jack swept his head. “Then we wait for his order.”

Rollins knew the Council members could be valuable prisoners. He wouldn’t presume to execute them. If Pierce was smart, he’d understand they were valuable hostages to have, too.

Walking in to the World Security Council Chambers, Jack was a little relieved to see the Council members still alive. Cephas stayed near Rollins, after Jack gave a jut of his chin to send Greer to the far side of the room. It kept two operators between them and the chamber doors and placed the third to keep an eye on any possible escape to the helipad outside. Pierce was keeping a wary eye
on the room, his arms crossed defiantly, as Councilman Rockwell called him a “smug son of a bitch.”

Singh motioned toward Pierce, expectantly telling Rollins, “Arrest him.”

Jack drew his pistol from its holster, pointing it at Singh and eliminating any doubt in the room that Pierce was still in charge. Rollins’ men stood by, waiting for orders from him or the Secretary.

Pierce pocketed his hands, saying, “I guess I’ve got the floor.”

“What’s the meaning of this?” Rockwell demanded, looking around the soldiers in the room.

“I’m afraid Capt. Rogers is right,” Pierce airily conceded, starting a lazy walk across the room.

Jack reholstered his weapon, as the Secretary crossed in front of him. “You’d be surprised how few people in this building actually work for you,” he noted, with a tip of his head toward Rockwell.

“HYDRA...inside SHIELD?” Councilman Yen questioned.

“This is preposterous!” Singh argued.

“For years.” Pierce’s brow rose, correcting, “For decades, I’m afraid. Watching, manipulating. Waiting for the right moment to reveal ourselves.” He looked down through the wall of windows of the Council Chambers to the Potomac below. From the side of his eye, Jack saw the disturbance of the water as the hangar doors opened to retract from over the Insight bays, and Pierce added, “A little sooner than planned, but nevertheless, that moment is now.”

The Secretary touched the corner of his cell phone against his chin thoughtfully, watching Insight 02 slowly rise into the air just ahead of her sisters. He turned away from the windows, looking to Councilman Singh. “Let me ask you a question,” he began. “What if Pakistan marched into Mumbai tomorrow, and you knew that they were going to drag your daughters into a soccer stadium for execution,” he paused, handing Singh a glass of champagne, “and you could just stop it, with the flick of a switch, wouldn’t you?” He looked across the Council. “Wouldn’t you all?”

Jack read the refusal coming from Singh, in his deep inhale and subtle flex in his jaw.

Rollins’ hands had been folded in front of him and Jack let them part back to his sides, thumbing down the retention on his holster.

“Not if it was your switch,” Singh told him, throwing the glass of champagne away to the floor.

A quiet, if not disappointed, laugh came from Pierce, as he gave a subtle nod of acceptance. The Secretary turned to Rollins, who was already unholstering his weapon, leaving his finger hooked inside the front of the trigger guard and allowing the weight of the barrel to turn the gun over against his palm and let him turn the weapon with the grip held out for Pierce to take.

Pierce raised Jack’s pistol, taking aim at Singh, when Rollin’s attention was drawn past Singh to Hawley. Hawley kicked into Singh’s hip, sending him in an off balance tumble away and out of the line of fire, before she struck out, throwing her wrist into Pierce’s throat, as her other hand tore the gun from his grip. She made a move, appearing to throw something at Greer, as Rollins and Cephas came forward to engage.

From the side of his eye, Jack saw Greer seize and fall to the floor unconscious. It was only a fraction of a second before Hawley flung the pistol in her hand at Jack, catching him in the throat and sending him to the ground on his back. Rollins grabbed at his throat, rolling to his shoulder to get back up and feeling to make sure the pain that choked him hadn’t come with any bleeding.
Getting to his feet, Rollins already knew the woman in the blue skirt and jacket wasn’t Hawley. Seeing her take down Cephas, he had his suspicions. The woman moved like Romanoff. He just wasn’t sure how she’d changed her appearance so convincingly to be able to get into the room with the others.

Jack picked up his gun from the ground, bringing up his sights as Romanoff turned on him from Cephas. She grabbed his forearm, pushing it away as she spun and caught Rollins by the back of the neck, slamming his head down against the table in front of him. Falling backward, his legs weren’t underneath him anymore and his vision blacked.

... Jack came to, slowly. He crushed his eyes closed against the pressure and throbbing he felt in his head, rolling to his side. Opening his eyes again, he saw Cephas and Greer on the floor, either dead or unconscious. There were a couple Council Members on the deck and he wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard the door to the helipad shut, as he slowly sat up. Looking around, Rollins caught sight of the shattered glass wall and a body laid out. Sitting up slowly, Jack noticed a piece of material wadded up at his feet.

Turning the material over in his hand, Jack complained under his breath, “Photostatic veil.” He swept his head. “That clever bitch,” he hatefully smirked, tossing the veil aside.

He was shaky getting to his feet. He reached a hand out to the edge of the table to steady himself, for a moment. Standing again, he could see the body in the next room was Pierce. The blood soaking into the Secretary’s shirt was unmistakable, from where Jack stood. He didn’t see any bleeding wounds on his men and went to check on Pierce. Standing over him, Rollins recognized the dimming stare of a dying man and let out a tired sigh at the words on Pierce’s last breath, “Hail HYDRA.”

"Fuck,” Jack muttered.

Rollins turned his attention to his downed teammates. The broken glass crunched and snapped under his boots, as he moved back into the Council Chamber. Carefully eyeing the armor over their chests as he approached, he couldn’t tell if either of his friends was breathing. Stepping past Councilman Yen, Jack dipped down to pick up a pistol from the floor.

Jack took a knee between Cephas and Greer. He was near enough to be able to reach their necks to check for a pulse if he leaned one way or the other, but a loud explosion sent a shudder through the building and Jack’s attention snapped up to the wall of windows to his right. A cloud of thick black smoke began to thin as it rose and Jack could begin to see the shape of something looming large in the windows ahead of him.

"Shit.”

Listing toward the Triskelion was Insight 01. Beyond her, her crippled sisters were falling, as well. It only took a second of watching to prove what his gut told him. The wounded helicarrier was coming straight for him. Jack hesitated for a moment, looking to his friends on the floor, unsure what injuries they might have, but knowing he couldn’t carry two dead weight men. Not fast enough.

Survival instinct told him to run, but Jack couldn’t stop himself from reaching out to touch his fingertips to the necks of his friends. His own adrenalin filled pulse had put a subtle shake in his hand, but Jack still knew the disjointed feel of Greer’s neck. He fumbled to try and find a rhythm on Cephas, as he hazarded a glance back to the windows. He had only seconds to make his escape,
but Jack froze. His eyes snapped back down to Cephas, adjusting the pressure his fingers had to his neck. **There.**

"Come on," Jack coaxed, through grit teeth, fighting against a wave of nausea for his balance as he stood, pulling at Cephas’ arms to get him to sit up.

Rollins crouched down, leaning low to get his shoulder under Cephas. Jack’s knee almost failed him, in a flash of disorientation, as he pushed himself to stand up with his friend’s added weight over him. Upright again, Jack moved as fast as he could, still shaking off the haze that had lingered from the blow to his head from the Widow’s attack. There was a thunderous noise behind him and the floor beneath him shook violently.

Jack didn’t have to look behind him to know that Insight 01 had lost her fight and had crashed into the Triskelion. All he could see was the double doors ahead of him in the hall that led to the breezeway connection between Towers B and C. A forceful rush of air hit him in the back, clouding the air with a heavy gray dust, as the sound of a roaring avalanche of concrete chased after them.

Burdened with Cephas, he ran as fast as he could. Jack’s shoulder and hip slammed into the door, throwing it open ahead of them, as the air grew thick enough to choke. The wind howled through the door behind him as Rollins turned the first corner he saw and dove to his knees, rolling Cephas off of his shoulder to the floor and ducking over him to shelter his friend from the burst of debris that shot itself through the hall. Several seconds later, the tremor in the building stopped and the roar in the air dissolved until the only sound left was Jack’s labored breathing and the repeating evacuation message over the PA from the speakers above them in Tower C.

Jack sat up, turning onto his hip and falling back against the wall. He looked around. To his left, the floor was littered with chunks of crumbled concrete and the dirty air swirled in the breeze and sunlight pouring in from the doorway. Rollins looked down at Cephas, still unconscious on the floor in front of him. Jack took a deep breath to try and reign in his pulse and breathing again. He coughed at the gritty air he took in, turning to spit and clear out his mouth.

He stood up, using his shoulder into the wall to steady himself. Stepping over Cephas, Jack carefully made his way to the corner again, peering around the side of the wall. Squinting against the dusty wind and brightness of daylight, Jack stepped back into the hallway, taking a pair of small steps forward toward the jagged lip of polished concrete that used to be the breezeway between Tower C and the entrance to the World Security Council Chambers. He craned his neck, not daring to get any closer to the edge but morbid curiosity wanting to see what was at the bottom of the wide column of black smoke tilting away from the Triskelion in the wind. If he didn’t already know what he was looking at, he wouldn’t have been able to recognize the destroyed hull of the helicarrier in the pulverized heap of what used to be Tower B and the flightline.

The wind began to shift and the smoke inched toward him. Jack backed away and turned to go back around the corner. He raised his arm, using the crook of his elbow to wipe down over his face. He crushed his eyes closed, waiting a long moment to let his eyes tear out the grainy particulates blurring his vision, before making a second swipe of his sleeve at his face. Jack bent down, taking hold of Cephas by the arms to tug him up again. Jack draped Cephas’ arm over his shoulder and straightened up to drag him along at his side. His balance was still too untrustworthy to shoulder him the way Jack had before. He made his way to the closest elevator and used his credentials to override the building AI and recall an elevator to them.

Down in the lobby of Tower C, Jack set Cephas down, propping his back up against the wall. Jack took a deep breath of the slightly cleaner air and looked around. About half of the lobby floor was
covered in a cascade of concrete and steel. By some undeserved grace, Tower B and the carrier seemed to have fallen away from the rest of the Triskelion toward the flightline and river. Rollins attention snapped over to the echoing sounds of voices across the way.

Jack’s arm shot up to wave over the company of suited and uniformed men who seemed to be coming back into the building to look for survivors, shouting, “Hey! Over here!”

A few men split off from the others, rushing across the lobby to help. “Are you okay?” one man asked, looking Rollins over as the other two men went to Cephas. “Do you know about anyone else?”

Rollins nodded to say he was fine, watching the volunteers check Cephas as he answered, “Secretary Pierce, Councilmen Yen, Rockwell, and Singh, and STRIKE 2nd Lt. Greer were all in the World Security Council Chambers. ...They’re all dead.”

The two men with Cephas each took hold of an arm, lifting him to be carried between them. The first man went to catch up with the rest of the search party and Rollins followed the others out of the lobby to the bridge. On the way, Jack stripped off his armor and dropped it behind him. He tugged his combat shirt off overhead, turning it inside out to wipe over his face and head. Finally out of danger, he had slowed down enough to be aware of the tenderness of the side of his head, as he wiped his shirt to clean his face. With another thick cough and spit at the ground to clear his nose, Jack stopped on the bridge, as people continued to stream out and evacuate.

Looking back and up at the Triskelion, he recalled how impressive she once stood, shining in the afternoon light that first day he’d arrived for his assignment there. He gave a slow sweep of his head, suddenly disappointed and angered. It was all over now. He was compromised and had no idea who else of his team had survived. But there was still procedure to follow.

Jack unclipped the straps of the drop rig on his leg. He stripped the pistol from its holster and tucked it into the back of his waistband. He took off his gun belt and tossed it aside, untucking his t-shirt to tug down and hide his gun. Rollins turned and fell in with the crowd crossing the bridge. He reached out, catching the arm of a woman who stumbled when the heel of her shoe caught in a crack in the pavement damaged by some debris. He let her stay there, clung to his arm and choking back tears in shock of the disaster, until he could pass her off to someone on the other end of the bridge and make his way through the crowd before anyone recognized him.
Chapter 51

Jack stopped, his head snapped up and eyes over to the bedroom door. As if he wasn't already tense, the urgent knock from the front door set him on edge. He moved quickly downstairs, barely making a sound as he took the stairs two at a time and thumbed back the hammer on the gun he grabbed off the dresser on his way out. At the bottom of the staircase, whoever was outside knocked again. Jack moved silently to the door, pointing the gun into the wood at chest height with his finger hooked in the trigger, as he checked the peephole. Seeing Libby outside, nervously looking around and reaching to knock a third time, he let out his breath.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered, decocking the gun and tucking it into the back waistband of his jeans. He shook his head at himself that he'd considered just shooting through the door before deciding to look. Rollins took a step back and unlocked the door. The relief was evident on Libby's face when she looked up and saw Jack standing there.

"Oh, thank god," she breathed. "You didn't go to work today."

Jack gave the street a quick glance in both directions, before shutting the door and locking it again. He heard Libby's keys and purse being set on the table in the hall and found himself toe to toe with her when he turned away from the door. Libby's arms cinched around his neck, as she kissed his cheek. Rollins recovered from the surprise and put his arms around her.

"When I couldn't get a hold of you, I just had to look for you and-"

"Found me," Jack grinned, letting her go, hoping the smile would help her settle down. He pointed up the stairs, fumbling, "Lib, I, uh-"

"Oh, of course," she tittered, gesturing a hand up. "I'm sure they need all the help they can get."

"Right," Jack halfheartedly agreed, heading back up stairs.

He heard her hurried footsteps behind him, trying to keep up with his long strides. Rollins pulled the gun from his jeans and added it to his go bag. He didn't hear her shoes on the hardwood floor and Jack noticed her stopped at the doorway, watching him.

"Jack?"

"Yeah, sweetheart..." he distractedly answered, zipping the pocket closed on the side of his bag.

"Jack...your face," she seemed to hesitate, her hand vaguely gesturing up at her neck. "Your throat. Are you okay? What happened?"

Fucking Romanoff, that's what happened, he wanted to say. His head still throbbed from getting forced into the table and there were random spasms in the right side of his neck from where the gun had clipped him. In spite of himself, a smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. He had to give it to her. That photostatic veil was clever. But he hadn't been thinking about that when he let Libby in. He didn't think about the bruising that had started to set in.

"Work, hon," he shrugged. Rollins sent her a warm grin, adding, "Don't worry. Doesn't even hurt anymore."

Libby came in to the room, folding her arms across herself. Jack was back to stuffing a change of
clothes in his bag. He could feel her eyes on him and he began to wonder if his answer had satisfied her. He had to pass her on his way to the small walk-in closet. When he did, he paused to give her cheek a kiss to be more reassuring.

"It's all over the news and we could all see the smoke..." She followed after him, for a few steps, as he crossed the room to the closet. "People were saying it was another terrorist attack, like New York. I tried to call, but I couldn't get through to your phone...so, I came here."

"Cell network is down for the area, hon," he told her, popping the side of his fist into the wall when the latch on the concealed panel didn't give way.

Opening the compartment in the wall, Jack grabbed a loaded M&P in one hand and pair of full magazines and two stacks of cash in the other. Libby watched wide-eyed and confused, as he packed away the extra ammo and money in his go bag. He slipped the gun into a holster off the dresser top and clipped it into the waistband at the small of his back. Jack grabbed a t-shirt out of the drawer and yanked it on quickly overhead, tugging down the hem to conceal the gun behind him. It hadn't even taken him a minute to stash the money and gun and finish changing, but he was aware of every second passing.

Turning around, Libby stood there in stunned silence, her lips parted to breath. Jack sighed, feeling a little guilty for her being there. She was obviously concerned. Why else would she have left her job to come over? He moved to her, feeling his shirt drawn tight around him as her fists bunched the material she grabbed at his sides. Jack wrapped his arms around her shoulders and Libby shook her forehead against his chest.

She'd ruined the plan. He meant to slip away before anyone had time to check on him; before SHIELD or Homeland, or anyone else, came to arrest him or put him down. Libby didn't know any better. She meant well. She had no idea he'd meant to make a run for the safe house and let her think he was dead. It'd have been easier for her that way, in its own backward logic.

"Jack," her voice cracked, and he frowned at hearing it. "Jack, at work...they were saying-" Libby took in a shaky breath before she went on. "People heard that the attack was HYDRA; that SHIELD had been infiltrated and-" She pulled back to look up at him. "Jack, they said SHIELD was attacked by sleeper agents; that they were everywhere..."

He knew she wanted to ask, but she didn't know how or have the nerve. And he felt bad for it. Rollins didn't have to say anything. All he had to do was look back at her and give a small nod. The breath fell out of her and her face paled. Libby let go, turning out of his arms and retreating a pair of weak-kneed steps.

"Libby, sweetheart," Jack began, although he wasn't quite sure how to finish.

"You?" she breathed out, her expression completely wounded. "Jack, why? How could y-"

Libby stopped herself, seeming unable to get the words out. Her hand splayed over her belly, her breathing was jagged, and her eyes ticked around the room. Rollins' guilt tugged at him again and he thought the poor thing might faint, or something, if she was left to stand there on her own. Jack stepped up and put his hands on her arms to steady her.


She gulped down a breath and crushed her eyes closed. Libby swallowed hard and shook her head, breathing in deeply through her nose. Rollins soothingly rubbed his hands up and down the backs
"That's better," he nodded. "You're alright."

Finding her words again, she questioned, "HYDRA, Jack? How could you do that?"

Jack shook his head, not expecting her to understand, when he said, "The world's gone to shit, Lib. HYDRA's going to bring it to order. All these wars and terrorist attacks, the disorganization and chaos? It can all be stopped. The world just needs one firm hand to guide it. I know it seems frightening now, but it's for the greater good, for everyone."

Her hands went to her face, hiding it while she shook her head and raked her fingers back into her hair. "I can't believe this," Libby muttered.

"Libby, I can't stay here anymore," he sighed, aware of how much time he was losing. "I have to--"

"You're leaving," she interrupted.

It wasn't so much a question as a panicked realization and Jack was cut again by the hurt and worry in her eyes. First HYDRA and then his leaving. Jack might as well have been putting a bullet into her chest with each new thing he said. He nodded, curving one hand beside her neck and cradling her cheek with the other. Her hands wrapped over his wrists and Jack pulled her to him again.

"I'm sorry," he softly offered, turning to press a kiss into the side of her hair, because he was.

Still in shock, she stammered, "Jack, you ca- You're leaving and I- What's happening?"

Jack straightened up enough to put his hand between them and tilt her chin up to see him. "Lib, sweetheart, listen," he told her, looking into her eyes. "This is it. I'm sorry, but I've got to go. People are gonna come." She opened her mouth to speak, but he swept his head for her not to.

"Listen to me," he insisted. "They're going to look for you and ask you questions. Don't hide. Just keep going to work and wait for them to come to you. When they ask questions about me, you tell them the truth."

Her head was shaking slowly and he worried she wasn’t really hearing him. “Tell them whatever they want to know, because you have nothing to hide,” he assured her. “You haven't done anything wrong. Okay?” His gaze dipped to find hers again, insisting, “Libby, you haven't done anything wrong. All they'll want is to find me. You'll be fine, just wait for them and tell them the truth. You didn't know. I never told you. Okay?”

Tears spilled over her lashes from where they'd been pooling. "You lied to me," she barely managed.

"No," he shook his head, "I didn't lie. I just didn't tell you everything. And I'm sorry about that. I really am."

Rollins sighed. “I'm sorry you have to go through this and what's coming next, but I've got to go. And you do, too," Jack moved back, picking up his bag and putting it on his shoulder. "Go home or go to a friend's, but don't stay here, hon," he warned. “They're gonna be here soon and they won't knock.” He cupped his hands to her face and thumbed her cheeks dry. "I don't want them to hurt you by mistake."

Jack took her by the hand, leading the way downstairs. He grabbed her purse and keys from the table and put them in her hands, guiding her to the door and throwing the locks open again. She still looked so confused; still hurt, watching him open the door. The more he saw of it, the worse
Rollins felt. Libby was a good person. She deserved answers and closure; things he didn't have time for. Libby had been incredible to him. She doted on him and showed him off, proud to tell her friends about him. She put up with the unusual demands from work on his time and mind. She never asked anything from him and gave him everything she had to offer.

The guilt fully took hold, when he looked at her tear streaked cheeks and realized he hadn't give her enough. He had kept her like a consolation prize, while he secretly pined for Allison. She deserved more from him. She deserved better, and he knew it. He knew she meant it when she told him she loved him and he resented himself, knowing he didn't give the words the same weight when he said them to her. He did love her and had let her get close, but he stubbornly kept her back without letting on, still wary after the whole disaster with Claire and holding on to the fantasy that something would change and he and Allison would get their chance.

Jack gently took her face in his hands, pressing a long kiss to her lips. With his forehead tipped to hers and her hands curled around his wrists, he promised, "I did love you, Lib. I'm sorry it came to this, but you'll be better off without me. Take care of yourself, sweetheart."

Libby held on, begging, "Jack, please."

He turned his wrists out of her grip and took hold of her arm to move her through the doorway, urging her, "You've got to go, Lib. It's not safe for you here anymore."

Outside the door, it was hard to tell if the sirens in the city were rushing toward the Triskelion or after him. With one more desperate grasp at his arm, Libby stopped them both on the way down the stoop. Rollins allowed it, looking back at her. She took a deep breath, her eyes a bit clearer and looking a little braver.

"Jack," Libby began, giving his arm a squeeze, "be careful...please?"

Jack looked down, feeling her let go of him. He climbed back up a pair of steps, giving her another kiss and a warm smile. She did her best to grin back, but there was a tremble in her lip he could see her struggling to hide. She really did deserve better.
Chapter 52

May 2014

“New arrivals on the road, Sir.”

Rollins nodded, still watching the news coverage of the incident in DC. “Verify IDs and advise the watch,” he replied.

Seated at the head of the conference table in the war room, Jack tuned back in to the broadcast. He was the ranking officer of everyone who had made it in to the safe house, so far. Most likely, it would stay that way. Rollins had been onsite and in command since arriving a couple hours ago. He had gone straight to the command center, looking for casualty reports or a list of known survivors. After checking in, Jack took a quick shower in the barracks to wash off the dust and grit he could still feel from the collapse and put on a fresh pair of BDU pants and a t-shirt from Supply. His go bag hadn’t made it to the officer’s quarters yet. It still sat by his feet on the floor.

“Facial recognition confirmed, Sir. They’re all ours. Post 7 notified of incoming.”

Jack didn’t respond to the update. It would be the third time in the hour, if he had. He didn’t ask for names. He didn’t need to. Operators coming in would be all eventually brought into the command center and be put on a roster to be added to a watch rotation. He’d see for himself who else had made it, soon enough. There was no rush and most everyone who’d come in opted to grab some food before formally being counted.

Several minutes passed. Behind him, he heard the techs monitoring security talk amongst themselves, updating posts around the farm that served as the cover for the HYDRA safehouse. He overheard them acknowledge that the new arrivals were on their way inside. The news coverage of the Triskelion collapse held his attention until he heard the announcement, “The next group is here, Commander.” and the door opening.

"Look at that fuckin' mess," he said, smirking and tipping his head toward the television coverage. "Look at her burn."

Rollins laughed. It was all he could do, still in disbelief of what had happened that afternoon. About what had happened in the Council chambers; about Greer and his narrow escape with Cephas. He certainly couldn’t try to explain to anyone why he felt an occasional twinge of sadness at seeing the smoking rubble on TV.

Just about everyone else in the room joined him, with the exception of the men working at the computers and on the phones. Rollins stood up and made his way down the length of the table to greet the new arrivals. He cleared his throat on the way, trying to restrain the relief he felt at seeing Addams standing, apparently unscathed, among the new arrivals.

"'Bout time you sons a' bitches showed up," he said, shaking Mickelson's hand and then everyone else's. "Haslip's gonna show you the barracks." He looked to Allison. "Didn't know if you'd make it. I'll do you a favor and give you the officer's quarters."

"Don't put yourself out on my account, Jack," she said, with an indifferent shrug.

"Wouldn't want to be on anyone's bad side if they come to find out you had to shack up with these animals," he told her, before looking around the rest of the group. "Rest up. We'll get everyone into the watch rotation tomorrow. Anybody need any medical?"
Allison shook her head and the others answered aloud or shook their head 'no'. Rollins nodded and gestured for Haslip to show them out. He watched them file out of the room, giving Allison an extra once over to be sure he saw no injury for himself. When the door shut again, Rollins turned to one of the agents working the communications terminals.

"Any word from Cmdr. Rumlow?" he wondered.

“No, Sir. Not yet," he shook his head. “We have another vehicle inbound. He’s not with them either.”

Jack slowly nodded. “Keep me updated on the casualty lists as they come in,” he ordered, moving for the door.

“Yes, Sir.”

In the hall, Jack let out a tired sigh. He scratched his hand back through his hair, still a little damp from the shower he was finally able to get. He made his way upstairs and outside. There was a pair of agents sitting of the log benches around the fire pit and talking as they smoked. Rollins walked over to bum a cigarette. He actually left with two, one lit in his hand and a spare tucked behind his ear. Taking a long drag as he wandered off toward the lake, Jack was lost to trying to figure out how long it’d been since he had a smoke.

*March of ‘07? No.*

He shook his head. It was February that year. Claire had been so proud that he kicked the habit with time to spare before the wedding. Looking at the cigarette cupped in his hand as he exhaled the smoke, he wondered what she would say to him now for smoking again. *Fuck it.* He’d had a hell of a day. That it was his first smoke in over seven years was still an accomplishment. She’d probably just frown and shake her head the way she did when-

“*The fuck?*” he shook his head, ashing his cigarette before another drag.

His brow creased down, frustrated with himself for being so distracted. He looked back over his shoulder, hearing a car horn tapped a couple of times, to see another black SUV stop at the end of the drive by the house. “*Good,*” he muttered to himself, with a small nod of approval. He carried on with his lazy walk. He ignored his curiosity about who else might have just arrived, knowing he needed the few minutes of quiet for himself. All he needed to know was Rumlow wasn’t in that car.

No one that they knew had been in Tower B had shown up yet, here or at any of the other safe houses, except for himself. They were still hacking and mining hospital systems to check rosters against identified patient names to try and track down HYDRA operatives. As far as they knew, no one else who was in the tower when it collapsed had survived. And that most likely included Rumlow.

“*God dammit,*” he quietly lamented, the smoke on his breath rising and his head turning down.

He stopped walking, his gaze panning over the lake sparkling in the distance but not appreciating the peaceful view. He was trying to figure out how many of his men he might have lost, from Delta and the other teams. Jack ran down what he could remember of the garrison schedule, trying mentally to place teams and squads in the Triskelion and figure out who would have survived. He frowned, realizing that regardless of their duty stations, he couldn’t expect everyone to have held their positions and not engage the enemy, whichever side they were on.
Jack muttered another curse, impatiently realizing he wouldn’t know for days, or weeks, how many of his friends and colleagues were dead. Regardless of which side their loyalties fell on, there were 246 men and women under his command that he had fought and trained with over the years. Of the 247 members of his family that could be left, assuming Brock was found, Jack had only seen and heard of 41 still being alive. He knew he would only hear reports about the 109 STRIKE operators that were HYDRA, but it didn’t stop him wondering about the others anyway.

“More will come,” he assured himself.

He was still wary about how many would make it to him or to one of the other safehouses though. On his next pull from his cigarette, Jack turned back to look at the house, reminded and grateful of who he had seen for himself.

She’s here. She’s okay.

Flicking his middle finger against his cigarette in his hand, Jack held onto the smoke in his lungs for a moment, nodding to himself that Allison was alright. At the moment, it was all he had. He had a backpack of the few things he could take from home that he hadn’t even unpacked. He’d given up his privacy to put Allison in the officer’s quarters. She was the only woman there. It was the right thing to do, but Jack would have preferred the silence in his own room than to the company of the barracks. Those disruptions to his life were small in comparison to what he considered he’d just done to Libby.

The things he’d left behind we’re just that. Once he figured out where he would be stationed for his next assignment, he could replace it all. To save face, SHIELD would likely list him, and anyone else outted by Rogers’ little speech, as KIA. They’d have a hell of a time recovering the public’s trust, if they admitted how many HYDRA agents had been in their midst for so long, now that they knew they were there and would start to look. Rollins would get reassigned with HYDRA as soon as possible. His prospects were good. Optimistically, he could expect another command position or maybe there would be a slot available with Task Force 3, or one of the other SpecOps teams, he could throw his weight around for and stay operational. He would move on with relative ease.

Libby would have to adjust. Like he’d told her, people would be coming for her. He figured it would be the FBI. If people started looking too hard at SHIELD, they might be worried about the level of cooperation the agency had with the CIA and NSA. The Bureau would likely be the most trustworthy to investigate the security breach, in the public's eye. They likely wouldn’t detain her more than a day for questioning. They certainly wouldn’t jail her. It’d be pretty apparent to them that she had nothing to do with anything. But Libby would still be frightened.

If they were polite, the men that came to collect her would be in suits, flashing badges and hiding guns. They’d know right away she wouldn’t be any trouble. But if they were sending uniformed officers around to gather up witnesses and collaborators, it’d be an embarrassment that would be hard for whoever saw to forget. Her bosses at the DIA would have to re-certify her clearances and background checks. She may be reassigned from her position as a Technical Intelligence Analyst, but he couldn’t imagine a reason to fire her. They’d know pretty quickly that he’d never used her and that their agency was never compromised because of her.

Jack figured she’d probably get a few days off of work for them to do their vetting of her again, or she’d voluntarily use some of her time off to get her feet back under her. The routine of work would be good for her, but he could just as easily see her taking some time to spend with her sister and away from suspicious looks. He’d put money on the later, picturing her cooking up a storm in Susan’s kitchen. It always amused him that instead of taking a break and resting when she was stressed she would spend the day in the kitchen. He didn’t complain. She was a fantastic cook. He
snorted, recalling how resistant he was, at first, to sitting on the couch watching DVR’d episodes of Kitchen Nightmares with her. Jack’s grin fell and he put his cigarette back in his lips, feeling a pang of loss at the memory. He considered maybe he had a few more things to adjust to himself than he’d realized.

Rollins was up the next morning by 0500hrs, like always. After he dressed, he went to the Command Center to get an update on casualties and recovered operatives. The numbers hadn’t changed much in the seven hours that had passed since he finally forced himself to hit the rack.

Jack abstained from a morning run and grabbed a plate of eggs and bacon with his coffee instead. He didn’t want to be gone and miss an update. The rest of the agents and operators in the house were slow to rise. No one seemed interested in straying too far either. A couple insomniacs had gone out for a miscellaneous supply run and Jack had pocketed a pack of smokes from the open carton left on the kitchen counter for people to scavenge from. After he passed back through the kitchen to get another cup of coffee and drop off his plate, Jack took a walk out the back door. This time he made it to the edge of the lake, nodding his silent good morning to the pair of sentries he passed keeping watch on the water along the way.

Packing the cigarettes against the heel of his palm, Rollins took a deep breath of the fresh, damp air. The sun was just beginning to rise and hadn’t done anything yet to take the chill out of the breeze off the water or dry the dew beaded up on the tall grass. If he weren’t aware of the armed men 40 or so meters behind him and the fact that, as of yesterday, he was a wanted man, the scenery might almost be enjoyable. As it was, Jack flipped back the top of his hard pack of cigarettes, tucked one into the side of his mouth and slipped the box into the cargo pocket of his BDU pants, hoping for some of the peacefulness to sink in. Sheltering the flame from his lighter with his free hand, Jack lit up and took a long drag.

He surprised himself how easily he fell back in to the vice. Jack tried to take in the ambiance of the nature around him, listening to the frogs hiding somewhere by the water’s edge and the birds singing from the trees, looking for even just a moment’s reprieve from the stress of the day before. But he couldn’t keep his mind from straying back to yesterday.

He got to thinking about Rogers and about how he could have pulled it off. He obviously had Romanoff. She was always an ace in the sleeve. With her training, like Allison, she was worth at least 5 men. But Rogers and Romanoff had been flagged and their clearances disabled. They couldn’t have gotten back into the Triskelion without help from the inside. How the hell did she get a hold of that photostatic veil?

It wasn’t hard to make a list of people who could pull it off. The Captain was a likable guy; a national hero, a legend. Any number of people would offer their assistance. All he needed to do was ask. But to get back into the Triskelion and bring down the Insight carriers would have taken more skill than the average agent would be available to offer and anyone from outside of SHIELD would be lost to navigate their systems, let alone figure out how to get around the buildings. There wasn’t anyone left on the list of traitors that Lucas had given them months ago. They were all dead. Executed by Jack and a small handful of operators Lancaster hand selected. Rumlow himself had overseen the investigation into the threat and they never found any new leads.

“There had to have been more,” Jack muttered to himself, exhaling the smoke in his lungs. “We just didn’t find them.”

Rollins ran through scenarios in his head. A string of tactical gambits and wild what ifs, trying to figure it out. He knew he could discount anyone from Delta being involved. To take down Insight
though, Rogers would have needed someone who was a part of the program.

Jack dropped what was left of his cigarette, listening to the hiss of the cherry falling into the damp grass before snuffing it out under the toe of his boot. “Someone with a high clearance,” he quietly reasoned to himself, that could move around freely in sensitive areas. To get anywhere near Insight, the bay or the control room, they would have to be, “Level 8. ...Or better.”

Rogers himself didn’t even rate to know about Insight. So, how did he know about the project in the first place?

“Fury,” Jack nodded to himself.

Of course. The Captain was always a favorite of his. If Fury had any doubts or concerns, he could have brought Rogers in as a plan B. The Director didn’t trust many people, and it made the man predictable, in some ways. Fury could have s-

No. Fury was already dead. He couldn’t have been any help. “But maybe Hill,” he guessed.

She had the clearance, hadn’t been flagged for any reason, and Fury could have caught her up to speed on Insight. She was a friend of Rogers, already. She was loyal to Fury to a fault. So much so that she woul-

“Motherfucker,” Rollins muttered, turning back to look at the house over his shoulder.

A troubling thought came to him. The clearance, loyalty, and trust. Rogers, Romanoff, and Hill weren’t the only ones Fury favored.

“Allison.”

Jack wiped a hand down over his mouth, his gaze drifting back to the lake in front of him. Being a Horseman came with Level 9 clearance. She knew about Insight. She’d been on the carriers. He’d seen her with his own eyes. Fury had been behind her since day one and she was arguably one of the Captain’s closest friends.

She had always seemed a little too good for them; for HYDRA. She did the work; never questioned orders, but there was something about her, a kind of honesty that never quite fit. It was something part of him had always liked about her and he’d never questioned it before. But, now, Jack was beginning to doubt his judgement, trying to figure out how she could have gotten through the vetting process with the scouts.

“She couldn’t,” he decided, with a sweep of his head.

They were never wrong. Their 4% failure rate was practically an anomaly in itself. The percentage came from the approaches. When their backgrounding had pointed them in the wrong direction, they found out the moment they revealed themselves. Their subject’s reaction or outright refusal was always readable and the errors were immediately eliminated to protect HYDRA’s secret. They had never been wrong about a recruit who made it in to the service.

Rollins shook his head. His moment of peace hadn’t come, and it wouldn’t while he had so many suspicions. Jack turned to head back to the farm house. He’d had enough of his own thoughts and needed the distraction of work. It had only been an hour or so, but maybe there was an update for the casualty lists.
Chapter 53

May 2014

Rollins had only been downstairs in the war room for a few minutes, before he was handed the phone. Hanging up the call, Jack stared at his hand still on the receiver. “Fuck,” he muttered, his mind racing in the few seconds that passed. Rollins straightened up, turning back to face the room.

“Listen up,” he barked, pulling everyone’s attention. “We’ve been compromised. Evac protocol Charlie in effect. Recall operatives to rally for loadout in 20 mikes. Anyone who can’t meet that window, send them on.” Jack watched, as the room sprang to life around him. “Burn it all down.”

Jack left the command center, stalking down the hall and brushing past agents in his way without apology. He had one suspicion about how the safe house location could have been compromised. The one piece that never quite fit was Allison. Despite what Rumlow had told him, the assurances that Allison was vetted, his impression of her was that she was too good for them. It wasn’t that he didn’t want her to be, but there was always a flicker of doubt in the back of his head. The only one he didn’t fully trust their loyalty to HYDRA was her.

He didn’t knock. Rollins marched straight in to the officer’s quarters he’d given up to Allison. She wasn’t in the main room and a quick check of the bathroom confirmed she wasn’t there. Jack looked over the room, pushing a exhale heavy with frustration out of his nose as he wiped a hand over his mouth. He didn’t know where she was, and it only fueled his suspicion.

Jack opened and turned over the drawers from the desk. He pulled the few clothes out of the dresser, throwing them aside, and stripped the bed of its covers, flipping the mattress to see anything hiding beneath. He grabbed her backpack from the floor at the foot of the bed and scattered the contents on the overturned mattress. Sifting through its contents, Jack picked up the gun he found, stashing it in the back of his waistband and moving on. He pushed aside some folders, seeing a tablet lying underneath the HYDRA stamped files.

Taking up the tablet, Jack turned around, giving the room a thorough once over. He set his jaw, determined to find out who had given up the location of the safe house. Rollins went back to the command center, grabbing a tech on his way out with a burn bag and turning him back into the room at the door. Rollins traded the tablet for the bag, telling him, “Open this. I want to see any outbound communication from this device in the last 24 hours.”

Rollins passed off the burn bag to the next person headed out the door. He stood over the tech’s shoulder, watching him connect a cable from his computer to the device. He shook his head when the tech asked if he knew the tablet’s unlock code. His arms crossed tightly over his chest, Rollins had little patience. They were working against the clock for evacuation and he had other things he should be supervising.

“It’s our device,” the tech noted, as his fingers fluttered around his keyboard to unlock the tablet. “It’ll be just a minute for me to backdoor in without the code.” Jack waited for the next update, eyeing the lines of code that ran on the screen as the tech worked. “Actually,” the tech spoke up, “this device is Cmdr. Rumlow’s, Sir.” He shook his head. “There’s been no communication from this device for six days. The last data exchange was via hardline to our servers.”

“You’re certain?” Rollins checked.

The tech nodded. “Yes, Sir. Nothing in or out of this device for six days. Anything else with it,
Sir?"

"No," Jack frowned, deep in thought, holding his hand out to wait for the tablet to be disconnected and returned to him.

He wondered for a moment if he had overreacted. He knew Allison was HYDRA. How else could she be there with them? Rumlow had told him; had vetted her himself. The scouts never let anyone slip by. Jack had seen some of the paperwork with his own eyes. Rollins turned to leave and swept his head in aggravation with himself for having doubted her after just talking himself out of it earlier that morning.

Jack knocked on the door and Allison looked up. Rollins stood in the doorway, holding up the tablet, screen lit and unlocked, its security overridden by the tech, for her to see.

"Even after Bangui, I was surprised to hear your name on the list, honestly," Rollins said.

Taken and tortured by technically her own people. Motsepe had split from HYDRA, sure, but that betrayal had to have made the experience in Bangui even worse for her, knowing they were all cut from the same cloth. He wouldn’t have been surprised then, if she had turned her back on HYDRA the way they seemed to have done on her for those 18 days. It wouldn’t seem unreasonable that’d she’d want some kind of revenge.

"Oh, yeah?" she wondered, her eyebrows raised in curiosity, as she straightened up.

"Yeah," he nodded, stepping into the room. "You know, when orders came to move out, that SHIELD knew about this place...the first thing I said was, we got a rat." He took another step.

"And do you know my first thought was you?"

"Me?" she asked, sounding incredulous and a little insulted.

"You," he affirmed. "So, I tossed your room."

"Yeah. Thanks for that, by the way," she told him, looking around the mess. "Find anything in your size?"

Jack laughed, relieved she didn’t take his bait and prove him right. "I found this," he said, tapping his finger on the tablet. "Then it all made sense."

"Well, not everyone's a fast learner," she shrugged, and Rollins smirked, still amused by their little back and forth.

He handed her the tablet. "If he trusted you to get this out," he conceded, inclining his head to the device in her hand, "that's good enough for me."

She nodded. "You could've just asked, Jack," she told him, turning from his as she slipped the device into her bag.

"What? And do things the easy way?" he chuckled and Allison smiled. Jack reached behind him, pulling her gun in its holster from behind him off his belt. Handing the weapon back to her, he told Allison, "Get your shit together. You can ride out with me."

"I'll be right there," she nodded. "Just gotta tidy up. Don't want to lose the deposit."
Rollins left the room laughing and she shut the door behind him. Jack shook his head, walking down the hall. Everything was starting to get to him. The events of the last couple of days, the stress of making the escape and now being back on the run. He didn’t sleep well last night, despite the exhaustion from the day before. He was too on edge. It was making him doubt himself and what he knew too much. He needed a break and he hoped he could get it, when they got to Ithaca.

May 2014

The SUV Jack rode out in had filled up fast. It was near the front of the chalk, it was understandable that it would. He couldn’t make any complaints or kick anyone out to another vehicle. Even outside of SHIELD, Rollins was still bound by fraternization regs and now wasn’t the time to raise any suspicions about why he’d give a damn about Allison not having a seat in his car. She would be in one of the SUVs right behind him, anyway.

The drive up to the facility in Ithaca took more than a few hours. By the time the road trimmed down to a lane in each direction and the buildings and homes became smaller and more rundown as they went, Jack was eager to get out of the Tahoe and stretch.

Eventually, the landscape flattened and cleared on the way through a large, but empty, industrial park. A series of concrete warehouses and two story buildings was at the end of the road and marked their destination. They passed through the armed checkpoint and were waved on toward an open warehouse dock at the East end of the compound where his driver was directed to line up the vehicle inside. The warehouse housed several other vehicles and a pair of Sprinter Quinjets. With the vehicles parked, Jack and the men in his chalk were escorted to the administration building near the makeshift hangar.

They were shown to a large conference room on the second floor. There was a large, oblong table in the center of the room, surrounded by enough seating to accommodate about 25 people. Jack was already feeling better in the fortified base, reassured by the additional men on post and the thick, bullet-resistant glass with smart-tint film over the windows that prevented anyone, even thermal scans, from seeing inside. Rollins took a seat at the far end of the table, dropping his bag beside his feet. The room was quiet for several minutes, except for a few low and social conversations from a few places around the table.

The room's attention turned toward the entrance, when a soldier outside opened the door for a middle aged man in a well-tailored navy blue suit to walk in. Jack hadn’t seen Ed Coleman in person in years, but he would never forget the taste for expensive suits the man always had. Coleman tugged down the end of his shirt sleeve as he walked, fussing with a cuff link. He walked straight to Jack and held out his hand to shake with a confident smile. Jack stood to greet him, smirking that not much seemed to have changed about Ed since he took over HYDRA’s Counter-Intelligence Division.

"Well," Ed sighed, "Rogers really fucked that up."

A stifled laugh shook Rollins' shoulders, as he let go of Coleman’s hand to take his seat again. "He won't be doing that again," Jack noted.

"It'll be months before they fish him out of the bottom of the Potomac," Coleman agreed, with a smirk that broadened to a smile. "Even a super soldier can drown."

A few chuckles went through the room. It was the first that Jack had heard that Rogers had drowned. Until then, all he had heard was that the Captain was dead.
"Still, it's a shame about Insight," Ed continued and turned to look down the table. "My apologies to you all for you having to leave Virginia in a rush like that. The leak has been found. It's been addressed."

"What's the roster look like?" Rollins asked, running a hand over his hair and stretching some of the fatigue out of his shoulders. "Any word on Bingo?"

"A work in progress," Ed noted, looking back to Rollins. "We're still recovering assets and dead drops. We should have a complete picture in the next 24-36 hours. But, no. Nothing on Rumlow, yet." Jack nodded and rubbed at his chin. "In the meantime," Coleman continued, looking back at the others, "rest up. See Medical, if you need. We'll have barracks assignments for you shortly. ...Hail HYDRA."

"Hail HYDRA," the room responded in chorus.

Coleman gave them a nod and smile, before he turned to go. As he exited the room, a new soldier passed him in the doorway. The agent read off names and room numbers from a tablet in his hand. Jack and the rest of his operators began to rise from their seats and file out of the room. The group made their way across the roadway and down around the next turn toward the small three story barracks. Jack split off from the others, taking the stairs to the third floor, where the officers’ rooms were. He found the room number he’d been assigned and shut the door behind him.

The room was mostly quiet. He stood in the middle of the room, his head lolling back tiredly and his eyes closing. Listening to the faint sounds of a vehicle passing by and the cadence of a squad on a PT run being called, Jack was very aware of the tension in his neck and shoulders. He straightened up, dropping his bag on the bed and rubbing his hand at the back of his neck. Jack looked out the window, watching the activities of the base below. Looking across the way, he could see the flight line and a pair of MH-6s coming in. Things were starting to look up.

The rest of the day was a wash. Rollins had only been to the Ithaca station as a waypoint for training, never long enough to look around. Base staff and the likes of men like Coleman would take over managing Jack and his troops while they were there. Until he was brought in to the loop, he had no business to conduct. Instead, he settled in to his room and took a long walk around the base to familiarize himself with the layout.

The next morning, an Agent was just knocking on his door, unaware Jack was coming down the hallway after his morning run. When Rollins identified himself, the man handed over a tablet. The young man said it was from Director Coleman, for Rollins to keep abreast of the casualty reports and other information during the recovery. In his room, Rollins went over the lists of dead, injured, recovered, and missing HYDRA operatives. Rumlow had been added to the MIA list. Jack felt a little comfort that at least he hadn’t shown up on the list of the deceased.

A day later and HYDRA Command was regaining traction. Orders were coming around. Deep cover agents were counted and being redeployed for new assignments or to other facilities to be placed in the coming days. Coleman was getting ready to head back to New York. Before he left, he gave Rollins the news he’d been waiting for. Cmdr. Rumlow was alive; turned up in a DC hospital. Jack didn’t know how he’d survived the collapse, and he was too relieved to hear his best friend was alive to care. According to Coleman, a team was on their way to extract Rumlow to a HYDRA infirmary.

In the meantime, Jack was designated the acting Commander, until Brock recuperated. The rest of the operators from STRIKE would be reassigned into two teams and posted in Ithaca, until Command decided how best to utilize them. Rollins was given one of the extra offices in the Administration building to use. There was a second office available he would use for his
reorganized teams’ leaders. After several meetings and video conferences with various members of HYDRA Command, Jack issued an order to a pair of runners to gather the STRIKE members in one of the briefing rooms to give them the updates on everything that had happened in the last couple of days and what to expect looking ahead.

By 1630hrs, the last of the STRIKE operators were settling in to their chairs in the briefing room. From the podium at the front of the room, Jack looked over his company of men and Allison. He tapped the screen of the tablet in front of him, bringing it to life for his notes for the meeting.

"Good afternoon, everyone," he began. "I'll keep this as short as possible, but we've got a lot to cover. First off, HQ has completed recovery of all surviving operatives. Despite the crashes of the Insight carriers, the impact on troop numbers was acceptable. The forced launch of the carriers without full crews aboard kept things in our favor. We're continuing extraction of downed personnel from DC area hospitals, as injuries allow.

"A full casualty list is available on the R drive," Rollins noted, "including unit reassignments and promotions based on temporary and permanent losses to the command structure. Agents coming in cold from their SHIELD cover assignments will be worked into a temporary rotation until a permanent unit can be assigned. You are all officially back on call and I want you mission ready 24/7. Delta operators, you'll be pleased, or probably not, to know we recovered Bingo in DC. He'll be laid up for awhile, but he should be back to bustin' your balls in a couple months. So, enjoy the vacation."

Rollins went on, handing out some assignments and giving status reports for the next half hour. At the end of the meeting, he opened the room for questions. When there were none, he dismissed his troops. As he gathered his things from the podium, Jack took one last look over the room, as everyone began filing out. He spotted Allison getting to her feet and watched her through his brow, trying not to be obvious or be noticed. She frowned, looking around until she saw Mickelson ahead of her.

Rollins was curious about the hard look on her face, as she wove through her teammates and tried to catch up to Mick. His attention was taken by Haslip coming up to him to ask for a little more information on Brock. Jack lost track of Addams and tipped his head, telling Haslip to walk with him. Jack caught him up with what little he knew, as they left one building for the next, heading to the mess hall to get dinner. They took a seat at a table with a few of their teammates and bullshitted about the adjustments they were going to have to make to get through the next couple of weeks until certain decisions were made about the remainder of STRIKE.

“What the hell?” Jack muttered, seeing the small ripple in the water in his mug on the desk and feeling a vibration come up through his boots on the floor.

The klaxons in the hall began to wail and Jack’s gaze snapped to the windows of his office. He got up from his desk, crossing to the windows in a few quick strides. All he saw from his east facing office was the personnel on the ground below running toward the west end of the compound. Rollins leaned toward the glass, trying to get a better view of what they might be running at, but it did him no good.

Jack looked over to the screen of his computer on the desk. In the same moment, an alert and orders lit up across the top of the monitor, warning of a perimeter breach. Moving back to his desk, Jack skimmed over the orders as a voice over the PA read the same warning and directives.
“Alert! Alert! Perimeter breach. Perimeter breach. All personnel report to defensive stations. Perimeter breach, Zone 5. Incoming airborne, Zone 5. Incoming personnel and battery- Zones 5, 1, and 4. Repeat- all personnel to defensive stations. This is not a drill.”

The announcement repeated, as Jack read the message on his screen instructing all administrators and Class 4 officers and above to evacuate. He was just straightening up from his lean into his desk, when his office door burst open. Jack’s eyes snapped up to the door and his hand dropped to his gun on his thigh. He relaxed seeing the base security officer with his rifle at low ready, beckoning him out of the office.

“Cmdr. Rollins, come with me. This way, Sir,” the officer said.

“Fuck me,” Jack complained under his breath, pulling his pistol from its holster, as he moved around from behind his desk to fall in with his escort. “What’s going on?”

“We’re under attack, Sir,” the soldier answered. “They think it’s SHIELD. From the west.”

Rollins cursed under his breath again, before Jack decided he’d had enough of being run off by SHIELD in the last few days. “Meet up with your unit,” he told his escort, turning the next corner to make his way to the armory.

The soldier grabbed Rollins by the arm, insisting, “Sir, you must follow me!”

“Like hell,” Jack growled. “I’ve got 63 STRIKE operators on this post who-“

“Negative, Commander,” the soldier shook his head. “STRIKE is being rallied for evacuation, as well. All Tier 1 assets are being evacuated. You have to come with me, Commander, now, or you’ll miss your ride.”

Jack relented, hearing his people were being evacuated. Class 3 Officer or not, Rollins would have ignored the order for his own evac if he knew his men were in the fight. Rollins nodded to his escort and turned to follow him down a staircase and outside.

Outside, the anti-aircraft guns were doing their work, trying to cover the Quinjets rolling out of the hangars. A pair of buildings were already bombed out and burning and Jack caught a glimpse of a pair of Apaches on a strafing run a few hundred meters away. This wasn’t SHIELD, he knew, but he’d put even money on them backing the assault up. Running along side his escort towards the motor pool, Jack overheard the soldier’s radio advising of armored infantry and ground troops flanking the far end of the base.

Under the shelter of the concrete motor pool building, Jack was waved over to a waiting chalk of blacked out and unmarked SUVs, like he’d arrived in with his troops from Virginia. As soon as Jack was secured in the vehicle, it took off, racing out of the large garage with a pair of SUVs leading the way. Rollins eyed the passengers with him, all heavily armed and armored security officers. The driver told him they were directed to transfer Rollins and the three other high value personnel in the cars ahead of them to Pennsylvania. The soldiers had no more information to offer than what Jack had already seen and heard for himself, except to add that the driver had orders not to stop under any circumstances.

The chalk tore out of the south perimeter gate. Jack began to relax, seeing an open road ahead of them. He still waited before he holstered his weapon again, needing to be sure they weren’t being followed. A few miles from the base and several critical, long looks over his shoulder and out the other windows, Jack was satisfied they had gotten away clean.
June 2014

[Revised: 18 June 2014]

Jack didn’t look away from his monitor, as he reached for his glass. At his desk, Rollins leaned back in his seat, his arm bent up at the elbow on the armrest and wrist hanging down to give the brown liquor in his tumbler a subtle swirl, as he stared at the date on the report.

He had received his official orders yesterday, his temporary assignment now permanent. Task Force 2 needed some tightening up. Rollins was the man to get it done, especially in the mood he’d been in lately. He took control of the Pennsylvania installation, leading TF2 personally and managing the daily operations of the airborne detachment stationed there, the soldiers and support staff assigned to the base, as well as the small medical and science staff that was on hand. The compound was, after all, one of the recovery points for the Winter Soldier Program. In his time with the Program, Jack hadn’t been to the base, but he knew it from the short list of US sites that had equipment and personnel on hand to tend to the Asset. Even with the Asset in the wind after DC, the medical staff carried on with their research for the Program.

Command seemed to have picked names at random, when parting out the surviving STRIKE operators for reassignment. A small handful of men from Bravo, Delta, and Echo stayed on-site with Rollins, slotted in to TF2’s ranks. The rest were sent to other bases and teams. Most of them were lucky enough to keep their positions. Some were attached to security forces, instead of maintaining their elite status on one of HYDRA’s SpecOps teams.

Overall, Jack should’ve considered himself lucky. Just about everything had turned out the way he figured. He kept his rank, took a command position with almost 500 soldiers and civilian staff under his supervision, was lauded by his superiors for his years of successful service during HYDRA’s infiltration of SHIELD. He could count Dennison, Emery, Mickelson, Strickland, and Cephas among the troops he was able to keep. Of the 109 HYDRA deep cover agents in STRIKE, 72 were still alive and had escaped capture by SHIELD. All in all, the last several years had been a success, according to the powers that be, and Rollins should be proud.

But staring at the report on his monitor, Jack felt nothing but disappointment and loss. In the end, there were 37 friends- his brothers and sisters who were dead or abandoned to remain in SHIELD custody, after the incident in DC. Workouts, cigarettes, or drink; nothing was doing anything to ease the emptiness he felt as soon as he woke up everyday. In the quiet and in the night, he couldn’t find a relief to the ache he felt in his chest.

[CMRD Brock Rumlow | Serial No. 51065068 | Status: Injured/Inactive
Location: Infirmary 22, DE | Status: Classified]

Jack reached out, clicking the mouse and scrolling back a couple of pages in the report. Settling back into his chair again, he threw back the last of the whiskey in his glass in one large swallow, leaning his temple against the glass in his hand. Jack stared, until the damp sting in his eyes made him blink.

[1LT Allison R. Addams Serial No. 78169736 | Status: MIA/KIA 30 May 2014
Location: unknown | Last Duty Station: Airbase Ithaca, NY 28 May 2014]
Aug 2014

Jack checked his watch. The wind shifted and he took a step back into the corner from the rain that lapped in under the shelter of the air traffic control tower’s entrance awning. Bored, he watched a refueling truck drive across the tarmac, before he smirked and quietly snorted at the profanity of complaint from the soaking wet marshaller that sprinted over.

“Ay,” Rollins said for his attention.

“Yes, Sir,” the man said, dropping his hands to his sides from literally wringing out his cover to snap to attention, apparently having not seen Rollins off to the side.

“As you were,” Jack ordered, wearing an amused grin at the start he’d put in to the man.

“Transport 1-6,” he wondered. “Still going to make it in in this shit?”

“Yes, Sir,” the aircraft marshall nodded, pulling the headset off from around his neck to shake off the water. “We’re still flying.” He pulled a small tablet from his pant leg pocket and made a few taps and swipes. “She’s a little behind, for the headwind,” he noted, with a small tilt of his head as he looked at his screen, “but she’ll be on the ground in about 6 minutes, Sir.”

Jack nodded to himself, looking out to the sheets of rain blurring the far end of the tarmac and the runway lights in the distance. He glanced back to the ground crewman, sarcastically wondering, “Rain gear not in the budget for you guys?”

“Got a boot out there,” he said, jutting his chin toward a hanger, “who left hers behind in another building. First week, and the boss is hitting the new guys pretty hard.” He shrugged. “Felt bad for her. Didn’t want her to catch another chewing.”

“Survival of the fittest. There’s no extra points for chivalry,” Jack quipped.

“No, Sir,” he agreed, with a sly grin. “But there’s a dry uniform and an extra coat in my locker. She’ll live to fight another day.” Jack chuckled to himself, nodding his appreciation of the man’s esprit de corps. “Is there anything else I can help you with, Commander?” he checked.

“No,” he swept is head. “Thank you.”

“Yes, Sir,” the marshaller replied, straightening into a salute.

Jack returned the formality, giving the man his leave to go into the building and change into a dry uniform. Rollins checked his watch again. He couldn’t complain about the transfer flight being off schedule. Not in this weather, anyway. Besides, he had nothing to do this hour of the morning but wait. Morning formation and briefing were done and Rollins had another two hours to himself, before his teleconference with Command was scheduled. Watching the storm roll through wasn’t a bad way to kill time.

As promised, Transfer 1-6 was maneuvering into position over Landing Pad 3, several minutes later. Rollins watched the Quinjet settle on the ground, with a short roll forward from a push from the wind, before the ground crew blocked the tires of the nose gear. The engines powered down and Jack inched forward again, pocketing his hands and mindful of where the concrete beneath his boots turned from dry to wet. A minute later, the ramp for the jet lowered and the arriving soldiers and staff began to deplane.

Most of the human cargo turned off for the next building to check in and get directed to their posts or barracks. One man shouldered a half-filled ruck and walked straight ahead to the airfield operations building and Jack. Rollins eyed his approach, studying his gate and posture, looking for
any deficiencies and seeing none. The only impediment the man seemed to contend with was the wind gusting across him, and the only adjustment he made was to the bill of his Pershing hat above the closed trench coat over an officer’s Class A uniform.

Jack folded his arms in front of him, eyeing him up and down, saying, “Well, don’t you look pretty.”

“Fuck you,” Rumlow sneered, pulling his hat off to let the water roll off, when he was out of the rain.

“Nice to see your piss poor attitude survived the collapse,” he smirked.

Dropping his bag off his shoulder and tucking his hat under his arm, as he gave Rollins a once over. “S’a shame to see you did, too.”

Jack’s shoulders shook with the chuckle he held back. He unfolded his arms, offering a hand out to Rumlow, offering, “Glad to see you above ground, Bingo.”

“Same here, big guy,” he grinned, leaning in to meet his one armed hug. Stepping back again, he added, “Didn’t know if I was gonna be able to say that.”

Rollins gave him a sympathetic nod. He still couldn’t believe his luck to have his friend standing in front of him again. When he’d heard about the circumstances and the condition Brock had been found in, he wanted to be optimistic, but common sense told him not to hold out any hope. When he heard that Rumlow was released from the infirmary and recovery, he was surprised by how quick the news came. And when he was told that Rumlow was taking over command of the facility, Jack was more than a little dumbfounded. He hadn’t spoken to him since that day in DC and, even seeing him with his own eyes, Jack was having a hard time believing Brock was back.

“You alright?” he wondered, giving another look to the scarring he saw on his friend’s face and neck.

“Yeah,” Rumlow nodded, and Jack noticed a little more of the damaged skin on his hands as Brock put his hat back on. “C’mon,” he said, tipping his head away from the flightline. “We got some catching up to do.”

Rollins nodded, reaching into his pocket for his keys with one hand and pointing at the waiting SUV parked at the corner of the building with the other. “This way,” he said, reaching down to pick up Rumlow’s bag as they started for the car.

“I got it,” Brock assured him, holding out his hand for his ruck sack as they walked. “Here.”

“Oh?” Jack feigned ignorance. “You not taking command of the base after all?”

Rumlow snorted, flipping off Rollins and telling him, “You’re my lieutenant, not my valet.”

“Good,” Jack nodded, dropping the bag on the ground without missing a step.

He heard Brock’s footfall pause behind him, and his laughter, as he picked up his bag and loudly sighed, “Ah, it’s good to be back.”

Jack glanced over his shoulder, seeing Rumlow still chuckling at his heels. “Don’t want you to think anybody actually missed you,” he deadpanned, thumbing the remote to unlock the doors of the SUV.
“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Rumlow grinned, walking around to get in the passenger seat as Jack slid in behind the wheel.

Dec 2014

“Where you been?”

Jack powered off his phone, straightening up from his lean in the railing and turning to look down his shoulder, as he discretely pocketed the device. “Nowhere.”

Rumlow closed the distance on the walkway, pocketing his hands as he met Rollins. “I know you ain’t up here for the view,” he snorted, panning his gaze out over the other unimaginative concrete buildings of the compound.

“No,” he agreed, with a crooked grin. “Just lookin’ for a quiet place for a smoke.”

“Ain’t the first time I’ve seen you up here,” Brock mentioned, tipping his head down the length of the open air bridge between the buildings.

Jack gave a subtle nod of acknowledgment, pocketing his hand to find his cigarettes. “It’s a shortcut,” he shrugged, hoping Brock wouldn’t follow through with where he figured his friend was going.

“To fuckin’ where?” he scoffed. “The birds use this bridge more than people do, this time of year.”

“So, what’s your excuse then?” Jack asked, snapping his zippo shut and tucking it back down in his pocket after his pack of smokes, his cigarette ticking in the corner of his mouth as he spoke.

“It’s a shortcut,” he shrugged.

Jack shook his head, snorting as Brock cracked a smile at his own joke. Rumlow folded his arms to lean on the railing and looked over the edge. Rollins turned, settling with the rail behind him and cigarette in hand.

“So, what are you really doing up here?” Rumlow pressed, turning his head to see Jack.

There was a pause while Rollins took in a breath of smoke, breathing it out to say, “Nothing.”

“Who’s phone is that?” His eyes ticked down to the pocket Jack had dropped the device in.

“The fuck’s wrong with you?” he asked, giving the Commander a dubious look. “It’s mine, dumbass.”

Rumlow panned his gaze around the other buildings, giving a nod as if he were accepting something, before he said, “No, it ain’t.”

“You drinking on the job?” he quipped. “Who else’s would it be?”

A smug smirk pulled at the side of his mouth, as Rumlow observed, “What you had in your hand wasn’t issued tech. That was analog,” He gave Rollins a once over. “So...what the hell you doing with a burner?”

He knew he was caught, but Jack didn’t answer. Instead, he took another pull of his cigarette and
let it out slowly, studying the thin trail of smoke as it curled off the end of his cigarette in the breeze and debating telling him the truth. He knew he could get in trouble for the call he’d just made, if anyone else had seen, but, with Rumlow, he might be able to get away with it.

“Things have been a little too dicey the last few months for people to be sneaking around makin’ secret phone calls,” Rumlow noted. “People might get suspicious.”

“It was a personal call,” Rollins muttered, putting his cigarette back to his lips.

“We don’t get the luxury of personal calls, anymore, big guy,” he pointed out, standing up and squaring himself to Jack. “Who ya callin’?”

Jack let out a heavy exhale, giving Brock a side eye glance, before admitting he called, “Libby.”

It was quiet for a moment, before Jack hazarded another look at his friend. He’d expected a quick and scathing response, maybe even a lecture on OpSec to have started by now. At the very least that there would be some kind of jab about being a “sentimental sap” or some other emasculating bullshit. But Rumlow just stared back, a subtle tilt of his head and pull down in his brow as he studied him, like he was thinking about something.

“Libby,” he repeated and Jack nodded, taking another long drag. “Are you out of your god damn mind?”

The question didn’t have the sharpness he had braced for. “I know what I’m doing,” he assured him and blew out his smoke. “Call was one burner cell to another. Nobody has to know.”

“Nobody has t-“ Rumlow scoffed, raking his eyes up and down him. “You are crazy,” he decided. “The hell’s wrong with you? You’re gonna get the both ‘a you-“

“I’m not,” he swept his head. “She knows what to do.”

“Yeah?” he incredulously dared, cocking up a brow. “And who taught her that?”

Jack just gave him a tired look for a reply and Brock shook his head. “Look,” Rollins began, watching the ash fall away as he flicked his finger into his cigarette, “I checked up on her, alright? I had a tap put on her, awhile ago, to make sure she wasn’t sayin’ anything we needed to know about.”

“There’s nothing she knew that she could have told to anyone,” he flatly reminded him. “You said so yourself. Were you lyin’ then?”

He took in and let out an aggravated breath through his nose, cracking his neck to one side and setting his jaw. “No.”

Rollins felt Brock’s heavy gaze on him, but he didn’t look. He kept his attention focused straight ahead of him and took another drag, before Rumlow said, “Tell me why you called her, Jack.” When he didn’t speak up right away, Brock insisted, “Tell me why you’d risk tippin’ off SHIELD, an’ everybody else, that you’re still alive and where we are.”

“Just making sure things worked out,” he said, trying to make it sound as indifferent and insignificant as he could.

Next to him, Rumlow slowly nodded. “I see.” He wiped his hand down over his mouth and shifted to lean down on the railing again. “That’s a hell of a big risk you’re taking...for some girl.”
Jack understood and nodded his agreement, but he couldn’t help himself. It was a few weeks after the incident in DC. He was still at the Pennsylvania base he’d been evacuated to from Ithaca, where Task Force 2 were headquartered and Rollins had taken up command of the team, as well as the facility, before Rumlow’s return and assignment there. It wasn’t a complete lie to say he ordered the tap on Libby’s phones to be sure she wasn’t talking about Jack or HYDRA, but mostly it was for his own peace of mind about her.

As he settled into his new quarters on base and found a new routine and sense of normalcy, Jack couldn’t help but worry how Libby was doing. A hack of the DIA network or dummy call to check her status with her employer would be too obvious, but listening in on phone calls was perfectly reasonable. Getting a daily transcript to review any calls she made or took was old school tradecraft and, most importantly, passive. It wasn’t anything more than HYDRA was doing for other deep cover operatives as part of their ongoing threat assessments. Jack let the order expire after one month, when the transcripts showed that Libby literally mentioned nothing about HYDRA or the incident in DC and never said Jack’s name.

After that, HYDRA SigInt was satisfied. But Jack’s guilt wasn’t. Maybe it was losing Allison that finally allowed him to consider he had loved Libby a little more than he’d originally let himself think. For whatever reason, at the end of August, Jack took a day off to drive back in to DC. Libby still drove the same route home; same car. He waited at a curb and picked her up about a mile from DIA’s headquarters, following her from a few cars back, until they reached her neighborhood and he pulled over a few houses before hers to watch her and check that he himself hadn’t been followed. An hour later, Jack slipped a note into her mailbox with directions to a dead drop where he’d planted a clean phone and instructions on when to retrieve it.

He waited the better part of the next morning, sitting in his car across from a small park in Rivercrest. He’d almost given up hope that she’d come. She was 2 hours late. Worse, he began to wonder if she wasn’t coming because she had turned over the note to the FBI or SHIELD. But just after 11am, his fears were put to rest, seeing Libby finally walking across the park and looking around nervously. He waited, his arm bent up on the car door and his hand covering his mouth, watching her hesitate, looking like she might change her mind and back away, before she crouched down to pull out the parcel Jack had stashed in the overgrowth near a particular stand of trees. He realized his pulse was up, anxious to see what she’d do next. When she sat down at a picnic table to unwrap and study the phone in her lap, he didn’t blink. When the matching device in his hand rang, the breath fell out of him, relieved.

Jack flipped open the phone to answer, but waited to speak, until Libby spoke up, hopefully wondering, “Jack?”

He couldn’t keep the warm grin from his face, seeing her cover her hand over her mouth to muffle the sound of her gasp and crying, when he replied, “Good morning, sweetheart.” He gave her a moment to collect herself, panning his gaze around to make sure no one was watching either of them. Rollins only talked to her for a few minutes, assuring her he was fine and safe and making sure everything had worked out for her the way he predicted. He told her to dispose of the phone and how to send him a drop, if she needed him. After she reached out, he would get another phone to her and she’d wait for his call. Since August, there had been only one other call before today, and a meeting at a motel in Maryland where they spent the night together.

Whatever was still happening between them, Libby hadn’t found anyone to move on with yet and Rollins hadn’t even bothered to try, not that he had much of a chance lately. Jack figured whatever they were doing probably was better than being alone for both of them. He was still trying to rebuild. Jack was slow to shake off his paranoia and consider off base housing yet, a decision that obviously limited his socializing opportunities. With Allison and his home gone, his old life
destroyed, and most of his fellow operators from STRIKE reassigned elsewhere, Rollins’ only luck seemed to have been to get his best friend back. After everything he’d been through, the things and lives that were lost in the last several months, maybe that was why he was having trouble letting Libby go.

Jack nodded to himself, dropping his cigarette and snuffing it out under a sharp twist of the toe of his boot. Exhaling his last breath of smoke, he fell back on an answer he’d only given once before, saying, “Don’t know that a guy like you’d understand.”

“You’d be surprised,” Brock lamented, still looking out over the compound as Rollins quirked up an intrigued brow at not just the remark but the sentiment it seemed to carry. He was about to ask him if he had been calling Evy again, when Rumlow spoke up first, asking, “How many times?”

“Since the approach?” Rollins checked and the Commander nodded once. “This is number three.”

Brock stood tall again, taking in and letting out a deep breath as he did. He turned his head, but not his gaze, warning him, “Be careful, big guy.” Stepping back to move past Jack and continue on his way across the bridge, Rumlow added, “You’re playing with fire.”

“You’re not gonna even make paper on this?” Rollins called after him, part of him still waiting for the punishment he knew his admissions should bring.

“No,” Rumlow shook his head, without stopping or looking back. “I’ll let you have this one.”
July 2015

He had to see for himself. He had to see it with his own eyes. Standing in the TOC and hearing the communications relayed between the impromptu QRF and the controller wasn’t good enough. As soon as he heard PriFly advise Rumlow’s Quinjet was on the ground, Rollins was on his way to meet them.

The Commander and a squad from Task Force 2 were returning from a late training exercise, when the alarm sounded. Jack had been in his quarters, getting ready to call it a night. He literally had just lifted his boot off the floor to untie it when the klaxons went off and his phone rang to advise him of the security breach. He left behind his jacket, running for the command center in his uniform tee and pants. At least he still grabbed his gun belt.

Arriving in the TOC, he was briefed that someone had broken in and incapacitated or killed multiple personnel, after gaining access to their network servers in the Administration Building. Perimeter security had given chase to the suspect into the tree line and Rumlow’s inbound flight was waved off of its landing and redirected to the woods to assist in the search. It was only a matter of minutes before the thief was caught.

Except for whatever failures the investigation would reveal led to the breach in the first place, everything about the response to the event was textbook and worthy of praise to the soldiers involved. Until Jack heard Rumlow advise that he and his men had the Asset in custody and that Allison Addams was among the persons being transported back to base. Rollins’ suspicions, and anger, immediately flared.

Allison Addams was dead. He was sure if it. She hadn’t resurfaced anywhere after the base at Ithaca fell. No check-ins or drops. No sightings by any HYDRA personnel or mention in anyone else’s systems they had access to, since last May. She had even been listed as MIA- presumed dead, the last time he could bear to look her up. He couldn’t believe it until he saw for himself and, then, he needed to know how. Hurrying down the staircase, he threw open the corridor door and turned for the operating theater of the Infirmary.

Pushing his way in past the doors of the surgical area, Jack made a quick survey of the room, his eyes pausing on Barnes restrained and being examined by the medical staff before his gaze fell on Allison. It was true. But where relief would have taken hold of him a year ago, fury took its place, as a dozen scenarios ran through his head all at once about how she was standing in front of him, none of which allowed for her to be there as an ally.

Jack stormed over, drawing the pistol from his side and taking aim at Allison's forehead. She squared up to him, looking him in the eye, her breathing steady and level. His jaw set and his teeth grit in anger, ready to demand answers when Brock turned to see and barked for Jack to lower his weapon.

"The fuck is she doing here?" Jack demanded, locking his arm out for his shot.

"Stand down, Rollins," Brock ordered, strong and loud, shouldering himself between the two spies. "She's a fuckin' traitor," Jack hissed. "What the hell is she doing here?"

"We brought her in," Rumlow said, staring Jack down while Allison silently waited. "She brought
us the Asset."

"Like hell she did," Rollins spat. "She's been MIA since last year when Ithaca was taken." He shifted his eyes from Rumlow to Allison. "What have you been doing this whole time? Huh?"

Brock threw up an arm to knock the gun off Allison and gave Jack a simultaneous and jarring blow across his jaw. Rollins never saw it coming, and, in all their years of training and sparring together, he’d never taken a hit that hard from his friend before. A pair of soldiers broke off Barnes' detail and trained their rifles on Rollins, protecting their commander. Without looking, Brock waved a hand, calling off his men. He stepped into Rollins, menacing and angry, as Jack straightened up from the hit.

"She's been on assignment," Brock growled. He pointed behind him to Barnes, firmly noting, "Mission accomplished. ...You got a problem with that?"

Jack glared defiantly between Allison, Barnes, and Rumlow. "Mission?" he scoffed. "She's not even on book-"

"I said, do you have a fuckin' problem with that?!!" Rumlow scathingly repeated.

Rollins took in an agitated breath, indignant for the punch he’d taken and the way he was being dressed down and his concerns ignored. But now wasn’t the time to have the discussion with Rumlow about it. "No."

"Good," Rumlow said, his voice calmer but no less authoritative, moving back a few inches from Jack's face. "You ever pull a weapon on one of my agents again, I'll slit your god damn throat. You read me?"

"Yeah," Rollins nodded, still glaring at Allison.

Brock nodded and took a step back. He turned around, giving a quick glance to Allison before he walked over to speak to the doctors. Rollins holstered his weapon, against all his insitincts. Allison stared coolly back at him, as he moved to stand in front of her again.

“I don't know what your fuckin' game is here,” Jack began, "but I've got my eye on you."

The corner of Allison's mouth ticked back into an arrogant smirk. "What'sa matter Jack?" she pouted. "Mad I did what you couldn't?"

“Listen good, you little cunt,” Jack threatened, raising a finger to her face and his eyes leveling, incensed by her sarcasm and a fraction away from taking a swing at her to get her back in line.

"What'd you call me?" she cut him off, hardening her gaze.

“You heard me,” Rollins scoffed, taking a half step in.

"Say it again," she taunted, her hand slipping to the knife at her side and a dangerous smile coming to her lips. "I fuckin' dare you."

He was done with her. There was nothing she could say or do to alleviate his suspicions and he had no patience for her insubordinate tone and attitude. There were bodies in the halls and outside and an unknown amount of intel exported to a portable device. He was ready to dare her to pull the knife, his own hand near the knife at the front of his holster and other fist balling at his side, when the Commander glanced back over his shoulder from speaking with the doctors and saw them.
“Hey!” Rumlow barked, turning away from the doctors and crossing back to the dueling pair. “That's enough! ...both of you.” He pointed at Rollins. "Get a detail ready," he instructed. "I want eyes on the Asset 'round the clock. Medical wants 48 hours before we can begin to transfer the Asset to cryo and get him back to Command for reprogramming."

Jack tightly nodded his understanding, his jaw still working in frustration and glare fixed on Allison. She moved first, turning away to watch the medical staff and Barnes. Rumlow cocked up an expectant brow at him and Rollins took a step backward, with a scowl and a short sweep of his head to show his disapproval for the way the situation was being handled. Rollins turned to leave and make arrangements for the Asset’s security detail.

On the way back out of his office, Jack saw Rumlow coming down the hall. Brock's jaw was set and his eyes leveled on Rollins. Jack stopped, the door handle still in his fingers, and let out a groan of a sigh, concentrating to keep his lip from snarling back in resentment. He was tired. He had just sat down to take off his boots and was looking forward to a shower, after a long day of field exercises under the hot sun, when the klaxon sounded. After everything today, Jack just wanted to go to sleep, not deal with whatever this next round of bullshit was.

"Now what?" he grumbled under his breath, while his CO was still far enough away not to hear.

"Get back in that office," Brock growled, pointing with the length of his arm toward Jack's door.

Jack's head lolled tiredly to the side, as he pushed the door open again, snapped on the lights, and went back inside. Brock was a few steps behind him. Rollins turned to the doorway, exhaling heavily through his nose and folding his arms tightly across his chest to wait. Stepping inside, Rumlow swung the door shut heavily behind him. He was on Rollins in an instant, the front of the shoulders of Jack's shirt clenched in his fists as Brock threw Jack up against the wall.

"The fuck is wrong with you?!!" Rumlow demanded, giving Jack another shove. "Huh?" He let go to point back at the door with one hand and pushed against Jack’s shoulder with the other. "You fuckin' pull a weapon on one of our own?! I should have you-

"The fuck is wrong with me?" Rollins spat, knocking Brock's hand from his shirt. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Bringing her in here, aft-

"After what?" Rumlow challenged him, giving him a jut of his chin. "After she brings us the Asset?"

"Don't you think that's a little too convenient?" Jack argued.

"I don't see how burnin' resources and man hours trying to track down the Asset for a year is convenient," Brock countered. "It's about fucking time someone brought him in."

"But her?" he balked. "Where the hell has she been for a year, huh? She just appears, out of thin air, minutes after a breach, and just happens to be found standing over Barnes when you show up."

"She was doin' her damned job," Rumlow insisted.

"She ghosted on us after Ithaca. She was listed as MIA," Jack complained, not believing how none of this was raising alarms for Rumlow. "No one's seen her for over a year and-

"What is the fuckin' problem?!" Brock hotly cut in. "'Cause all I'm seein' is a win, because we've got the Asset again and one of our top operators back from the field."
"What field?" he practically laughed. "You're honestly gonna tell me, she was working alone and in the dark for a year? She's not on any active duty roster, no support assigned, no resource-

"She had everything she needed," the Commander assured him.

"How is that even possible?!" It was too ridiculous to fathom. Jack couldn’t help the incredulous laugh now, saying, "Where has she been? Who's she been reporting too?"

"To me, numb nuts," Brock informed him.

Jack couldn't believe what he was hearing. He looked up to the ceiling and shook his head. It didn't add up. None of it.

"To you, huh?" Jack double checked. "Since when? How? What did she do after Ithaca?"

"She made a break for it when the facility was overrun," Rumlow explained. "She took a good hit in the fight and had to lay low; paid off some clinic doctor to stitch her up. When she was on her feet again, SHIELD was still on their campaign and she said a couple places she tried to go to were already shut down. She reached out with some dead drops for awhile, waiting for someone to answer. When we finally did, she was tasked to bring in the Asset."

"When did she come in?" he pressed, needing to hear more.

He quirked up a sarcastic brow. "What, do I look like a fuckin' calendar?" Brock scoffed. "August sometime. What the fuck's it matter?"

What did it matter? Jack had lost sleep after Ithaca. He lost hours, thinking of where she might be, if she had been captured; thinking of what had happened to her if she wasn’t. He worried for days on end, wondering if she was okay; if she’d made it out alive or was she injured. When her name officially showed up on the missing personnel list, he still waited for her to reach out to them for help or to show up at a safe house. Weeks later, the night that her status was recategorized as presumed dead, he hadn’t entirely given up hope then, but he drank down the better part of a fifth of Jameson alone and passed out at his desk.

Regardless of what he’d put himself through, waiting and hoping to hear any news, he just couldn’t believe it now.

"I'm telling you," Rollins insisted, pointing a finger at Brock, "she's up to something."

"Oh, yeah?" Rumlow dared, reaching into his pocket. Jack's eyes tracked the thumb drive Brock held up in front of him. "You see this? This was found on the Asset. Wanna take a guess what's on it?"

Rollins let out an aggravated sigh, giving a half-roll of his eyes. "Enlighten me," he unenthusiastically invited.

"The data from the breach tonight," the Commander told him. "Found in the Asset's pocket, matched to the terminal from the server floor where the breach occurred and we found our guys laid out." He pocketed the thumb drive and asked, "Wanna know what else we found?"

"What?" Jack grumbled, folding his arms over his chest.

"One of our pistols on the Asset," Brock said. "Taken off one of the sentries he dropped on his way out and missing the same number of rounds we found in bodies. And Addams? Yeah, her weapon-the one we issued to her, was only short the two rounds she put into the Asset before we got there."
"So, that's what you're gonna believe?" Rollins wondered, eyeing his friend.

"Because it's the truth," Rumlow confirmed, with a small nod. "Those are the facts." He gave Jack a once over. "You, of all people," he shook his head, with a disappointed click of his tongue. Brock pointed a finger back to the door, wondering, "You're gonna put a gun to her head?" Jack didn't respond. "You should be relieved we got her back. You know how many 'a our guys he took out before he got here? We lost a lot of good men to that sonuvabitch. We can all sleep better, because she brought him in." His eyes ran up and down Jack, adding, "We're fuckin' lucky to get her back. And I would've expected you to appreciate that, all things considered."

Rollins' jaw worked in frustration. It was a good story. The more Brock filled in, the better it sounded. But there was something he couldn't get around.

"How come you didn't tell me she was still alive?" Jack questioned, calmed down enough to admit to himself, if only for a moment, that he actually was relieved to see Allison again. "Why didn't you just tell me, when you took command here, that-" He stopped, feeling a choke coming to his throat, resenting that, "You know I fuckin' mourned every one of the guys we lost. And her, you know what she-"

"Jack, come on," Rumlow grimaced. "Believe me, buddy, if I could, I would have. This ain't like SHIELD anymore. You know that. Some of this shit is locked up too tight. They got their reasons. I wanted to, but-" he shook his head, "I can't tell you everything. Not even about her."

For that, he missed SHIELD. Deep cover agents weren't privy to know who other undercover operatives were in the agency. Compartmentalization meant no one slipped up and spoke to someone they shouldn't about their cover. Everyone operated under the mentality that they were alone and it worked. Few agents ever crossed the line, moving back and forth between SHIELD and HYDRA facilities. The exceptions were the Delta operators that were part of Jack and Brock's squad, but they were some of the steadiest men in the business; hand picked and unquestioningly reliable. Jack and Brock were the only ones who ever spoke about who was who, needing to in order to run STRIKE and keep the agenda in line.

Back with HYDRA, after the incident in DC, the loop closed. He wasn't in a position to know everything anymore. Part of him resented it; the lost level of confidence he and Rumlow had been able to share inside SHIELD. It made trusting people harder. If things hadn't been torn down by Rogers, maybe HYDRA wouldn't have put muzzles back on their leadership. Maybe he would have slept better and his suspicions wouldn't be so on edge, if he had heard all of this in August.

Rollins inhaled, slow and deep, scrubbing his hands up and down his face. He exhaled heavily, checking, "We done? I'm fuckin' tired."

"Yeah," Brock snorted. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Where is she?" Jack asked, dropping his hands to his sides.

Rumlow shook his head, quietly chuckling, when he said, "I'll still have to write you up for fraternizing, Jack. Even here."

Jack gave a small snort, in spite of himself, with a sweep of his head. "That's not why I'm asking," he grumbled.

"I know," Brock smiled. "I put her in one of the empty officer's rooms, for now. But leave her alone, Jack. She got into a little row with the Asset before she got her shots in. She needs-"
"She alright?" he interrupted. His ears had pricked and it finally occurred to him, remembering the
discoloration along her hair and forehead from rain thinned blood, the mud on her uniform, and the
split in her lip. He'd let his anger get in the way, and he suddenly felt like an asshole for not being
more concerned sooner.

"Of course," the Commander proudly smirked. "But let her rest. She's been busy lately. You can
apologize for being a bigger dick than usual, later."

"Fuck off," Jack groaned, with a smirk pulling back one side of his mouth, as he walked around
Brock. Turning the office lights off on him, as he opened his door, Rollins told Brock, "Shut the
door when you leave."

"You're a little bitch, you know that?" Brock quipped, walking out and pulling the door shut
behind him. "Get some sleep. I wanna see both of you in my office at 1100."

"Copy that," Rollins nodded, giving a half-assed salute as he turned the corner to spilt off from his
CO. Out of earshot, he muttered, "Sleep? Fat fuckin' chance."
Chapter 56

July 2015

“‘Morning,” Jack tiredly said, twisting to shut the door behind him.

From behind his desk, Rumlow lifted a hand, a gesture to acknowledge Rollins and return the greeting, while he was on the phone. Jack sipped down his styrofoam cup of coffee, before he continued in to the room to take a seat in front of the Commander’s desk and wait. He checked his watch and took another drink, a little surprised not to see Addams there by now. She had a couple minutes to spare, but he used to know her to be early for meetings.

Jack didn’t mind the lull, though. He hadn’t slept well and, although he’d been up and moving for hours now, he still felt like he’d just drug himself out of bed. He slept so light, he wasn’t sure how much of his time in bed could even qualify as sleep at all. Besides getting to bed late, after a long day, he had trouble quieting his mind enough for sleep to come. Just when he thought he’d finally relaxed, another question about Allison, her apparent resurrection, and her return with the Asset would cross his mind. While Brock wrapped up his call, Rollins rubbed his thumb and forefinger into his eyes, hoping the third cup of coffee for the day would be the trick.

Hanging up the phone, Brock offered an apology of sorts, complaining, “I think I’ve been on the phone all damn morning.”

Brock pointed his elbows down into his desk, leaning in to scrub his hands up and down his face, as Jack nodded, “I can imagine.”

Dropping his hands to fall over his arms, Rumlow’s brow knit down as his eyes scanned over the papers and files spread out in front of him. “I got training requisitions and schedules to approve for the rest of the week, quarterly assessments to finish and sign off on, 1st squad’s AAR to review, on top ‘a all this bullshit today.”

“Gimme the assessments,” Rollins interrupted, holding his open hand out to wait while Rumlow sorted the file folders from the mess of paperwork on his desk. “I’ll get started on ‘em after this.”

“Thanks,” Brock appreciatively grinned, passing the stack of folders over his desk.

“No problem,” Jack nodded, balancing the folders on his leg and taking another drink. “So, she running late, or something?”

“What?” he asked, a wrinkle of confusion coming to his brow.

“Addams,” Jack stated the obvious. “You said 11 o’clock.”

“Yeah,” he nodded, “You’re right. Sorry.” He waved a dismissive hand and sat back into a deep lean in his chair. “This whole morning’s been a fuckin’ blur.”

“So, where is she?” he asked.

“ Took a car down to Philly,” he answered. “Brass wants to debrief her personally.”

“I thought you were handling her,” Rollins mentioned, unable to help the suspicion that came up in his tone.
“I was,” he agreed, with a bob of his head, “until she became a fuckin’ celebrity.” Brock sat up again, moving the mouse of his computer to click on the new message window that appeared on his screen. “Everybody wants to shake her hand and hear how she did it. An’, between you an’ me,” he glanced over to Jack, cocking up a brow, “I’m kinda glad I’m getting this break. I got enough on my hands, with getting the Asset back into cryo and shipped out of here. I don’t have the time for those sons ‘a bitches to be climbing up my ass for status updates and a debriefing report for a year long black op, not when they can hear it from the horse’s mouth.”

Rollins quietly hummed, watching Brock adjust the keyboard on his desk to type a reply to his message. “And when do we get to hear how this tactical miracle happened?”

Rumlow snorted, giving a nod as he kept on typing. “She should be back this afternoon,” he said. “Left early this morning.” He finished his message and sat back, smirking. “Unless she ends up in the infirmary with a stress injury from all the handshakes.” Jack gave in to a grin, shaking his head, and Brock pointed toward the files under Jack’s hand. “Either way, gives you plenty of time to put a dent in those assessments.”

“Can’t fuckin’ wait,” Rollins dryly quipped, moving to stand and head back to his office.

Jack took a late lunch. The day was off to such an unenthusiastic start, anyway, he barely noticed how off schedule it was. He had made some headway with his paperwork, though. From a work perspective, he was doing well. He only had a few assessments left to finish. He’d made the adjustments to schedules and staffing of the Asset’s security detail, since Barnes had been moved into one of the labs and was under sedation, and had gotten a few emails and phone calls out of the way. If he kept up his pace, the extra work he picked up for Rumlow would be finished and wouldn’t interrupt his schedule for tomorrow.

Walking back into the Administration Building after lunch, Jack checked his watch. He gave a nod as a show of appreciation to the base security officer who stepped aside and held the door open for Rollins to pass ahead of him first. He would have returned the young man’s salute, if not for reaching for the ringing phone in his pocket.

“Rollins,” he answered, crossing the small lobby for the elevators.

“Sir, there’s a situation in the lab. The Asset’s broken containmen-“

“Say again,” Jack growled, coming to an abrupt halt.

“Someone assaulted the staff. We have men down and-“

Rollins hung up, already running back for the door. He called to the security officer who had just let him in and was still bullshitting with a buddy nearby. The officer stuttered for a step, conflicted by Jack’s order to come with him and the ones he was hearing from the radio on his belt calling the base security forces to their stations and announcing the escape. The man dutifully fell in behind Rollins, just as Rollins hit the door, pointing Jack to the Jeep parked just down the row.

While Jack and his driver raced to catch up with the other vehicles now in pursuit of a Jeep they believed the Asset was in, Rollins’ jaw tightened, furious that somehow someone had made it through the perimeter and been able to access Barnes, let alone make it out of the secure, subterranean lab he was being held in. Security around the installation had been tightened and troop strength increased. There were multiple checkpoints and armed men between the Asset and fresh air. Two breaches in two days was impossible.
“Suspect vehicle is stopped at the southeast gate! They’ve barricaded the road. Troops in contact! ...Second vehicle has breached the gate! Male driver, black SUV—“

“FUCK,” Jack muttered. He reached over, grabbing the radio mic clipped to the dash, ordering, “Contact Flightline! Get air support for pursuit. All available units—stop that vehicle! Weapons free.”

“Almost there,” the officer announced.

Ahead of them, there was an explosion. Rollins saw a fireball rise with a plume of thick, black smoke beyond one of the buildings. He could hear gunfire and, on the radio, Security Forces were calling for medics and firefighters to be deployed to their position near the southeast gate. Still seconds away, Jack was fuming, frustrated not to be in the fight yet and at not hearing anyone updating that the Asset was in custody yet or even being followed.

They pulled up to a chaotic scene, tires chirping as they came to a hard stop. It was difficult to tell through the smoke, but it looked to be at least two vehicles on fire. Security officers were moving in on a surrounded Jeep. The tires were flat and the body and windows were riddled with bullet holes. Some troops were down, being aided by their fellow officers. But Jack’s attention was focused on what was happening at the Jeep.

An officer was barking commands to the unknown driver. He drew back, shattering the weakened window of the driver’s door with the butt of his rifle. The soldier reached in, popping open the door and grabbing the person behind the wheel, yanking them out of the vehicle and shoving them to the ground. The driver fell to their knees, before they were kicked in the back to fall facedown on the asphalt. While the men on the far side of the Jeep cleared it to be sure no one else was inside, the driver was pinned down and held at gunpoint, until they were placed in handcuffs.

Rollins heard someone call out that the vehicle was clear, as he approached the troops making the arrest and searching the prisoner. The men began to back off, as the driver was dragged to their feet. Jack’s eyes leveled. His pulse shot up and his fists clenched, seeing Allison standing in the midst of his soldiers. He was too angry to speak; too pissed for rational thought. Enraged at all of his doubts and suspicions being proven true in the same moment, Jack drew back, sending his fist into her face. The heavy handed cross snapped her head away from him and she fell limp, barely caught by the two soldiers at her sides before she could collapse completely to the ground unconscious.

“Get a hood,” he growled, staring down at Allison held up between the men, her head dropped forward and limbs limp. Jack looked around, some of the men seeming a little thrown by his actions. He ignored their looks, turning to the senior officer and ordering, “Get her to interrogation. This woman is an escape risk. I want a six man detail on her at all times.”

“Yes, Sir,” the officer nodded, waving for his men to bring their prisoner with him.

Jack felt the weight of several stares still on him, as he watched the soldiers heave Allison into the back of a truck nearby. He glanced over his shoulder to see the dumbfounded looks on the faces of the remaining men by the Jeep. He turned, barking, “Get these fires out! Secure the gate! Check the perimeter and double patrols. Find the Asset!”

"Unbe-fuckin'-lievable," Rollins griped, staring down his nose at Allison.

She came around, slowly. Once she blinked past that and swept her eyes across the room, he saw
that she recognized her situation. There was nothing to pull against, with her wrists shackled flush against the arms of the stainless steel interrogation chair. Her ankles were bound under the same metal restraints, with no room left to work with. An armed sentry was posted in each corner of the room,

"Hi, Jack." Allison said tiredly, with a humorless smile. "I missed you, too."

"You think this is funny?" he checked, casually folding his arms behind him.

"Every time I see your face," she sarcastically smiled, with a sweep of her head.

"You're gonna wipe that smile off your face, real fuckin' quick," Rollins assured her, "or I'm gonna do it for you." His shoulders and chest flexed, as his arms tightened behind him and he smiled, menacingly. His pulse and ire were still up, spurred by the sass she was giving him, like he was barking at a first day recruit. "You have no idea the things we're gonna do to you. You think Bangui was rough, Princess? Just you fuckin' wait."

Behind her, the mechanical lock released and the door opened and closed. Rollins' eyes ticked up to look over the top of Allison's head. He scowled, his brow wrinkling, as he watched Brock crossing the room. Allison turned her head to see who had come in.

"The hell happened to you?" Jack asked, straightening up and turning to face Rumlow.

Brock stopped, watching Allison for a moment, at an angle to her chair. He didn't speak. Brock held a disposable ice pack to the back of his head and simply pointed at Allison, with a leveled glare, to answer Jack's question.

"You done defending 'one of your agents' now?" Rollins taunted. "I fucking told you, she was playing us."

"Yeah," Rumlow nodded. "Good for you, Jack. You want a fuckin' trophy?"

Rollins quietly scoffed at Brock’s sarcasm and turned back to Allison. "I wanna know where the Asset is."

"Did you lose him again, Jack?" Allison feigned worry. She tutted, shaking her head. "That is not gonna look good for you, come review time."

Rollins drew back and sent a violent, open handed slap across her bruising jaw. He didn’t plan it. Hadn’t thought about it being the most expeditious way to get her to stop the bullshit. He just did it. She muttered a curse, under her breath, as she righted herself and set her eyes back on his defiantly.

"Keep it up," he urged her, feeling the tension from his anger building in his jaw. "This is the highlight of my day."

"Save it for later," Brock told him, giving him a pat on the back. "She can't answer questions, if she's unconscious."

"On the other hand," Allison chimed in, "whatever you think you're gonna do, you might as well get started. And put on a fresh pot of coffee. It is going to be a loooong night, Jack."

He’d had about enough of her lip. Rollins bent down, putting his face in front of hers. "It won't take long," he quietly promised. "You haven't seen everything."
Allison puckered her lips to a kiss and Jack sneered, more than a little confident in HYDRA’s means of persuasion. He straightened up, making a sharp gesture toward their prisoner and telling the officer in charge of the security team to move Allison to a cell in the detention center. He wasn’t going to take any chances with her being out of containment for long.

“Bag her,” he ordered, not wanting her to get her bearings or familiarize herself with the facility.

Jack stepped back, crossing his arms tightly and watching one of the guards place a black hood over Allison’s head again. He figured the bag might also trigger some bad memories about Bangui. Anything to try and upset her balance and take some of the confidence out of her fast. The soldiers worked in pairs to undo her restraints and replace them with handcuffs and leg shackles. She was pulled to her feet and guided out of the room by armed guards on either side of her. The door to the room was left open and Jack looked over to Brock, feeling his stare on him.

“The fuck was that?” Rumlow questioned. “Get off now on beating up defenseless girls?”

“Don’t fuckin’ start with me,” he warned.

“Jesus Christ, Jack,” he complained, pulling the ice pack off his neck to wipe some of the condensation off on his pant leg. “She’s not even awake for five minutes and you’re ready to knock her unconscious again? We need her, to find the Asset.”

“I’m not treating her with kid gloves,” Rollins argued, pointing a finger after where he’d last seen Addams, “because she doesn’t fucking deserve it. Strapped to that chair or not, she’s not a defenseless girl. She’s a lethal operator trained for survival, resistance, and escape. You know that. We made her.”

“Give it a rest,” Rumlow scowled, putting the chemical ice back on his neck. “I’m not in the mood for your bitchin’, right now. I got Command all over my ass about Barnes. Where’re we at on that?”

Jack let out an exhale, realizing Brock didn’t deserve his anger. They had enough problems without going at each other. He shifted his weight and raked his fingers back through his hair, concentrating on relaxing his jaw.

“Tracking team found the vehicle abandoned,” Rollins told him, “west along the tracks, near a switch. It looks like he went on on foot. Search teams are saturating the area. UAVs with thermals, K9s. Nothing yet.”

“He has a lead on us,” Rumlow quietly mused.

“Not a big one,” Jack disagreed. “We’ll find him.”
July 2015

“Sir?”

Rollins stopped mid-stride, turning over his shoulder to see who’d called to him from down the hallway. Jack moved out of the center of the hall and waited for the suited agent to catch up.

“What is it?” Jack questioned.

The agent held out his hand, opening his fist to show Rollins a small, clear plastic bag in his palm. “We found this, Commander,” he began, as Jack reached out to pick up the bag and inspect the small object inside. “Work detail clearing the roadway after the escape yesterday saw it. We thought it might belong to one of the officers present when the prisoner was taken into custody, but all of our equipment is accounted for. We took a closer look and,” he swept his head, “this isn’t our tech, Sir. This is SHIELD’s.”

“She obviously had access to HYDRA uniforms and gear. Probably scavenged from Ithaca and wherever else she’s been creeping around. So,” he reasoned, moving the earwig in the bag between his fingers, “she probably came across some of their gear and took it to use. At the very least, she’d want to try and tap comms to try and eavesdrop.”

“We thought of that, too, Sir,” the agent nodded. “But this tech is new. The firmware on this earpiece isn’t even six months old. And this was an active device, Sir. This wasn’t modified to tap our freqs. This is still in its original configuration for two way comms.”

“She didn’t do this alone,” Jack realized, squeezing his fist closed over the comms device in his hand.

Rollins started down the hallway again, the evidence of Addams’ small conspiracy clenched in his fist as he went to find Rumlow. Reaching the elevator, Jack smacked his hand into the call button, as the phone in his pocket rang. Jack tucked the small bag away in his pocket and took out his phone. On the other end of the line, an operator from Communications directed him to respond immediately to the Administration Building to see Col. Utley.

Ending the call and pocketing his phone again, Jack muttered a profanity. The elevator arrived and he took it to the ground level. It was a short walk to the base HQ. Outside the extra office visiting brass used, the secretary’s desk was empty. Utley’s trip was clearly spur of the moment, to not have arranged for travel for his staff to accompany him. Jack knocked on the closed office door, waiting for the invitation in. With the Colonel’s permission called out, Rollins let himself in.

“Commander,” Utley nodded, raising his hand to motion for Jack to sit. “Come in.” The Colonel sat back from his desk and into a comfortable lean in his chair. “What in Sam Hill is going on around here, Rollins?” He lifted a hand toward the window. “In less than 24 hours, this facility has recovered the Asset, had a prison break, lost said asset, and captured a spy, who all but waltzed in here and snuck the Asset right out the god damn front door.” Rollins’ jaw set, in frustration of the simplified truth.

“One...measly girl,” the older man scowled, holding up a finger for emphasis, “all alone, just walked through your gates and into a secure detention center, in the middle of a Level 2 facility, incapacitated this base’s CO- one of the best damned agents HYDRA has ever had, killed a good
handful of your men on the way out, and essentially barricaded herself between you all and the
escaping Asset, delaying your pursuit just long enough for him to disappear into the fucking wind
again. Is that it? Because, I can tell you, right now, that dog just ain’t gonna hunt.”

It occurred to Jack that he shouldn’t be answering these questions. Brock was in charge, and
Rollins was a little thrown not to see him in the office with them.

“Sir, I believe Cmdr. Rumlow-“

“Rumlow ain’t here, son,” Utley cut in. “He’s down in Interrogation with your spy, trying to find
out where our god damn Asset is. So, I’m asking you, how did this happen?”

Jack reached in to his pocket, pulling out the small bag containing the recovered communications
device he’d been given. He sat up, reaching out to place it on the desk, explaining, “This was
recovered from the area where the spy was taken into custody.” Utley picked up the bag, turning it
over in his hand to study. “That equipment is SHIELD tech, less than 6 months old. We don’t
know who exactly was involved, but she had help to free and extract the Asset. There’s no way she
could have gotten in here and done what she did on her own.”

“You telling me, we got a security problem at this installation?” the Colonel cocked up a brow.

“No, Sir,” Jack firmly knew.

Utley dropped the bag on his desk, picking up a folder to hand over his desk to Rollins. Jack
opened the cover to scan the pages inside, as Utley told him, “Those are transcripts of the security
logs for all persons coming and going from the detention center yesterday. Your spy’s name is
right there, next to Cmdr. Rumlow’s. There’s a copy of orders in there, from Director Cerbelli
himself, authorizing her for an interrogation and giving her carte blanche access to the Asset. Now,
how the hell did she pull that off?”

“Lt. Addams is a skilled operative, Sir,” Jack conceded, for the first time without any pride behind
it. “She has a strong background in espionage techniques and counters, from several years
of service with SHIELD’s Clandestine Services and STRIKE. She’s fully capable of forging any
documents she’d have needed to access the secure areas she did.”

“I don’t want to hear about this girl’s fuckin’ résumé,” Utley growled. “I want to know where the
Asset is, or I better hear that you’re on the trail to find him.” The Colonel slammed his fist onto his
desk. “I want to hear some god damn reassurances that we have not just handed the Asset over to
SHIELD!”

“Colonel, I assure you, we-“

The door opened without a knock and both men turned their attention to Rumlow, as he crossed the
room and Utley led him on, gruffly saying, “You better have some good news for me,
Commander.”

Taking the empty chair beside Rollins, Rumlow swept his head. “She’s not gonna give us
anything.”

“You’re sure about that?” Utley pressed, leveling his eye under a dubious furrow in his brow.

“Positive,” Brock nodded. “I know this one. She’d die before she gave anyone up.”

There was a brief pause, while Utley rubbed his chin. “Very well,” the older man nodded, slowly.
“Call up Yates. Tell him to fire up the lab. I want her in that chair the second the Doctor says the
tech’s dusted off and ready to go. He’ll break her down and we’ll have everything we need to know about how to find the Asset before lunch. And that sick sonuvabitch’ll have a new toy...We can’t get the old asset back, we’ll just make a new one.”

Rumlow nodded. “Yes, Sir.”

Outside her cell door, Jack peered in through the window, while he and Rumlow waited to be accessed by the officer in the control room. Inside, Allison was still, sitting near the end of her bed with her head turned down on her arms. The mechanical locks disengaged and the steel door began to open.

At the noise, Allison lifted her head from where she rested against her arms on her knees. The door to her cell opened and Rollins stepped in. Rumlow followed behind, stepping aside and leaving Allison the view of the armed guards outside the door. The door stayed open, while Jack eyed her over. Allison set her jaw, and he could give her a small amount of admiration for her apparent determination in the face of her current situation.

"It's decision time," Rollins evenly announced. "What's it going to be, you or Barnes?"

Allison took a breath, but didn’t speak. Jack expected as much. She wouldn't trade Barnes to save herself. If anything, she was probably biding her time, counting on him, or someone with SHIELD, to come to her rescue. As it was, the additional security measures Rollins had ordered put in place made her escape on her own impossible.

"Tell me I get to watch them break you in two," Jack taunted, waiting to see if there was a chink in the armor yet.

He expected some sharp comeback, but Allison stopped, her mouth barely opening to speak before a ringing phone interrupted her. Her eyes snapped over to the source of the sound and Jack turned as well, one eyebrow raised in curiosity, watching Brock reach into his pocket to answer his phone.

Brock connected the call. "Rumlow. Yeah. We're looking at her right now." Rumlow looked at Addams, as he listened for a moment to whoever was on the other end of the line. "I'll call you back." Jack looked at him expectantly and Brock answered the question in Rollins' expression, saying, "Command, waiting for an update."

"What do we get to tell them?" Rollins asked, turning back to Allison and gesturing his arm out to reference the call Brock just took.


"So, that's a 'no'?” he disdainfully smirked, knowing he shouldn’t have been surprised by her refusal to cooperate.

"I won't tell you where he is," she promised, with a small sweep of her head.

The smile that spread across Jack's face may as well been borrowed straight from the Devil himself. "That's okay," he assured her. "I know you think you're still doing the noble thing here, protecting him for whatever reason, but you'll tell me. When we're done putting your brain in a blender, you'll tell me anything I want you to." He shifted a foot forward to lean on, bending to stare in the eye and roughly grabbing a fistful of her hair at the back of her head. His eyes shifted between hers, as he menacingly growled, "I'm going to enjoy every second of you
screaming and begging me to just kill you."

"Whatever gets you off, Jack," Allison told him, "you pathetic piece of shit."

"Every. second, Princess," Rollins reiterated, before he straightened up and let her go, with a casual smack on her bruised jaw.

"You're wasting your time," Rumlowsaid to Jack, with bored aggravation in his voice. "She doesn't give a shit."

"She will," Rollins decided, with a jut of his chin, heading for the door. "A thousand bucks says she'll give him up in the first hour."

It was a bet he'd confidently make, any day. If her time infiltrating HYDRA for Fury and her friendships with Jack and the others hadn't been enough to sway her to HYDRA's side, the doctors and techs in the Program would definitely change her mind. No matter how hard she would try or how strongly she could promise herself that she'd never give up Barnes' location, she could only resist them for so long. The few hours her will and training might be able to hold them off wouldn't mean a thing. In the end, the serum and machines worked or the subject died. There wouldn't be a third alternative.

"We'll find out tomorrow," Brock noted.

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Jack's phone buzzed on the table beside the bed. He glanced over, taking his attention from the Kiwi he was rubbing onto the toe of his right boot. He put aside the rag for the polish and set the boot on the floor to take up his phone. Rollins took his time to read the order from HYDRA Command line by line.

He exhaled slowly, letting the phone's screen dim and black out. Jack dropped the phone on the mattress beside him and went back to polishing his boots. He threw an occasional look at the TV at the end of the room, keeping tabs on the Nationals game, as he finished putting a perfect spit shine on his boots. When he was done, he set the boots down by the end of the bed and put away his shine kit in the closet. Shutting the door, Jack stopped, resting to lean on his arm straightened into the door and dropping his head.

"Fuck," he breathed.

Jack straightened up, pulling his t-shirt off overhead and dropping it over the foot of the bed. He sat back down, taking up his phone again to reread his last message. HYDRA Command had issued an order giving Addams an ultimatum. She would be given one last opportunity to give up Barnes' location, in the morning. If she refused, she would be immediately taken to begin the procedures to replace him in the Winter Soldier Program.

"How the hell did this happen?" he muttered.

Rollins shook his head, trying to make sense of the last 24 hours. He'd been right, all along. But it didn't make him feel good. His instinct that Allison couldn't be trusted was unfortunately true. It didn't make sense, her showing up out of nowhere, without making any drops or any other communication with HYDRA to say she was coming in. He hadn't heard a word about her since she was listed as MIA, likely KIA, in Ithaca last year. She hadn't been mentioned in any reports, briefings, or even in friendly conversations or water cooler gossip.

When he'd first heard she was back, there was an unexpected leap in his chest. He was excited to
hear she was alive. But in the next breath, he heard that she had the Asset and heard about the dead men and the stolen intel and the elation was over. Suspicion rose and he somehow knew better. Had he always known?

He wanted it to be true. God damn, did he want it to be true. That somehow Allison had been working another black op to recover the Asset and had only come in because she completed her assignment. But after she freed Barnes and turned her weapons on his men, Jack knew any hope he had that she was still one of them was gone.

Still one of them? Had she ever been?

They had to have been working together all along. Allison must have gone back to SHIELD, maybe even walked right up to join them in the fight in Ithaca. Somewhere along the way, they had located the Asset and, for whatever reasons, the two of them have been working together. It would explain how Allison was using a recently manufactured SHIELD communications device and how the Asset was able to disappear so quickly after the escape. There was obviously somebody waiting to extract them, only, for whatever reason, Addams and Barnes split up and Allison didn’t make it.

Looking at the alarm clock on the table next to the bed, Rollins debated going over to the detention center. He had so many questions. So many how’s, but most importantly, why? But then he considered, did he even want to hear her speak? He knew he shouldn’t expect to hear the truth from her. Could he stand to hear more lies?

Thinking back on it all, Jack searched for a sign; some hint of her betrayal that he’d overlooked or missed in the years since she joined STRIKE, but there was none.

He wondered how she been able to insert herself into HYDRA so smoothly and then it occurred to him, “Fuckin’ Fury.” It had to have been a set up all along. If HYDRA could infiltrate SHIELD for so long, how could he not expect Fury to run his own slow play. It was starting to make sense now. “That son of a bitch.”

The months HYDRA spent hunting down leads and traitors, after the Insight engineer had been caught. Fury was the one who could orchestrate a plot like that, especially with Allison’s help. She knew and spoke to so many people. She had to have been his proxy. And it made sense why her name never came up in the investigation. Fury would have kept his ace up his sleeve. If the other conspirators did know of her involvement, even for the cowards he’d met in his work, none would give up a woman.

Jack’s pulse was up and his jaw tight. He sat there, fuming all over again, his fist clenched where it hung over his knee. For years he’d helped her and protected her. If he had slipped once and told her. If he had held back or done one thing different, could something have changed? Would HYDRA have ever been found out? Would she have betrayed them the way she did? Was there something he could have done or said to reach her and she joined them?

“God dammit,” he sighed, turning his head down as his hands raked through his hair.

Jack shook his head, knowing it didn’t matter whether he got answers to his questons or not. It was done. HYDRA was revealed. Nothing could change that. The Asset was lost and Fury’s spy had been captured. In the morning, both of the problems would be remedied. At 0700, Allison would give her refusal to surrender Barnes and sacrifice herself to take his place. He had no doubt of it.

Turning off the television and lights, Jack climbed into bed. He settled into his pillow with a heavy sigh. At 0700, Allison would start to disappear. It would take time; a couple hours for the exams
and initial procedure to be complete. But even those few hours were only a blink of an eye, considering the sum of a lifetime when erasing someone's mind. If Allison survived the initial exposure to the serum, she couldn’t withstand the machines. They’d do it fast and dirty, to get the location of the Asset. After that, they’d ship her off to monitor her response to the serum and as near as what they could call recovery, before the more refined and lengthy process began and they would begin assimilating her to the Program.

Jack took a deep breath, feeling the tension in his jaw slow to relax. He thought ahead, wondering would he still be so angry at the end. Would there really be any satisfaction in seeing her suffer the way he’d seen Barnes suffer? What would he think when he was there, standing in her cell in the morning? What he would say to her? Speaking to her for the last time as Allison Addams, would he say anything at all?

Rollins closed his eyes, folding an arm under his pillow and giving himself a small shake of his head. He didn’t know her. Not anymore. Maybe he never did.

She had chosen SHIELD over him; over their friendship and over every one of her brothers; every one of his brothers. She betrayed them all, after everything they had done for her. Everything leading up to the last 24 hours had been a lie, and Jack was never one for being lied to.
Chapter 58

July 2015

Jack’s hand skipped, scratching a short mark away from what should have been the R of his signature. His head snapped up, eyes leveled and scanning the windows outside for any sign of the tremor he felt and muted rumble he heard.

“Now what?” Jack growled, hearing the klaxon sound and an announcement directing fire personnel to the dentition center.

Rollins dropped his pen and grabbed the receiver from his desk phone. He called base security. As soon as the call was picked up, the officer on the other end of the line advised she was just about to call him.

“Sir, we have a perimeter breach, Grid 4-1, west,” she explained, “and a secondary explosion at the detention facility, first floor, north. Fire is en route to Detention. Evacuation in progress. Security responding to the breach, but no signs of enemy troops or movem- Sir, we also have two missing helos. Air Boss just advised two MD-6s fell off radar from a morning training exercise.”

While she rattled off coordinates for the last known locations of the missing helicopters and the numbers of souls onboard between them, Rollins felt his jaw tightening as he listened. There were no maydays or other reports from the little birds, before they dropped from radar, “within a second of each other, Sir.”

“What else do we have in the area, now?” he asked, his gaze unfocused out his office window as he waited for the officer to get him the information. She named a morning transfer flight with two Quinjets carrying security reinforcements that was inbound to the facility and told him the remainder of the helicopter squadron was searching for wreckage on their way back to base.

“Redirect the transfer flights to assist with an area search. Put up another pair of jets, so we can cover all points. And double the response to the perimeter breach.”

Jack hung up the receiver and rubbed a hand over his mouth. He shook his head, unable to name the uneasy feeling he had in his gut. There wouldn’t be a breach if there wasn’t someone there. Standing up from his seat, he thought better of going to the TOC, compelled to make another call.


In the background of the call, Rollins could hear the fire alarm and pre-recorded evacuation order sounding, as the block supervisor shouted over the noise. “Sergeant,” Jack began, “give me the status on Prisoner Addams.”

“I’m sorry, Sir,” he fumbled, maybe not hearing him. “Prisoner Addams? Addams is no longer on the block.”

“Evacuated?” he checked.

“No, Sir,” he answered. “Transferred.”

Rollins switched the phone from one hand to the other to check his watch. “Since when?”

There was a pause, before the officer replied, “As of oh-556, Sir. Released to Cmdr. Rumlow and his team’s custody for transfer to Medical.”
“Cmdr. Rumlow?” he repeated.

“Yes, Sir,” Warner confirmed.

“Who else was with him?”

“I don’t know, Sir,” he answered. “The escort was kitted up. Is there a pr-“

Jack hung up the phone and dialed the number for the lab in the Infirmary. His index finger tapped impatiently, as the phone rang unanswered. Of course, there wouldn’t be an answer. Staff wasn’t scheduled to arrive until 0700 to begin prep for the procedures on Allison. Rollins slammed the receiver back into the cradle, cursing under his breath.

He was fuming on his way to Rumlow’s office, his jaw working against itself, as Jack threw open the Commander’s office door. The room was empty and would have been silent, if not for Brock’s cell phone sitting on his desk, ringing as Jack called it for the third time in the last two minutes.

“Mother fucker,” Rollins growled, turning on his heel to head back down the hallway.

He called the tower from his cell phone, as he walked briskly down the corridor. Jack had just turned in to the doorway to go down the stairwell, when the Air Boss answered from PriFly with a report that there were no immediate signs of any wreckage along the training flight’s amended flight plan to suggest a crash occurred, but the two missing helicopters still hadn’t reappeared on radar and the tower had no signal from either transponder. Additional jets would be on scene within minutes.

“Get whatever Flight Line has fueled ready for immediate departure,” Rollins ordered, racing now down the stairs. “This is no longer search and rescue. Mission is contain and capture the personnel on those missing birds. This is a fucking prison break. Scramble QRFs. Alert Task Force 2-2. I want them on the tarmac with me in 5 mikes.”

He wouldn’t take Rumlow’s squad. Rollins needed his own men; people he could trust. On the ground floor and out of the stairwell, Jack broke into a sprint across the building lobby. He darted out the door, climbing into his Jeep and taking off for the armory. His pulse rose as the questions in his head multiplied. Who was with Rumlow? Why had he taken Allison early? Had security been breached again and Rumlow coerced into taking a rescue team to Addams? Was he helping her on his own? A dozen scenarios ran through his head, all of them unsettling in a dozen different ways. He pushed them all aside to call Col. Utley, as he drove, and pass on his suspicions about what was happening.

“Bring back that girl. You find any proof that sonuvabitch has done what you say he has, you put him down,” the Colonel ordered. “If you have any doubt, bring him back to me, personally.”

Rollins grabbed his weapons and gear from the armory, stowing it in the passenger seat next to him. He drove straight on to the tarmac. As he stalked around the front of his Jeep, an aircraft marshaller hurried over to let him know that the flight crew was onboard and running through pre-flight checks. Jack strapped on his vest and grabbed his rifle, without a word. He only nodded at the marshaller to acknowledge him, before turning to board the jet, falling in with the other operators climbing up the ramp to take a seat in the cabin.

A minute later, the last of his squad was loaded and the ramp was raised. The engines whined up to full power and the Quinjet lifted off. Jack tucked in an earpiece and turned the radio strapped into his MOLLE gear on, before settling his headset on to hear the local frequency of the plane. The pilots pointed them toward the last known location of the missing helicopters, as the update came
from the TOC saying the little birds had been spotted. With a clenched jaw, Jack gave the order to engage the rogue helicopters.

“Negative. Canopy’s too dense. Can’t set down or see in.”

Jack worked his jaw in frustration at the report. One of the helicopters was down, the other was unaccounted for, somehow still evading radar and having shook its tail. But before that, somehow, the little birds had managed to ground one of the troop transfer jets. It was a rough landing, but there were no casualties.

His pilot updated they were 60 seconds out from the location the pursuit aircraft gave as the site of the helicopter crash. Rollins’ optimism was short lived, before he heard the report from the TOC that a bombing run had just hit the flight line. He pressed a hand over his headset to be sure he was hearing correctly, when the controller called out that the base was under attack by incoming troops and vehicles from the north. They appeared to be from SHIELD.

Rollins stood, grabbing hold of a rail overhead to steady himself as he addressed his squad. “Listen up! Your target is an escaped prisoner. Female, white, brown hair, blue eyes, 5’9, 147.” He hated himself a little for still knowing that. “The prisoner is a former STRIKE operator. Do not underestimate her. She’s being aided by 7 unknown personnel. They’re wearing our gear, and may be some of our men. Anyone not on this team is considered a hostile.”

“Rules of engagement, Sir? We still contain and capture?”

“Do not fire, unless fired upon,” he begrudgingly nodded. “The escapee is to be taken alive. If you encounter resistance from anyone else, overcome it, by any means necessary.”

Rollins looked over the determined faces of his men. “Cmdr. Rumlow is no longer in charge,” he told them. “He’s out there. Find him and take him into custody, as well.”

There were many looks of confusion, but only one man questioned, “Sir?”

“Cmdr. Rumlow has committed a treasonous act,” Rollins said, “and must answer to the charge.” He set his eyes on the sergeant who had questioned him, warning, “You may find a friend standing at the end of your rifle today. I assure you, the men in these woods, if they’re still alive, are not your brothers anymore. They have betrayed HYDRA and they have betrayed you, by aiding the enemy.” His gaze crossed them all. “You have your orders. Execute them.”

Jack and his squad from Task Force 2 moved quickly through the woods. The security reinforcements from the morning transfer had their gear and guns with them and were ordered to assist in the ground search for Addams and any survivors of the helicopter crash. They had found an opening in the treetops wide enough to fast rope in and were on the ground just before Rollins and his team arrived. The downed helicopter was empty and the squad had split up to cover more ground.

They were noisy and fast, crashing through the forest’s overgrowth as a Quinjet overhead directed them after a pair of heat signatures they were tracking. The other team was chasing their own targets, with assistance from another aircraft. The traitors from the helicopter had been forced to split up, when the security forces had caught up to them and engaged. Jack and his men were in pursuit of the other two targets who had escaped the firefight. The July morning was already
heating up and Jack could feel the sweat beginning to bead up on his brow.

It had been several minutes, but they were catching up. A soldier had broken off from his team, spotting the two escapees moving through the trees. While his squad was engaged, he had been able to track the two fleeing from a distance, updating the TOC and helping to get air support in the area to follow. He’d been able to take a shot and advised one subject was wounded, but there hadn’t been an update since that report. Jack assumed the worst for the soldier, considering who he might have been following, but was confident whoever he was chasing was dealing with at least one wounded.

As the pilot above updated their location to within a hundred yards, Rollins ordered his men to slow down. They were quiet now, methodically moving forward. The eye in the sky described a hillside and ravine ahead of them. It looked like their targets were going along a creek beside the hillside, instead of over it.

Where you fight counts for a lot. If you have the high ground, you have the advantage. And Rollins and his men took it.

Inching up to the edge of the hill, Jack spied their prey over the hillside. He signaled for his men to stop and for half of them to split off and flank the ravine below. Rollins instantly recognized Addams’ silhouette, a smug sneer on his lips for finding them first. Jack thumbed off his safety, whispering into his mic that they had contact, and sent down a strafe of high velocity rounds across their path from above, shattering the rock at their feet into dust. The pair froze, looking up and around for the shooter, and Jack caught a glimpse of the masked face with Allison. And he knew.

"Her I could see," Jack’s angry voice echoed off the rock around them, as he skipped down the side of the hill and the targets turned to see him. "Something about her was always a little too good for us. But, you Bingo? ...Not you. You're a lifer, like me. Whole divisions under your command," he scowled, walking up on the escapees, “...and look at you now."

"What? You don't like surprises?" Rumlow quipped.

"All I can think is maybe that knock on your head was a little harder than we thought," Jack shook his head. "Because I'm racking my brain and can't figure out what you get out of helping her."

"I'm flattered you still think about me," Allison smirked.

"You're cuteness wore off a long time ago, Princess," he sneered her way.

"You're still calling me Princess," she pointed out. "You can't be that mad."

"I'm not mad, just disappointed," he growled, before turning his focus back to Rumlow. "This looks pretty bad for you, Bingo," Rollins noted, setting his weapon into his shoulder and leveled just below his eye at Brock.

"Doesn't look too bad from this side," Brock shrugged, panning his gaze along Jack and the three HYDRA soldiers set up beside him to meet Allison's eyes doing the same. "Seen worse, won them all."

He didn’t take it personally, when Brock responded by putting his own rifle sights on Jack. Rollins expected it. Trying to take him out first was the wisest choice for Rumlow. Allison had set her sights on a soldier a step closer to her and Brock than the others, shifting her eyes to watch the men beside Jack.

"Give it up," Jack groaned, with a tired cock of his head. "You're outgunned. You know we already
have the rest of the traitors.” It was a lie, or at least an exaggeration he couldn’t prove yet, but he was convincing. “There's no version of this you win.”

"I'd rather take my chances," Rumlow persisted. "We both know, there are no prisoners with HYDRA."

"There'll be one," Jack corrected, tipping the muzzle of his rifle toward Allison and he saw Brock’s gaze follow. "They still want their replacement." He nodded toward Rumlow, recalling his orders from Utley. "You, on the other hand, there's a standing kill order on you. Looks like I'm up for promotion."

"So, what are you waiting for, huh, Jack?" Brock pressed.

"You know me," he smirked, "always the sentimental one. I figured I'd give you a chance to surrender, for old time's sake."

Sentimentality, friendship, or whatever was holding him back, Jack needed to know. He had to hear some kind of explanation for why they were all here like this.

Rumlow chuckled, shaking his head. "You always were a softy, but I'm gonna have to decline."

The soldiers with Jack advanced another pair of steps, as he heard the squad lieutenant advise over the comms they were coming around into position from the far side of the hill. Allison took a step back, the heel of her boot finding the rock face behind her, as she and Rumlow withdrew a few inches. Jack saw the blood soaked material at Brock’s shoulder, silently relieved that the sniper had indeed left a mark. He’d take any advantage and, maybe, Brock could be taken into custody with Allison, instead of Jack having to follow through with his execution. He still needed answers.

"Ah, what the hell," Jack shrugged, with a fiendish smirk. "I gotta ask. Curiosity, you know?" He looked Brock in the eye. "...Why?"

"I'd explain it all to you, Jack," Rumlow offered, "but I don't think a guy like you could understand."

"Don't say I wasn't fair," Rollins scowled. "You had your chance."

Jack made a subtle adjustment to the grip on his rifle. Time slowed, as he shifted his index finger down onto his trigger. A shot rang out, but it wasn't his. Not yet.
Chapter 59

July 2015

Jesus.

Hand clutched to his chest, the heel of Jack’s boot dug into the ground to push him back into the overgrowth. He flipped over his hand, eyes leveled and making a quick study to be sure there was no blood on his palm or gear. He turned over on his shoulder, planting his hands to push up and drawing in a knee at the same time to scramble to his feet and take cover behind the closest suitable tree. With his back toward the firefight that had broken out and pressed up against the tree trunk, Jack swallowed a breath to settle the heaving of his chest.

His eyes crushed closed at the pain in his ribs and he took another, longer breath to center himself and let adrenaline do its job. He couldn’t help but look again, making sure the rifle round was caught in his armor. He felt a notch under his finger from the back of the round and the deformation around it in the Kevlar.

“Who the fuck-?”

Rollins turned and did a quick peek around the tree. There was a sniper out there somewhere. He had no doubt they were part of the team that had helped free Allison or a part of their exfil team. Either way, Jack hadn’t seen where the shot came from. He only knew that it had generally come from his 2 o’clock, somewhere north or northeast of him now. The chatter on the comms painted a picture of the details he couldn’t see, as he was forced to duck back behind the tree by some indiscriminate fire strafing his way. He radioed to rally available soldiers in the woods to his location, advising the TOC they had contact with the target.

Tucking his rifle into his shoulder again, Jack spotted two of his men nearby. They had cover behind a descent enough pile of fallen rock and dirt. He made a sharp whistle through his teeth, catching the eye of one of his sergeants. They shared a nod of understanding, as Rollins readied himself to move, calling out, “Covering fire! Moving!”

The sergeant and his partner shifted to rise on a knee and lay down suppressing fire back toward the hillside, as the sergeant responded, “Covering!”

Jack dropped a knee, sliding in low behind the rocks with his men. The sergeant hunkered back down to address him, while the other soldier took a better position to stay engaged in the fight.

“Does anyone have eyes on the target?” Jack questioned.

The sergeant nodded, his attention down on the spent magazine he was stripping and replacing from his rifle. “Second tango, Sir,” he said. He gave a tip of his head to point Jack over his shoulder. “Stand of trees, 1 o’clock. Can’t see ‘im, but Fire Team Bravo’s moving up and he hasn’t crossed them. Gotta still be there.”

Taking a fast look over the rocks, Jack scanned the area ahead of them, looking for Allison. “Primary target?”

“Lost sight,” the sergeant swept his head.

The gunfire had stopped. Jack listened, as his troops updated their casualties and all confirmed losing contact of both targets. Rollins spoke up, handing out orders over the comms for the fire
teams to regroup and telling the TOC to get medics and dustoffs inbound to recover the wounded and any KIAs. At the warning from the controller that all personnel, rescue and otherwise, were already engaged at the installation, trying to hold off SHIELD’s assault, Rollins’ jaw clenched, frustrated to not have any help coming for his men that were down.

“Movement on the hillside.”

The tension in his jaw disappeared, as Jack tuned in to the update and trained his weapon up toward the crest of the hill ahead of them.

“Tango 1, moving down the east side toward the water.”

“She’s watching us,” Jack growled, his eyes checking every angle of the hillside for a hint of movement.

The squad of security reinforcements from the morning transfer came over the air, advising they were moving up on Rollins’ and Task Force 2’s location. Jack told his men to standby, knowing without a visual of the enemy it was wiser to move up in force and overwhelm Addams and Rumlow. A Quinjet was still hovering overhead, in stealth mode, confirming from their vantage that the directions Jack gave to flank where the targets were believed to be was accurate.

When the security forces were at their heels, Jack gave the order to advance. Mere seconds later, they caught sight of the targets, moving toward the water’s edge again. Rollins wasn’t worried when one of his men took a knee to steady his sights and put a round each into the armored backs of Allison and Brock. He knew the shots were meant to distract and slow them down. He was more concerned with the subject the Quinjet on overwatch called out and why the trio had stopped in the first place.

His curiosity was interrupted by the spray of bullets Addams sent their way, as she turned and fired on them and stumbled back a few steps after taking her hit. Jack and his men split up, moving for cover, but not before another one of his men fell, killed by whoever the variable was. Jack barked out orders, positioning his men to give them control of the open area ahead of them.

One of his men called out that, “Target 1 and 2 are moving! 1 o’clock! Rock pile.”

Gunfire broke out, aimed in that direction. Jack and three of his men where on the move, in the distraction, maneuvering around to flank the targets and link up with more troops moving over and around the hillside to cut off the escape route. The variable was returning fire now, but radio traffic advised he was pinned, for now, behind an uprooted tree. As Rollins and his men moved up, a soldier sent a few pot shots down range to keep them covered.

The startled gunfire they received in response had some luck to it. The man next to Rollins dropped lifeless to the forest floor, while Jack dipped behind the closest tree. Growling in pain, he glared down at the searing heat he felt beneath the tear in his pant leg. The torn fabric was already shining in the morning sun that streaked through the canopy of the woods, wet with blood. Muttering a curse, Jack reached down to inspect the wound. His head fell backward, only slightly relieved that it was just a graze.

He let his rifle hang and reached around to the small medical pouch on his belt, digging out a package of clotting agent. He swore the powder always burned worse the the wound itself did, but he didn’t have a choice. Jack tore open the plastic pouch and poured in the clotting agent, gritting his teeth to get through the next round of pain.

Jack felt the shockwave hit him, instinctually ducking his head at the force and sound of a grenade
exploding nearby. His eyes leveled in anger, Rollins looked around, trying to see if he could identify the idiot who had clearly forgotten the “capture” part of their orders. With a glance around his tree he caught a fleeting glimpse of the variable getting to his feet and sprinting from the cloud of dirt and debris that was raining down.

Rollins’ spine stiffened, recognizing Barnes was the variable. *Mother fucker.* As if he didn’t have enough problems, now he had another objective to achieve and mission to run. He barked out orders, simultaneously updating the TOC that the Asset was in the woods and directing the security forces where to locate and engage him. Once again, Jack requested MedEvac and demanded reinforcements to help contain and capture the Asset. The controller didn’t argue this time.

In the chaos, Jack had a moment of luck. He spotted Rumlow. He could just barely see him retreating toward the hillside, low crawling or dragging himself along the ground. Jack couldn’t tell which, but he wasn’t going to lose sight of him again. While his men were engaging the others, Rollins crept around the edge of the fight.

He wasn’t ready for it. Brock’s hands were down in the dirt, pushing him back against the slope of the crumbling hill behind him. He was startled, when he looked up and saw Jack stepping forward, his rifle ready. The Commander’s arm snapped up and locked out, putting the sights of the pistol in his hand on Jack, and they stared at each other for a long moment.

Jack resigned first, unfurling his fingers from around the forward grip of his rifle and slowly moving his opened hand away. He didn’t expect Brock to trust him. If he were in his boots, he sure as hell wouldn’t. But there was something about seeing his closest friend lying bleeding and weak in the dirt that gave him pause. Rumlow’s sights didn’t fall, until Jack’s own were pointed to the ground. Even then, Rollins figured it was more that his aim broke from fatigue than from faith in Jack’s actions.

His head made a subtle tilt, considering Brock before him. He saw the wounds; the tears in the uniform and armor, the blood soaking through. With a labored sigh, Brock reached up and pulled the balaclava off his face. Jack gave a sympathetic sweep of his head, seeing the sweat on Rumlow’s brow and the paler color to his skin. He realized how grave his situation might be, and suddenly there was a heaviness to Jack’s chest he hadn’t expected.

"You've got nothing left," he decided. "This is it, Bingo."

"You got orders, Jack," he dared him, his breath a little hard to find. "You've never disobeyed them before."

"Never," Rollins agreed, turning his rifle across himself to rest the barrel in the crook of his arm, as he took a knee to get down to Brock’s level and look him in the eye. "But they were always your orders."

"Is that what's stopping ya now?" Rumlow asked, grimacing through a stab of pain.

A thoughtful frown twitched on his lips, as Rollins mused, "All the shit we been through, maybe you deserve better than that."

"Maybe," Brock accepted, the corner of his mouth flinching up in a crooked, if not exhausted, grin.

"My last favor," Jack nodded, hesitating for the first time in his life to follow orders.

There was an uneasy feeling in his gut. Guilt maybe, but maybe more anxiety about why he didn’t
just take the shot in the first place. If Jack was right, and the Commander was a traitor, the Colonel had told him to execute Rumlow. Jack had no doubt. He was absolutely certain. Still, at the moment he could have, he hadn’t. Jack used to laugh, maybe flip him off or pull a punch at him, when Brock would tease him about having a conscience or being a sap. Looking at Rumlow now, Jack remembered all the things he was before he had turned on them.

His best friend for 11 years. His brother. He’d stood with him when he married Claire and propped him up during the divorce. He wasn’t sure how many times he had saved his life, of how many times Jack had returned the favor. Poker nights, Nationals games, nights at Barny’s. It was all over now, but he decided it wouldn’t be by his hand. If Rumlow had any luck left, he’d bleed out before one of Jack’s men found him.

Jack swallowed and took a fast look around, as the fight around them continued, before he put his hand on his knee to stand up. "See you on the other side, Bingo."

"Jack," Rumlow called after him, taking as deep a breath as he could manage, as Rollins turned to see him again. "Let her go, Jack." He swallowed, trying to get more air to tell him, "Call ’em off. Tell Command, she's dead. That's your last favor."

Rollins eyed him, suspiciously, for a moment. "That I can't do. They want her back. She owes them a Soldier, and we’ve got some talking to do."

"Jack, don't. Not her.” Brock shifted his wounded shoulder, inching a little taller where he lay slumped into the rock. "Last warning," he told him, leveling his gaze at Rollins.

"Warning?" Jack scoffed.

Jack’s eyes flicked down to the gun in Brock’s hand lying in his lap, hearing the click of the hammer cocking back, as Rumlow’s head rocked weakly against the hill to shake at Jack and Brock told him, “Take me back, instead. Let her go.”

“You?” Rollins smirked. The muzzle of his rifle rose a few inches, gesturing toward Brock. “Look at you, Bingo. You wouldn’t make it. And they’re not interested in doing any favors, like fixing you. But she’s alright. She’ll survive.”

“I never asked for anythin’ from you,” Brock reminded him. Rumlow’s inhaled breath rattled in his chest and his tongue licked over his lip, and Jack’s brow ticked down, inexplicably unnerved by the redness he saw coming to his friend’s eyes as Brock, for the first time since Jack had known him, pleaded, “Jack, please...not her.”

Something came to him; realization, and then anger. What Brock had said earlier, when Jack first found him and Allison. He said a guy like him wouldn’t understand. Brock had never said that before. Jack had said it, meaning to say that he didn’t think he could explain the decisions he let his heart make to a guy, like Rumlow, who never seemed to be in love.

"The banker," he breathed out, taking a pair of measured steps back toward Brock. "It was you." Rollins shook his head, the accusing tone still inhospitable, as he towered over Rumlow. "That's why he never came around." He nodded tightly, as it all came together, his jaw set. "Because you were already there. It was you all along, you lying son of a bitch."

"She didn't do anything to you, Jack," he reminded him, with another feeble shake of his head. "Let her go."

"All this time, you knew," Jack growled. "You knew what she was to me.” He kicked out, knocking
the gun out of Brock’s weakened grip, when he saw the flex in his hand, broadcasting his intent to use it. Rollins dropped to a knee, his free hand grabbing a fistful of the front of Rumlow’s armor under his chin. “And you fuckin’ played me to keep her for yourself? Always undermining me and waving regulations.”

His mind raced, replaying every second of every interaction he’d seen of her and Brock, looking for a sign he’d overlooked; going over every time he and Allison had spoken in front of him. But there was nothing. They were clever.

In hindsight, he understood why Brock pushed policy so hard, but he never would have suspected why. His rage came up fast; insulted, jealous, and hurt all at once, by everything he knew now. But it wasn’t just about Allison. He realized everything was falling apart again. Only this time it wasn’t Rogers’ fault, like DC and everything after. It was because of her and Brock.

"It wasn't her, Jack," Rumlow insisted, his eyelids drooping as his head lolled to the side. "Your fight's with me."

They stared at each other, for a tense moment, before Rollins shook his head, putting a shove into his hold of Brock’s armor, before letting him go. "No. You helped her do all 'a this," he seethed, waving a hand out sharply toward the chaos around them. "Sabotaging everything we worked our whole careers for, lying to me for years." His jaw worked against itself. He'd never felt such absolute betrayal. "All this time, you had her, and you never said a word."

Rumlow shook his head, exhaling as he said, "I told you, a guy like you'd never understand."

Jack's chest rose with a deep inhale, the sinew of his jaw flexing. "Time to start obeying orders again," Rollins growled, taking a step back before moving out to the edge of the gunfire.
Chapter 60

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He hadn’t felt a pain like this since he found out about Claire’s affair. No. This was worse. With Claire, it had been just his marriage; a broken heart and a new apartment. But with Allison, everything had been turned upside down. He lost everything, after DC. His friends- brothers, his career, his home and the family he had left, after his father died. She had lied to him, probably every day he’d known her. She’d taken and abused his friendship, and he’d swear, toying with him and his affections, using him for intel, until Fury’s plan to expose HYDRA became reality in DC.

He lost everything that day, because of her. Including her; who he thought she was and wanted her to be. And, now that she’d come back from the dead, with fresh lies and another game, she’d taken the last thing he could say at least he always had. His best friend.

On the hunt for her again, it only took seconds for them to find each other. She came up on his blind side, driving her heel down into the back edge of Jack's knee and taking a swipe down at his head with the butt of her rifle. She missed. Rollins' tumbled forward from his buckled knee, rolling out on his shoulder, turning over to take a pot shot with his rifle as his back hit the ground. Allison flinched away, kicking into the barrel of his gun and knocking the weapon down while she took aim with hers. Jack wasn't done, ramming his boot into her gut and doubling her over, knocking the air out of her.

With a stumbling step, Allison ended up too close to maneuver the long gun for a shot. She let it fall to hang from the sling, drawing the pistol from her thigh, as she dropped to a knee and coughed for a breath. He wasn’t going to give her a chance to recover.

Jack pulled the knife from his boot, planting his other hand to push himself up off the ground. He lunged at Allison, an animalistic growl in his throat and hate in his eyes, as he took hold of her gun hand and she grabbed his knife wielding arm, holding each other at bay. He had the advantage again, pressing her down to the ground as she tried to push back up against his weight, despite the injuries he could see on her.

"Traitor," Rollins spat, his rage renewed by her attack.

Her ankle turned beneath her, as he kicked down into her leg. Allison groaned at the pain, falling to her hip. His size over hers and his brute strength over her wounded arms forced her down to her back. Jack trapped her forearm under his knee, his left hand wrestling for the grip of the gun, while he leaned down onto his right arm, inching the knife point close enough to press into her throat. She tried to roll her shoulder away and pull back from under his knee, but she was trapped.


Allison rammed her knee into his side. He grit his teeth, warding off the cough of the air being forced back out of his lungs. She only succeeded in interrupting his grip fighting hers for her gun and relieving the knife from her skin for a moment. With her hand immobilized under his leg, he smirked, twisting the pistol free and tossing it aside to clasp his newly freed hand over his other to send the knife down again as Allison flexed to try and stop him. She jerked her head to the side and, with another kick and a shift of her arm, the knife bore into the earth beside her ear.

"Go on," he sadistically invited, clamping one hand down on her throat and withdrawing his knife
from the ground with the other. "Talk your way out of this one. Beg. Beg for me to save your life again; for another chance."

"No," Allison told him, through grit teeth, as she still fought to hold him back. "Not from you."

Jack drew back, his fist wrapped tight around the hilt of his knife, sending a vicious jab across her face. In the dazed moment that followed, seeing the unfocused look in her eyes, Rollins yanked the mask off her head. Allison blinked the spots from her vision and found her focus again. The refreshed anger in her eyes fed his own.

He bent down, his breath hot on her skin and face barely an inch from hers, and menacingly hissed, "There's no replacement, now." Rollins palmed his hand over the side of her head, pressing her face into the ground to speak in her ear. "Just another casualty in the escape attempt."

He had orders to bring her back. Rumlow had begged for him to let her go. But he couldn't see anything but the face of a liar in front of him.

"All that time we wasted on you," he sneered. There was a subtle tip of his head, a flash of regret in his mind, looking down at Allison sweating and chest heaving beneath him. Just as quickly, it was replaced with anger again. "Such a shame, Princess."

"Fuck you," she spat, struggling under his grasp to tilt her head out of his grip and wrestle herself free.

He rocked the edge of the blade along her neck to still her. "You ungrateful bitch!" Jack bit back at her. "I believed in you, 'til you disappeared from Ithaca," he told her, his voice dripping with venom. "You had me convinced, like everyone else, 'til then." Allison jerked, trying to buck him off of her, to no avail. "You could've been great. The things we could'a done," Rollins seethed, the knife in his hand pressed a little harder to remind her it was there and stall her latest struggle, leaning to look her in the eye. "We let you in. We took care of you; protected you...and this is how you repay us?!"

Jesus Christ, Princess. Look what you’ve done.

He exhaled, bowing, resting his forehead into her hair, as he growled to her ear, pained at recalling, "Everything we did for you- What I did for you?" His tone softened a level, wounded, and his head shook slowly on hers. "What I would have done...for you."

Look what I have to do. Look what you're making me do.

He pressed a rough kiss to her temple and gave her head an extra shove down into the dirt, the hatred back in his voice, as orders replayed in his head. "Now, you're just another example of how weak SHIELD always was. Hail HYDRA."

Rollins easily wrenched his arm free of her grasp, raising the knife to stab down. Allison clawed up at his face, with her free hand, a last effort to go out with a fight. Jack's left hand caught hers, twisting it to hold across his chest and shift it out of the way of his next strike. Time slowed to a crawl, as Allison glared back up at him defiantly.

He saw it. Her wanting so desperately to convince him she wasn’t scared; to not give him the satisfaction of seeing the fear in her. She always was one of the strongest people he’d ever met. But he saw the dampness shining in her eyes giving her away. Some physical reactions of the body you can’t control; its instincts too strong to override, no matter how hard you try. They both knew what was about to happen. She was afraid. So was he. And he stopped.
Jesus fuck- What am I doing?

His fist tightened around the hilt of his knife, his breath caught under the unseen weight in his chest. Time didn’t seem to move, as his gut twisted, suddenly horrified of what he saw himself about to do. Answers he thought he knew were gone, of why he would do this and whose fault it was, seeing the fearfulness her eyes betrayed her with. Her fear of him. He never imagined seeing that look from her. In that fraction of a second, she had turned everything upside down again.

Jack went limp and his vision flashed white. His strength and senses gone with a crack through the air. Another pair of shots followed, punching into the side of his ribs. He felt warm, even falling to his side to the coolness of the forest floor’s shadows and dew, as he felt the heat from the wetness seeping into his uniform. He couldn’t move. He shut his eyes to the sunlight streaking down through the trees. His hearing was dull, his throat suddenly dry and unable to swallow. Everything was quiet and black.

Chapter End Notes

I can’t thank you enough, for taking the time to read this story. Although I know, like every fic that will appear in the STRIKE Series, this is a niche story, I am very fond of the Jack I created. Thank you for your support and encouragement of this series, the world I’ve built for these characters, and interest in their stories. It means everything to me.

Although this is the last chapter of “Jack Rollins”, he’s not done. Subscribe to the STRIKE series and follow Allison, Brock, Jack, and the rest of the team into new AU's and stories.

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