If They Haven't Learned Your Name

by silentwalrus

Summary

Steve gets out of the hospital in two days, but just barely. “I’m fine,” he tells Sam, Nurse Eunjung and the phalanx of doctors assigned to make sure Captain America didn’t bleed out and die and get bad PR all over their nice clean hospital. “I have an advanced healing factor. It’s fine. See? I’m standing.”

“That is not standing,” Sam tells him.

“You’re bending the IV stand,” Nurse Eunjung adds pointedly. “Let go and sit down, they don’t grow on trees.”

aka Steve and Bucky's Global Honeymoon Revenge World Tour.

Podfic of this story available by the incredible quietnight!

Notes
[rolls up to fandom 2 years late holding starbucks and wearing kanye sunglasses] So! This is immediately post-TWS and pretty much ignores literally everything canon that happens after. Ultron who? Anyway, I can't promise regular updates but this sucker's getting finished for sure.

Basically this is a murder comedy feat. Avengers, assholes, weirdness and a very angry Bucky serving sweet, sweet revenge.
Steve gets out of the hospital in two days, but just barely. “I’m fine,” he tells Sam, Nurse Eunjung and the phalanx of doctors assigned to make sure Captain America didn’t bleed out and die and get bad PR all over their nice clean hospital. “I have an advanced healing factor. It’s fine. See? I’m standing.”

“That is not standing,” Sam tells him.

“You’re bending the IV stand,” Nurse Eunjung adds pointedly. “Let go and sit down, they don’t grow on trees.”

“I’m completely fine,” Steve protests, wilting back against the bed and groping weakly for his shield. “I’m okay. Sam-”

“Yeah, yeah, you need to go, this is a time-sensitive operation, your boo needs you, uh huh. What we need- us here-” Sam gestures to himself and the medical staff, all of whom nod fervently. “Is for Captain America not to be a damn fool and rip his damn stitches basically twenty minutes after he got them. Lie down, Steve.”

“Get up, Steve,” Natasha says, pushing through the herd of doctors partly by means of an empty wheelchair but mainly by force of personality. She waves a sheaf of papers at him. “Paperwork’s filed. Doctors will sign it. We’re leaving.”

“What,” says Sam.

“Marry me,” says Steve.

“Wait a minute,” says one of the doctors.

“You can’t just do that,” Sam continues.

“He needs rest,” Nurse Eunjung finishes, even as she glares bitterly at the crooked IV stand. Steve, catching her eye, sheepishly reaches over to straighten it back out again.

“You’re not wrong. We’re going anyway,” Natasha says.

“Natasha,” Sam says.

Natasha sighs. “If we don’t sign him out then he’s just going to wait until you’re asleep and then climb out the window. Am I wrong, Steve?”

Steve looks tries not to look incredibly guilty, internally amazed that Natasha got his number so fast; the Captain America thing tends to take care of that, and up until recently it worked on her too. He doesn’t succeed.

“Jesus Christ, Steve,” Sam repeats.

Natasha wiggles the wheelchair with one hand while pressing the paperwork to one doctor’s chest with the other. “Come on, chop chop.”

Steve starts to get up, then falters. “Um.”

“What is it?” Sam asks warily.

Sam stares. “Did you seriously just try to leave. With a catheter still attached.”

“No,” Steve says, his hands now very firmly gripping the hospital blanket around his waist. Natasha’s face looks suspiciously close to smiling. “Maybe.”

“Who let you into the Army,” Sam says, a little wildly. “Who did that. Who.”

“Not going to lie, I’m enjoying this,” Natasha says, “but because we’re on a time limit and I don’t have a video camera, I’m calling it. Sam, Steve, we’re going. Nurse, could you help us out, please?”

Nurse Eunjung sighs. “I’m taking out Captain America’s catheter,” she mutters to herself. “Jesus Christ. I could’ve been a dentist.”

Two hours later, Steve, still smarting from Nurse Eunjung’s tender ministrations, is wheeled directly to Sam’s guest bed, his shield in his lap, and unloaded onto the mattress. He wants to protest and get up and hopefully find some pants but the moment his head touches the pillow he more or less passes out for nineteen hours straight.

This is good, because he wakes up no longer seeing double and when he pulls up his scrubs his stitches are lying unraveled on his stomach, pushed out by angry red scar tissue that’s slowly but steadily fading to pink. It’s also bad, because that’s a whole nineteen more hours for Bucky to disappear further and if Bucky’s even half the wily sonuvabitch he was back in the forties then that’s a lot of disappearing.

Steve picks up his shield and leans it against the wall before going to look for signs of life. Sam is in the kitchen, making a smoothie; a glance at the clock tells Steve it’s nearly six. “Morning,” Steve says.

Sam jumps and swears a little. “God damn it, Rogers.” He looks Steve up and down. “Well, at least you look less like hammered shit.”

Steve holds up his handful of stitches. “Feel better, too.”

“Three days after three bullets and you’re just walking around fresh as a daisy.” Sam shakes his head, eyeing the stitches warily. “Natasha called. Says she has something for us, wants to meet after Fury’s funeral. You up to go out? Of course you are.”

Steve opens his mouth to agree, then winces at the frankly horrifying noise that comes from his gut. “I do need to eat first,” he admits sheepishly.

“Yeah, yeah, fifteen thousand calorie diet to keep your prima donna figure,” Sam grimaces, but they stop at some place called Eggspectations on the way, so Steve graciously forgives him.

The pancakes and sausage and eggs and bacon do momentarily take his mind off the soundtrack of he’s alive I gotta find him playing in Steve’s head, but then they get to the cemetery and Natasha rolls up with her folder of intel and mission-focus crashes back down around Steve’s ears again. Fury says his pitch and then ghosts away, and Steve’s left looking down at the file in his hands like it’s crawling with spiders instead of TOP SECRET stamps written in Russian.
“I’ll help,” Natasha says, on a secure line forty minutes later, “once I finish extracting Barton and running some errands.” Steve assumes that this is Natasha-speak for ‘rebuild my compromised network of professional safeguards and quietly murder a couple of people that really need murdering’. “But I’ve read the file,” she continues. “And I doubt you’ll get anything out of there that I didn’t. My current professional opinion? You won’t find him, Rogers. Not unless he wants to be found.”

“We’ll see,” Steve says after a moment, because that’s the least awful of all the other things he can say.

“We’ll see,” Natasha echoes. There’s a pause, a faint crackle on the line. He hears Natasha take a breath, and- something changes, there, although Steve can’t quite pinpoint exactly what. Natasha sighs. “Alright, Steve? Call Stark. He just finished peeling the reactor out of his chest and digging the rest of his Malibu mansion out of the surf but he’ll help.”

“Wait, what?” Steve asks.

“- and we’ll need his help. He’s got resources and he actually is a genius, although if you ever tell him I said that you will suddenly find your life to be very interesting.”

Steve rubs his face. “More interesting than it already is?”

“I’m a girl of many talents. And before you complain about how awkward and rude it would be to ask Stark for help, don’t, I know that doesn’t mean shit to you. Explain the situation to him, that’s all. If-” Natasha pauses, then takes another breath, “When we find him, whatever’s been done to him, he won’t recover from that alone. You won’t recover from that alone. Stark helping out is our best case scenario. And,” she adds, “We can trust him with this. He was practically first on HYDRA’s kill list, after all.”


“Call Stark,” she repeats, and hangs up.

Steve stares at his phone for a long time, unseeing, before going to open up that file and yank as hard as he can on that thread.

-o-

The Asset drags the—Steve. Captain America? Steve. The Asset drags him ashore. Low density vegetation, open bank—easy to see a red, white and blue body from a news or emergency services helicopter. Captain America. Steve? The Captain is breathing. Steve has trouble breathing. Captain America is immune to all disease and has an advanced healing factor. Steve has —

The Asset turns, resets his dislocated shoulder against a tree and staggers off. The choppers will be coming soon.

The Asset follows his compromised extraction protocols. He hides his tactical gear. He covers his arm. He takes steps to keep himself from being recognized. He—
—does not retreat to the designated safe house. He is heading there. He is going, his body is moving, he—

—passes right by it. He—is not— going back—to the vault—

The Asset does not retreat to the designated safe house.

The attic space of a plastics processing plant in Anacostia is stuffy, stinking, and impossible for even a highly athletic human to enter. It takes the Asset four minutes on a recently dislocated shoulder to get in. He sits in the dark, cramped space and focuses on returning his breathing to baseline.

The Anacostia plant is not a HYDRA safehouse. There are no handlers here. No technicians. The extraction was compromised and the mission—

-the mission changed, mutated inside of him, unlatched its claws and teeth from one part of his brain and sunk them into another. The Asset is no longer following the bloody rails laid down inside his mind. The Asset has deviated from protocol (wipe him). The Asset has disobeyed the protocol. The Asset has discovered new protocols.

The Asset has not complied with those, either.

There are no handlers here. No technicians.

No Chair.

The Asset is no longer an entity dependent on protocols. This has been proven empirically. Whatever that mission had done, it had chewed something loose inside, something fundamental. You’re my friend. I’m not going to fight you. ’Til the end of the line.

The Asset’s arm ripples and his teeth grind together. He needs more information.

The Captain America exhibit is empty, after dark and in a city under emergency lockdown. A recorded voiceover echoes strangely off the cavernous walls; blue-grey shapes make flickering shadows as big, wall-mounted videos play. There are murals and photographs and mannequins. There are photographs. Birth certificates. So many words.

He stands a long time in the flickery, echoey rooms. The face that is not his face is on the wall. The Steve that is not his Steve is on the wall. His heart rate is up and his breathing is erratic. It feels like water is building up inside his lungs.

It isn’t much better outside, fourteen streets away and sliding through the dark, invisible. Like the mission, the museum knocked something loose. Something has been let off the leash. He is off the leash.

The thought is so big it’s like he can’t even think about it. It’s a pressure in his head, in his chest, crushing like terror and bright like adrenaline. Training kicks in: he is in enemy territory. He has to get off the street. He has to retreat, regroup, reassess.

The Asset, recognizing that the Anacostia attic is severely lacking in things like running water and WiFi, finds a half-renovated condo on the outskirts of Georgetown that promises privacy in its layers of dust. He secures the house as best he can, with limited resources and an open floor plan;
he finishes barricading himself in the basement just as his flesh hand begins to shake in earnest.

This is not an unexpected turn of events. Standard mission-prep protocol is for a technician to depress six syringes’ worth of various chemicals into his bloodstream, with varying amounts more if he must return to base for resupply or maintenance. He knows without knowing that he has gone through withdrawal before. This is not his first compromised-extraction rodeo. Flashes of sand, the hammering of chopper blades, ringing in his ears. The taste of vomit and the occasional snatches of Farsi. Cold. Heat. Cold again.

He walks unsteadily to the bathroom, sitting down between the sink and the toilet with his knees up and the Glock in his hand. Like the Chair, he doesn’t need to remember the whole episode to know, bone-deep, that this is going to hurt.

Time begins to dilate. It has been two hours and thirteen minutes. It has been seven seconds. It has been seventy years. His breathing comes louder, quieter, louder again. The tremors move from his hands to his shoulders to his spine to his lungs.

The Glock stays in his metal hand. It doesn’t shake at all.

The Asset is well versed in hallucinations. He can recognize them; he knows when the world he’s stuck in is unreal. It's not a great help. If anything, the shuddery, looping confusion of trying to reconcile two sets of sensory data makes it exponentially worse.

But he knows. He knows he’s hallucinating. It just doesn’t help.

The Asset opens his eyes, and he’s right above him: blue eyes, straight back, brand new uniform. Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes looks down at him: young, dead, immortal.

He crouches down over the Asset, his crisp uniform creasing. He is as handsome as they painted him, face pale and poreless, but the Asset has seen that look before, in the eyes of men about to cut him open.

The Glock is an unbearable weight in his hand, but the Asset raises it anyway. Barnes watches, coolly detached. “You can’t kill me,” Barnes tells him, almost pitifully. “I’m already dead.”

“You’re not real,” he tells Barnes, but it’s weak: his voice is thready, and his conviction too.

“Realer than you,” Barnes says blandly. He reaches out and his hands are as cold as the tile, pressing on either side of the Asset’s face, an icy headache crushing in from the outside. “You’re wearing my face,” he whispers. “Maybe I’ll take it back.”

And the Asset is burning, his insides whiting out with the heat of his rage, how dare he, and he lunges at Barnes, snapping like an animal. “You’re dead,” he chokes, grasping at nothing, collapsing on the tile, and Barnes is gone like he never existed.

Hallucinations. Loads of fun.

Time keeps on smearing. He hears screaming, German shouting, artillery fire; he sees black oil spill down his front, out of his mouth, then vanish in the next second. He curls up tight in the space between toilet and tub and shuts his eyes, hands over his ears, Glock pressed sideways to his temple.

When he unsticks his eyes again Barnes is back, naked this time, bruises at every point of restraint and site of injection. He’s lying on his side, mirroring the Asset, watching him with sleepy-eyed apathy. He looks like a corpse. The Asset wonders if he does, too.
Barnes picks at his left shoulder, peeling at it, absentmindedly drawing away strips of bloody flesh. “You’re not dead,” he says conversationally. “Dead hurts less. I’d know.” He nods at the Glock, now lying in the corner. “Want to try it? I know you have before.”

The Asset blinks at the Glock, his thoughts slow, and lets his eyes slide shut again. He can feel his fever shivering through him, burning. It’ll break soon.

“You’re thinking there’s no point telling me to go away,” Barnes says in his ear. “You’re thinking I’ll disappear anyway, when you’re detoxed. But I won’t. What’re you gonna do, cut your own face off?”

The whisper moves closer, like it’s coming from inside his head, coming from his own mouth. “You think you’re better than me, honey? That I broke, and you’re what survived? Sweetheart, I’m in you. I am you. And when you slip, I’ll take it all back. I’ll take what’s mine.”

The Asset rolls over and gets to the edge of the tub before vomiting. Not much comes up. He hasn’t eaten in thirty-seven hours and he doesn’t expect to be able to for about another twenty more.

He collapses against the tile, panting. Barnes is gone again. It’s another interminable smear of time before he can push his head under the tap and turn the water on. He gulps half-heartedly at the stream, and some half-collapsed flicker of memory tells him that here, in the midst of serious withdrawal and no medical attention, staying hydrated is the best thing he can do.

Staying hydrated. The thought pings off something, some forgotten, rusted chord inside of him, and his shoulders shake and wheezing, creaking sounds creep out of his mouth. Staying hydrated. Ahahahahahaha.

“You crazy fuck,” Barnes murmurs, and this time he’s sitting on the edge of the tub, sporting two black eyes and the Asset’s arm. It’s new, the flesh around the shoulder red and inflamed as it tries to adjust to the foreign metal. Barnes’ head is shaved; the Asset knows without looking that there will be stitches all over the back of his skull, surgical incisions marching down his spine. They’d really wanted to figure out the arm.

“You poor bastard,” Barnes says, and this time he sounds almost fond. “I shouldn’t’ve said what I did. You don’t know up from down, honey, I got no call pickin’ on you like that. After all, you’re mine too, ain’t you? And I’m yours. Stuck in this mess together.”

Asset rolls over and puts his hands over his ears again. “I don’t want anything from you.”

“Sure you do,” Barnes says, amused. “If you’re me, then it all makes sense, don’t it? Captain America’s best friend, back from the dead, just fucked up by HYDRA a little. And he loves you. He’d die for you. Just like a story, ain’t it? All neat and nice and poetic, even.”

Asset bares his teeth again. “I’m not you.”

“You’re not anything else either.”

“I’m the- the-” the fist of HYDRA.

“But you aren’t,” Barnes says in his ear. “Not anymore.”
come with me now

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sam doesn’t make him talk on the way back to the house, for which Steve is eternally grateful, and claps him on the shoulder when they get there and says something about watering his plants. So Steve sits down— mission focus, dry eyes, no room or time for his hands to shake— and reads the file.

It isn’t hugely informative, in the sense that it has all locations, dates and personnel names heavily redacted, which makes it very difficult for Steve to immediately storm the coordinates of the HYDRA facilities that had held Bucky and decommission them with extreme prejudice. But it does have rundowns of the Winter Soldier’s missions, which has enough information despite the redactions for Steve to pull together a fairly solid picture of events from context. And Google.

Drawing an actual picture helps. After six hours at Sam’s kitchen table, with Sam himself occasionally drifting into the edges of Steve’s spatial awareness to periodically push glasses of orange juice towards him, Steve has a timeline scribbled out in front of him on a collection of napkins, some envelope, two grocery receipts and the back of Sam’s water bill. The timeline ranges from 1951, with the earliest recorded mission, to last week, when the Helicarriers had razed a good chunk of downtown DC and ruined several miles of the Potomac for the next five generations of fish to come. Points on the timeline are surrounded by notes scribbled in Steve’s cramped handwriting.

Looking over it, Steve smiles.

“You’re creeping me out, man,” Sam says from across the table. Steve blinks and looks up; Sam’s in sweatpants now and has what looks like a dime store paperback open in front of him. There’s a glass of iced tea at his elbow. It looks like he’s been there a while. “That smile? Creepy as shit. Just thought you should know.”

“I’m just— optimistic,” Steve says, rubbing the back of his neck. His eyeballs feel like they’ve been coated in carpet. “I’m no expert, obviously, but. I think there’s room for hope.”

Sam stares at him a little. Steve’s used to this stare. He gets it from a lot of people, especially nowadays from those who grew up on Captain America without ever being exposed to Steve Rogers. “You’re gonna have to lay this one out for me, Steve.”

“Well,” Steve says. “Firstly, look at all his ops. They’re almost all recon, sabotage, long-range hits. There’s a lot of— destruction, sure, but it’s all long-distance, a lot of remote triggers and things set up to look like accidents. He wasn’t supposed to exist, let alone be seen, and that was his MO—”

“—right up until DC,” Sam finishes, his eyes on the scribbled timeline. “Where he comes in, sticking out like a grenade in a gumbo, and goes full Terminator on an overpass in full view of at least six traffic cameras and like a billion witnesses. Not to mention a news chopper or two. At the very least.”

“Yeah. That.”

Sam frowns, then flicks his eyes to Steve. “You know, it could have been orders,” he says, his voice gentling from soldier to friend. “If the helicarriers had gone up, HYDRA probably wouldn’t
have wasted any more resources on secrecy and stealth. Not with their evil death lasers in the sky. Maybe they just pointed him at you and told him to go nuts, figuring that in a bit it wouldn’t matter either way. And it makes for a great distraction— Captain America in a big showy fight, a nationwide manhunt, all big public spectacles that distract from the actual helicarrier launch.”

Steve rubs his face with one hand. “Bucky doesn’t miss, Sam,” he says quietly. “He was a good enough shot even— before— ” Steve takes a breath. “He’s a sharpshooter. He had kill shot options on the helicarrier. He didn’t take them.”

“Okay, okay,” Sam says, raising his hands. “I believe you, Steve. You know I’m with you on this either way, right? You say the guy is worth going after, we’ll go after him.”

“It’s not Bucky we’re going after,” Steve says, because now he’s had time to think. “We won’t find him. But HYDRA…” Steve taps a finger on the file. “We don’t have to find anything. It’s all online. We’ve got the locations of over a hundred bases and outposts right here.”

Sam eyes the folder. “That’s gonna step on a lot of toes. Geopolitically speaking.”

“I’m not going as Captain America,” Steve says. “I’m not going as an American soldier. As of this week, I’m just an unemployed asshole swinging a big chunk of metal and a hell of a grudge.” He meets Sam’s eyes. “If you throw in with me, you’re going to be a target.”

Sam raises an eyebrow pretty damn high on his forehead. “Dude, I’m black,” he says. “Don’t talk to me about being a target.”

But he sits back and thinks about it, arms crossed. “There’s gonna be consequences,” he says slowly. “The government will flip its wig. Multiple governments will flip multiple wigs. But.”

Sam’s mouth pulls to the side, a little wry. “HYDRA isn’t just a Captain America problem. They’re doing bad shit. They gotta go down. And I don’t think I trust anybody else to do it.”

“You’re sure.”

“Well, I mean, my momma’s gonna kick my ass from here to Botswana, but yeah, I’m sure,” Sam says. “What, are you gonna try and talk me out of it? Didn’t think so. Where do we start?”

Steve sighs and rubs his face with both hands. “I gotta call Stark.”

As it turns out, Stark calls him. Sam’s house phone rings barely two minutes later and Sam picks up. “Steven Grant Rogers!” Steve hears Stark bellow tinnily.

“Actually, no,” Sam says.

“ACTUALLY YES,” Stark shouts. “Put him on, bird boy, before I tank your credit score so hard it’ll burn a trail through the banking software—”

“Stark,” Steve says, taking the phone from Sam, who’s making a face caught between hilariously amused and incredulously offended, cutting off Tony’s high-pitched rant about giving Sam’s laptop sentience and eternal life and then making it hate him. “Did Natasha call you?”

“No, the Red Menace did not call me, Steven, and neither did you, or Fury, or goddamn anyone else I knew while this spectacular global shitshow was going down, oh my god. I got pulled in by Hill! Hill!”

Steve frowns. “What’s wrong with Hill?”
Stark takes a breath that sounds like it’s two parts snarl. “Do you have any idea. What I have been going through these past three days.”

“Apparently you had your own thing,” Steve says. “I hear your house fell into the ocean?”

“More like blown up into the ocean by firebreathing terrorists, my goodness me, thank you so much for caring, and make no mistake we will have words later, but you! And SHIELD! Fury! Coulson! Goddamn DC going up in flames!” Stark makes a wheezing noise. “HYDRA! At no point did it occur to you that maybe, possibly, just a wild thought out of the blue here, that you could use some backup?”

“No time,” Steve says, while mentally wincing.

“No time? No time? How long does it take to shoot off a text? Hey Tony, can you drop by DC for a bit, bring your suit and all the missiles you can carry? I know you’re a slow typer, Steven, but even for you that’s a bit much—”

Steve grits his teeth. His stomach may be healing but it still fucking hurts, he doesn't quite know the first place to start, and Bucky's in the wind. Bucky needs help.

"Stark," he says, cutting him off again. "You're right. I should have called. Now I need you to fill me in on what happened."

Stark falls silent for a second, then audibly sucks in a huge breath and launches into the sloppiest, most editorialized sitrep Steve’s ever heard.

It’s pretty much what he expected. DC is still under a state of emergency and the National Guard is handling disaster relief along with the Red Cross and FEMA. The incident is being classified as terrorism, and the FBI has jurisdiction and has opened an investigation. Pretty much every other alphabet agency has started an internal witchhunt, and all that’s just domestic; Stark makes some noises about some UN uproar and how Interpol is circling the wagons.

"—so now SHIELD's a train wreck, Cap, and SI has been picking up the slack as much as we can, I mean— we have Hill here, she’s working for us now, and Pepper's gone ham on the hiring department. And the legal department. Just, all of the departments, really, and I've spent the past three days running triage on the SHIELD files and you would not believe some of the stuff I've read in here— "

"Good job," Steve says, which knocks Tony silent again. Steve takes a deep breath. "How familiar would you say you got with those files?"

"Pretty goddamn familiar, Cap. If I got any more familiar I'd be legally wed to them in forty-nine states and two territories— " Stark's voice sharpens. "What are you looking for?"

"What do you know about the Winter Soldier?" Steve asks, leaning his forehead against Sam's fridge and closing his eyes.

"What, like the Thomas Paine Valley Forge metaphor? JARVIS, run it." There’s the sound of a chair rolling. "Search query's turning up nothing...nothing... So far it's a total blank, Cap, but HYDRA was a pack of devious douchebags if nothing else so I know even their secrets have secrets— is it a person? Holy shit. Is that guy. Is that the Terminator Fabio who tried to laminate you across a DC overpass. It is, isn't it. Please tell me you knocked his block off, but good."

"No, he's my friend," Steve says, which makes Stark give a strangled sort of hoot. "What've you got on him?"
"Nothing, Cap, the files mention nothing about your good buddy American Psycho there, I am extrapolating based on contextual evidence and your piles and piles of goddamn crazy. Your friend? What kind of friend shoots like six different guns at you and rips the steering wheel out through the roof of your car?"

"It was Sam's car," Steve says automatically. "And he— " Steve opens his mouth, thinks for more than two seconds at a time, and shuts his mouth. "Call me back on a secure line," he says instead.

"I'm going to do you one better," Stark says grimly. "Private jet at the Potomac airfield in two hours, bring your bird friend. No, listen to me, Cap, we need to be in New York. You're in a completely unsecured two-bedroom bungalow in DC suburbia— "

"Not for long," Steve says, equally grimly. "I've got things that need doing, but he— it starts in DC. Call me back."

Stark growls like an angry cat, but Steve hangs up. Two seconds later, Steve hears a few bars of guitar from the living room and then AMERICA, FUCK YEAH! blares tinnily through the house. Somewhere to his left Sam spits something out and then starts laughing uncontrollably. Steve sighs and goes to his army duffle, slung under the coffee table, where it takes him two verses and a chorus to find the Starkphone he'd tossed in there after the Battle of Manhattan and basically never touched again.

"Hi," Steve says, once he's figured out how to answer the damn thing. "Is this secure?"

"If it's not, we've got way bigger problems," Stark answers. "Now, what's the dirt on My Little Murderbuddy, Friendship Is Stab Wounds that you didn't want just any old anybody to hear?"

Steve has to take a few breaths and remind himself that property damage is not the answer. At least not to expressing his feelings. At least not in Sam’s house. He breathes some more.

"Cap?"

Steve closes his eyes again. "What do you know about James Buchanan Barnes?"

“America’s favorite sergeant? What about him?"

“That’s him."

“Him who?"

“The Winter Soldier. It’s Bucky."

After Stark's horrified shrieking has died away, replaced by relatively more manageable horrified spluttering, Steve explains what he can. “HYDRA got him,” he says, hearing his own voice like it’s coming from somewhere just slightly outside of himself. “He survived the fall. He was captured, tortured, and brainwashed into becoming the Winter Soldier. He doesn’t have his memories, but. He recognized me. On the helicarrier. I’m positive. And he’s alive— he would have gotten out, he was in better shape than I was when I fell, he— he pulled me out of the water, Stark.”

“What? What? No, Steven, what even, do not go jumping to conclusions, think about it, you probably swam your concussed super soldier ass fifty yards to the shore and then just forgot about it— “

“He pulled me out,” Steve repeats. “I wasn’t swimming nowhere, Stark. I blacked out before I hit the water. And it wasn’t fifty yards, either.”
“Oh Jesus Christ,” Stark says prayerfully. “Where is he now? Please tell me he’s not sharpening knives under Wilson’s kitchen table as we speak—”

“No. He’s gone. He’s in the wind.”

“You’re telling me we’ve got a brainwashed cyborg assassin loose on the streets—”

“So you’d be willing to help me find him, then?” Steve says, very calm.

There’s another round of sputtering on the other end of the line. Steve waits. “Should I take that as a no?”

“Should you— should you— who do you think reprogrammed those INSIGHT chips for you in under four hours, Steven, did you think that cyber fairies just delivered those in the night— ”

“Excuse me,” a female voice cuts smoothly over Stark’s, and then Stark’s noises cut off entirely. “Captain, this is Pepper Potts. We met in SHIELD medical, if I recall, after the Battle of Manhattan. I am currently the CEO of Stark Industries as well as Tony’s fiancée.”

“Ma’am,” Steve manages. It’s his turn to be derailed.

“I’m sure that your concerns are very pressing,” Ms. Potts continues, “but considering Tony underwent open heart surgery less than a week ago, I’m afraid I have to put certain limits on what kind of help he’ll be able to give you. I hope you understand.”

“Oh,” Steve says. “I was, um, not aware of the— surgery… thing, I’m sorry - ”

“It’s no problem,” Ms. Potts says smoothly. “I don’t doubt Tony will recover quickly, and there’s plenty he can do even while he rests, God help me. I’ll let you two get back to it in a moment, but I do actually have a few quick questions for you, Captain.”

“Of course, ma’am,” Steve says, bracing himself. His memories of Pepper Potts are colored with a healthy dose of awe as well as vague surreality; their first meeting had indeed been in SHIELD medical, right after SHIELD had hustled them away from the shawarma place. Steve had been surreptitiously pinching his inner arm to stay awake for all the post-Battle tests and decontamination procedures when a willowy ginger Valkyrie had strode in and proceeded to rip Tony Stark a new asshole while simultaneously crying and kissing Stark’s feebly protesting face. It had taken Steve a good fifteen minutes of blinking owlishly at the two of them before he realized that this was actually happening and was not, in fact, a bizarre hallucination brought on by adrenaline backwash and fatigue.

“You’re out of the hospital, yes?” Ms. Potts asks, and Steve blinks.

“Yes ma’am. Discharged yesterday.”

“That’s good to hear, Captain. I hope you’re healing well. Now, I’m sure you know that things are a little bit of a mess right now, sociopolitically speaking,” Ms. Potts says wryly, and Steve snorts before he can catch himself. Ms. Potts, however, just sounds amused when she goes on. “Stark Industries has been working some of the fallout, of course, and there are a number of SHIELD employees who have been hired by us in research and security capacities, since Director Coulson’s SHIELD is currently unequipped to handle the previous volume of— ”

“Wait, I’m sorry, did you say Coulson?” Steve says. “I thought he didn’t have any relatives?”

“Ah,” Ms. Potts says. “Another thing Tony has failed to mention—”
“I totally mentioned!” Steve hears Stark yell faintly. “I mentioned the hell out of it! Not my fault Freedom Fry over there wasn’t paying attention—”

“—but yes, Phil Coulson is alive, and as the next most senior agent after Hill, he has taken the director’s office,” Ms. Potts finishes. “We’ve been in contact over the last couple of days, straightening things out.”

“I went to Agent Agent’s funeral!” Stark rants in the background. “I put flowers on his goddamn headstone! Expensive ones! I could sue!”

Steve has to lean forward and put his forehead down on the coffee table for a minute. “Does nobody stay dead anymore?”

“You started it!”

“Anyway,” Ms. Potts continues, “I was wondering, Captain, if you had given any thought to releasing some kind of statement. People are worried, after all, and you do have a rather influential voice. I apologize that I’m demanding this of you so soon,” she says, actually sounding apologetic, “but in my experience it’s best to jump on these things as early as possible, before they take on a life of their own.”

Steve thinks.

“I don’t think I can do a press conference,” he finally says, rubbing his temple with his free hand. “A — a statement, maybe? I can say I’m alive and some things that happened, but— appearing somewhere and answering questions, it’s— that’s not in the cards. Certain things require my attention and they are time-sensitive in nature,” Steve says, quoting Peggy verbatim from 1945. “Besides, correct me if I’m wrong, but I just made a lot of very powerful people very unhappy, and after the past week I’ve learned my lesson about thinking HYDRA is gone for good. They might want revenge and they don’t particularly care about collateral damage. I think it’s safest for everybody if I don’t go parading around anywhere for a while.”

“I understand. Thank you, Captain— ”

“They’re going to subpoena you,” Stark predicts loudly, coming back onto the line. “Yeah, yeah, you’re Captain America, but Congress gets vicious when it’s pissed and they’ll get round to it eventually, when they need somebody to skin on national television. We’ll handle spin, we’ve got lawyers—I’m assuming your SHIELDRA PR team is kaput now even if it wasn’t probably staffed by liberal arts Nazis but we should have some people here ready to go—”

“My PR team?” Steve says blankly. He had a PR team?

“Yeah, Cap, whatever you need,” Stark says breezily, clearly assuming they are on the same page of a book that Steve doesn’t even own.

Well. Natasha did say Stark would help. “I need all the known locations of HYDRA bases from the files and a lot of materiel,” he says. “Assault weapons, explosives, ammo. Real-time intel and processing anything we come across would be invaluable too. A couple of passports, eventually, but that’s not as urgent.”

“Wow,” Stark says after a short pause. “You actually are not fucking around, are you.”

“That’s not been something I’m often accused of, no,” Steve agrees. “We’re hitting the east coast first. Widow said she’d join us once she gets a few things straightened out. The faster we get this started the better. I don’t want to give HYDRA any more of a head start than I already have.”
“You want fast, you came to the right guy,” Stark says. “Intel and processing— forty minutes to dedicate server space and tweak the details, it’ll be hooked up to your phone within the hour. JARVIS can get you the HYDRA bases in half that, look out for the email. As for guns— tell me, Captain, have you yet had the privilege of meeting my good friend Colonel James Rhodes?”

-0-

There’s sunlight coming in from a tiny window. Birds are singing somewhere outside.

The thing that is not the Asset rolls over and retches. He feels like a can of shit that’s been kicked up and down the entirety of God’s staircase. The fever broke several hours ago, but thank fuck he’s in a bathroom. The less said about what his body does there the better.

He’s in a bathroom. He doesn’t remember how he got there. But he’s alone. There’s traffic, but it sounds far away. Whatever building he’s in, it’s small and empty.

He can piece together enough of the past twenty-some hours to make himself shudder and retch again. He rests his forehead against the cold ceramic lip of the bathtub and assesses the situation.

He’s alone, effectively defected from his previous handlers. Is he Barnes? Who the fuck cares. It won’t matter what the fuck he calls himself if HYDRA gets it together enough to come for him again. There are no handlers and no technicians here. There is no Chair. He wants this state of affairs to continue.

He gags, spits and sticks his head under the tap again. No Chair. No more fucking Chair.

So. The thing that is not James Buchanan Barnes is going to do a magic trick. He is going to disappear.

Of course, even the former Winter Soldier can’t do much if he’s starving to death. His healing rate slowed down because of the lack of nutrition, but even so most of his injuries have at the very least begun knitting back together. He’s good to move. Sort of. His clothes are a mess, stained and stinking and unfit for blending in as a civilian, so he ends up washing them all in the tub, as best he can with no soap and cold water. He hangs them up on the towel railings to dry and sits, naked on the floor.

He considers his arm. It doesn’t come off, but the modifications HYDRA made to it are fairly superficial. He remembers them swearing about it over his head. A miracle, they said, but we can’t do much of anything with miracles. They tried anyway, unlike the Russians, who knew when to leave well enough alone.

The armor plating ripples open for him. He reaches inside with his right hand and starts yanking out the wires tangled around the cold silver core. Things spark and die, but there is no pain: they could not figure out how to connect to the arm, and the arm is what connects to him.

He knows there are other failsafes in his body, because while they couldn’t cut into the arm they could damn well cut into the rest of him. He will have to deal with that next. He finishes stripping out the parasitic wires and leaves them in a pile on the bathroom floor, stumbling as he stands. He is weak, after detox, and getting weaker. He puts the clothes on damp and heads out the door.

Finding adequate nutrition is not hard in a city like DC, even if it is currently an overturned anthill of police and National Guardsmen. They’re not a problem, but other people will be, especially when he goes to find his food. He needs a cover.

He finds one lying on one of the little tables in one of the patient waiting rooms at Georgetown University Hospital. The cover says, in three different typefaces, Seduced BY THE Wall Street
Werewolf. The letters are garishly yellow and the entirety of the art is just a set of heavily defined spray-tanned abdominal muscles. Just looking at it makes some dusty, distant part of him want to slap himself in the face. Perfect.

He ghosts into the hospital’s long-term patient ward and, after a few discreet glances at charts, settles in the room of one Arthur Tollmeyer, year-long coma patient. He sits down beside the bed, hat pulled down low, and after some more discreet maneuvering, opens the book. Anyone passing by will see Mr. Tollmeyer and his visitor and nothing out of place, and they certainly won’t see that Mr. Tollmeyer’s nutrient IV cannula is now inserted into Barnes-thing’s right cephalic vein.

The book is, predictably, fucking awful. The plot is by turns baffling and nonexistent, the prose tortuous and repetitive, and the characters follow no laws of logic known to mortal man. Asset-Barnes loses count of how many times the word “throbbing” is used to describe someone’s genitalia. And not that he’s an expert, but he’s 98% certain female reproductive organs don’t work like that.

Once he can feel the metabolic shift kicking in, he slouches over to the hospital cafeteria and gets food: pudding, jello, some kind of rice milk concoction that tastes the least offensive and goes down easiest of the three. He can progress to real solids within 72 hours. After that it’s a whole new world.

He drifts through the hospital, camouflaged by the bags under his eyes and the paper cup of shitty hospital coffee in his hand. His pockets grow heavier as he wanders, filling with medical supplies; when a nurse starts watching him a little too closely, his face smiles at her and she blushes, ducking her head.

He has to switch locations again for the surgery. He finds a locking single-stall bathroom in the Georgetown University library, which is good enough. A sink and a mirror are all he needs. He knows where the trackers are in his body: his metal hand hums a little when it gets close to them, like it’s calling to the other pieces of metal in his body and doesn’t know why they don’t respond. If he’s ever told any handlers about this, he doesn’t remember it. He thinks maybe he didn’t. The hum is a very little thing.

He knows what to do, sort of—he thinks he’s had to dig shrapnel out of himself before, or do other minor surgery in the field. He strips and disinfects everything, swabbing iodine over his skin, then injects the local anesthetic and opens up the scalpel.

One of the trackers is in his knee: that’s easy enough that he manages to extract it before the ten minutes of numbness run out. The second one is under his ribs. He triples the dose of anesthetic and sticks himself just to the right of his sternum, then props himself in front of the mirror and gets to work.

Forty minutes later he’s bleeding and his diaphragm is twitching a little but the trackers are out, sitting in his metal palm. The arm hums at them, the pitch increasing once, twice, then dying down entirely; he can tell both are inactive, though he couldn’t say how he knows. He closes his fist with a crunch.

Bandaging everything is a matter of moments, which is good—if the trackers sent out a signal upon being destroyed (unlikely but not impossible) he needs to not be here. None of his operative functions are impaired and he will heal completely in a matter of hours. He flushes the broken trackers down the toilet and goes back into the world, untagged.

He doesn’t know if he’s supposed to feel different, but either way the question is moot because being in public takes up more or less all his available processing power. He walks for a while, to manage the nausea and acquire cash via other people’s wallets; the lockdown is still in effect, but
this is a capital city and there are still pedestrians out on the streets. He acquires more rice milk at a vegan grocery store and walks some more, drinking slowly out of a big green straw, until he passes a neon plastic newsstand, fresh and full of big angry words and big angry pictures.

FILES LEAKED, the headlines scream. NAZIS AMONG US? SERVERS CRASH. PUBLIC OUTRAGE.

It’s time for the Barnes-thing to acquire a computer.

Finding a laptop is not hard. He pulls a sleek silver number out of a man’s bag at a cafe while the guy is distracted by yelling at his waitress and easily bypasses its civilian encryption in another cafe down the block. He finds a different house to settle this time, in Anacostia again, a poky shuttered apartment that shares a wall with a Starbucks next door. WiFi taken care of, he sits on the floor, Glock by his hip, and opens the laptop.

There are indeed HYDRA files all over the internet. The Black Widow— red, red, black, red— has leaked them and now Congress is baying for her head. He eyes those headlines skeptically. He recognizes, in his brain that can know without knowing, that if he couldn’t crush that spider then the entire Congress of the United States of America doesn’t have a prayer.

He continues through the files. Some information is familiar in the same way the spider is. Others call up ugly ratcheting echoes inside. He avoids those when he can. He doesn’t have the resources for a meltdown.

Other files are strangely welcome. Alexander Pierce is dead, multiple headlines claim. Gunshot wounds. That’s a shame. Asset-thing resolves to check the veracity of this claim, because if it’s true Barnes has a grave to piss on.

There is no mention of the Asset, as expected. After all, he doesn’t exist.

The rest is more or less what he expects. One of the USA’s most covert intelligence apparatuses is in shambles. Fingers are being pointed. Captain [steve] America (fuckin’ Rogers—) is out of surgery but in the hospital. No reports on his state of consciousness.

He hesitates for a long moment, fingers hanging over the keyboard. He types james buchanan barnes into the searchbar.

There’s a lot of the same stuff from the museum. Born in Brooklyn, drafted into infantry, trained as a sniper, became a special operative and Captain America’s right hand man during the last years of WWII. America’s most famous sniper and arguably its most famous Sergeant. Killed in action. A hero, died for his country.

He knows things about Barnes that he shouldn’t know. That he wouldn’t know, unless the knowledge came from the inside. And there is the matter of Captain America’s recognition. There is the matter of the asset-thing’s face.

Alright, so he was Barnes, before they burned him out, before they turned him into HYDRA. And they did a good job - they made him just like them. They cut Barnes’ head off, and now something else is growing in its place.

The Winter Soldier was not a drooling vegetable nor a dumb animal. The Winter Soldier was invisible; to be invisible he had to be resourceful, intelligent, creative. But the Winter Soldier could not feel, because guns don’t. He could not feel frustrated, he could not feel cheated, he could not feel angry: those led to dead technicians in the prep room, and had been cooked out of him accordingly.
But he was not tortured for shits and giggles either. He was not a toy. He was first a wildly successful science experiment, then an incredibly well-designed and obsessively maintained weapon: the perfect merger of soldier and machine. The majority of the pain inflicted on him was neither random nor born of spite (except for the beginning. In the beginning it was—).

— no.

They would not have kept wiping him if they didn’t have to. They would not have dragged him back to the Chair, over and over, again and again and again, until he sat in it willingly, until he only knew it like children know the monster under their beds— they would not have wasted resources unless they had to. Not unless his head kept trying to grow back.

The thing that is James Buchanan Barnes with its head cut off is, in layman’s terms, an incredibly resilient bastard.

And now he’s feeling frustrated. He’s feeling cheated. And he’s feeling angry.

Chapter End Notes

This is Steve's ringtone :)


HYDRA has supply caches in most major cities, and DC is no exception. Barnes-thing locates one specific to the Asset and finds he doesn’t even have to break in; it’s empty of personnel, and his access codes all work. He’ll be logged as having entered here, but since he doesn’t intend to leave the building standing after his exit, he’s not too concerned. HYDRA’s in no state to send a response team after him anyway. Not here, not now. DC’s still in lockdown.

His fingers punch in the codes without the numbers ever actually passing through his brain, but that’s familiar too. He palms the interior biometric seal with his flesh hand and the gear locker hisses open. He halts for a moment when he breathes in the smell— leathery-plastic tac gear, the tang of explosives and gunmetal— before snapping out of it, reaching in and helping himself. There’s a set of masks hanging right at the front, one of which he unhooks and slips onto his face immediately. The air filtration system will protect him from most toxins, but more importantly, it’s designed to cut down smells. Scent is a trigger they hadn’t been able to get rid of, and a smell can produce all sorts of unpredictable consequences. He can’t afford distraction now.

He fills a duffel quickly: tac gear, weapons, explosives, two pairs of goggles and all the other masks. He checks to make sure all his gear is tracker-free, but he’s not too concerned about it. The frequency with which he destroyed all his equipment meant they’d preferred to chip him, and the itch of knitting flesh in his knee and chest remind him that he’s taken care of that problem.

He considers the computer bank briefly, but it’s unlikely anything of use would be stored in such a poorly-guarded outpost. Placing the C4 and blasting caps is a matter of minutes and programming the detonator is effortless. He hoists the strap of the duffel over his shoulder and heads out the door.

He’s never actually assaulted any fully staffed enemy bases all by himself before. That’s alright. It’ll be a learning experience for everybody.

-o-

Last week if somebody had asked Rhodey to pick the worst week of his life, he’d have told them about the last week of finals his junior year at MIT, where he’d simultaneously had to deal with the finalization of his parents’ divorce, the presentation of his long-range ballistic missile guidance system capstone project and the fact that fifteen-year-old Tony had discovered cocaine. If they asked him this week, he’d have seriously considered clocking them in the face with a War Machine gauntlet on.

He’d been in South Korea when the whole HYDRA thing had started going down, developing capabilities at Osan AFB, and he’d been recalled nearly twelve hours too late, arriving in DC to find half the city on fire and his immediate superior under arrest for treason.

It basically only went downhill from there. He hasn’t seen the inside of his apartment in three days and the last time he slept— on a cot in a Secret Service safehouse, for four hours, on sheets at least one other person had also slept on— feels even further away. He’s not gonna get a break, either, because War Machine is a rapid-response airborne unit that can give aid or deliver a precision strike at will, and more importantly, as of right now he’s one of the few senior military personnel one hundred percent free of suspicion of being a secret Nazi.

One of the first things Congress did in their slew of emergency meetings with Homeland Security — which, after SHIELD, was the department harboring the most secret Nazis, and thus currently working at the operational efficiency of a kicked anthill— was attach him to an interagency task
force and give him jurisdiction regarding seizure and neutralization of any persons or materials suspected of pertaining to HYDRA. That means he’s been more or less ass to mouth with what feels like every single cop in the greater DC metro area and over half the FBI. He’s learned the true meaning of interdepartmental cooperation.

He’s also the poor asshole who has to talk to the press. War Machine is also Iron Patriot, and Captain America is out of commission, so Congress has swung the other internationally famous red-white-and-blue weapon to the forefront of the domestic anti-Hydra crusade. If he has to say “we can offer no comment on ongoing investigations regarding the incident” one more time he’s blasting out of here to do loop-the-loops over Miami Beach.

Everybody is still only calling it The Incident. Nobody’s saying it, but everybody’s running around like this is the worst case of terrorism in the US since 9/11. Because it is. Jesus, the Patriot Act was bad enough; he really doesn’t want to see the legislation that’ll undoubtedly replace it in the next couple of years.

A secret Nazi conspiracy. Sweet Jesus Christ. If flying alien space slugs hadn’t dropped out of a wormhole in New York last year Rhodey wouldn’t have believed it, and he’s standing in it.

Rhodey turns back around, his metal boots making dull clanking sounds against the cement floor of the bank vault. The whole place is a mess, having been very recently raided by him, two SWAT teams and the rest of the FBI special task force, but most of the equipment stands intact, waiting for the forensics teams. The computer banks, the medical equipment, the racks of guns, the Chair: this had been HYDRA field operation command, the location sent to Rhodey via JARVIS and confirmed by the DHS analysts scrambling to sort through all the HYDRA files.

The Chair. Rhodey feels it deserves the capital letter, the same way Armageddon and Hell do. Generally he’s a firm believer in not judging a book by its cover, and he’s never been someone to say an inanimate object looks evil before, but this thing does. The cuffs on the armrests are strange and overkill-thick; the leather seat is dark with stains. He can’t smell anything through the filters of the suit, but he saw the way the other agents wrinkled their noses and turned their faces away from the thing.

They don’t know what it’s for, other than to pretty obviously lock in a human being and do—something, so Rhodey is standing guard over it until it can be processed and safely put away, just in case it turns out to be an evil Nazi Transformer or something. The past two-odd years have taught every government official some degree of caution with dealing with weird shit they don’t understand, except now the primary option of “Pass it off to SHIELD” doesn’t exist anymore. So the next best thing right now is Rhodey standing over it, the two senior FBI agents loudly coordinating in the rest of the bank just outside.

At least this way he doesn’t have to go recite more nonsense at reporters. Seriously, he will pull a Tony, court-martial be damned. A man has limits.

As if summoned, the call active icon blinks on in the corner of his HUD with the name Tones under it. “No,” Rhodey says aloud. “Tony, not right now, and how many times have I told you, wait for me to pick up, don’t just hack it so all your calls go through—”

“Wow, honeybear, what’s wrong? Are the feebs bad-touching you through your metal panties? You are wearing them, right? You better be in the suit, Rhodey, don’t make me come down there —”

“You stay in bed,” James says. “I’m in the suit, you’re calling the suit. Are you taking your pills? Where’s Pepper?”
“Are your external mikes off? Make them off. Off, off, turn them off—”

“They’re off, Tony, they’re off, the way they always are when I take a private phone call in the middle of a top-secret operation—”

“Ooh, yes, pardon me, not like I gave you the intel for it or anything, but! Speaking of! Wanna hear a secret? I’m gonna tell you a secret. How’s your security clearance these days?”

“Tony. If my security clearance was any higher I’d be legally obligated to become president. You know that.”

“Yeah, yeah, and you won’t run ’til twenty-twenty at the earliest, party pooper, and why am I asking anyway, this is too secret to have a clearance, maybe don’t share with anybody, but here we go, here goes, are you ready? The enhanced hostile that engaged Cap in DC is Bucky Barnes. No, I’m not shitting you. Out of Cap’s own mouth, I swear, and he sounded a couple coconuts short of a daiquiri so I’m inclined to believe him—”

“What? What? Tony, what?”

Tony tells him. Rhodey gapes, squeezes his eyes shut, opens them again. Tony tells him some more. Rhodey shuts his eyes again and silently chants giant space whales. Giant space whales. Your suspension of disbelief must now, as a rule, accommodate giant space whales until he feels — nope, still not better.

“Tony,” he finally manages. “Tony, why are you telling me this.”

“So you’ll know, duh. If this Winter Terminator shows up you’re the first line of engagement and I don’t want you to kill him. Cap’s pretty, uh, invested in this guy.”

And Tony is pretty invested in Cap, not that he’ll ever, ever admit it. “Tony—”

“Incidentally, I need you to go meet him. You’ve met Cap already, right? You’re gonna go meet him again. I promised him a lot of guns.”

“Why?”

“So he can keep kicking HYDRA’s ass, obviously.”

“And you want me to, what, bust open a SWAT team locker and hand Cap some riot shields?”

“Of course not. There’s a Stark warehouse twenty miles outside of DC, you can be there in five minutes.”

“Tony. The entire DHS is so far up my ass I can feel them touching my teeth,” Rhodey says. “That’s Homeland Security, Tony. I’m in the middle of an op, nobody knows who I should be reporting to so I have to report to everybody, the only people I don’t want to kill is the Secret Service guys and that’s because they control where I sleep and you want me to go jog out for five minutes to meet Captain America and give him access to dubiously legal weaponry, all off the books?”

“Yes,” Tony says.

“Fine,” Rhodey says.

The five-minute flight to the Chantilly warehouse does wonders for his temper, actually, if only because flying the suit has the same effect on him as candy does on toddlers. Of course, that
doesn’t mean he’s happy about this, but it does mean he’s no longer in very real danger of punching out Captain America. Not that he wants to punch Captain America. It’s just that if Captain America is around and Rhodey’s going to punch someone regardless, he figures Captain America will be able to take it.

Still, he’s worried. He’s met Rogers twice before, and both times he got the distinct impression that the man would rather remove his own liver piecemeal with an ice cream scoop than ask anybody for help, let alone Tony Stark, so the fact that it’s already happened has dread creeping like dry ice up Rhodey’s spine.

Rogers reminds him of Tony, actually. At first, second and third glance they’re about as far away as polar opposites can get, but Rhodey’s pretty good at reading people and there’s that same sense of kinetics about them, the same potential for explosive, unstoppable force. Except Tony tends to blow off steam and spin outwards, and when Rhodey met him Rogers was about as shut down as it was possible for a person to get.

He’s not so shut down anymore. Rhodey can see it from two hundred feet up, circling the Stark warehouse facility parking lot to decelerate: Rogers climbing out of a truck with another guy in tow: his shoulders are open, his back straight, all his awkward hunching gone out the window. And apparently he’d been in the hospital with three GSWs last week. Un-be-fuckin’-lievable.

Rhodey’s boots hit the asphalt as his suit syncs with the facility’s security system, so all it takes is a verbal command to retract the automatic gates that block off the warehouse from the parking lot. Rogers and his friend walk through, taking off their sunglasses as they go. Rhodey pops the faceplate of the suit.

“Colonel Rhodes,” Rogers calls to him, hand outstretched; thankfully Rhodey has some experience shaking hands in the gauntlets, and he’s managed not to squeeze the President’s hand off so he figures Rogers will be fine. “Thank you for meeting us. I’m sure you have a lot on your plate.”

Buddy, you have no fucking idea. “Captain,” Rhodey acknowledges, then looks at the guy next to him. “Where do I know you from?”

“Falcon program, sir,” the guy says. “Staff Sergeant Samuel Wilson. EXO-7 twenty-nine alpha.”

“Right,” Rhodey says, instead of jesus christ another adrenaline junkie or I saw some of those moves you pulled in the air last week and if you were one of my men I’d chew you out, buy you a beer and then have you doing extra PT for the rest of your life because neither would be appropriate. “They discontinued the program, didn’t they?”

“Yessir. Not enough compatible candidates, sir. I’ve been out for two years.”

Wilson looks nervous, and Rhodey wonders why for a second before realizing that in order to get the EXO-7 flight suit he almost certainly would have had to steal military property. Well, it’s not like Rhodey particularly gives a damn about that. “That was some damn good flying,” he tells Wilson, whose eyes bug out a little before he manages to pull on a pretty good mask of cool.

“Colonel,” Rogers says, but Rhodey waves him away.

“Not right now,” he says. “I’m in the suit, not in uniform. You’re here for some equipment?”

“We’re here because Tony Stark is apparently willing to do me a lot of favors,” Rogers says.

Rhodey kind of prays Rogers never finds out just how many favors Tony is willing to do. “Did he call you and offer to add rocket boosters to your shield again?”
Rogers’ mouth twitches. “Not quite. He called to tell me I should have pulled him into this last week. Then I asked him for weapons and money.”

Which Tony is all too happy to give, if it’s for one of his alien-fighting buddies who eat shawarma together once and never call again. Rhodey’s mouth pinches a little. “Have you reported to anybody?”

“Deputy Director Hill has our full after action reports,” Rogers says. “Well, former deputy director. She’s at Stark Industries now.” He shrugs a little at the look on Rhodey’s face. “Nobody else asked.”

“Nobody else contacted you?” But Rhodey can see it: Captain America’s a national icon, a symbol, and he’s somebody else’s problem. If you’re not the Senator, the Congressman, the President, the Director, then what are you doing, asking for Captain America’s time? What are you, a journalist or something? And with SHIELD gone, Rogers has no immediate superior officer, and every other person with clearance high enough to ask him anything besides “How’s the weather” has too much on their plates as it is. Everyone would assume and in fact actively hope that somebody else was handling it.

“What’s your current chain of command?” Rhodey asks.

“Nonexistent,” Rogers says. “I’m talking to you as a real live honest-to-god civilian.”

“So this mission you need a whole lot of guns for,” Rhodey says slowly.

“Blatant vigilantism,” Rogers says cheerfully. Wilson makes a muffled choking noise that’s either strangled laughter or actual choking.

“Are you sure you don’t have anybody to report to?”

Rogers very nearly raises an eyebrow. “Well, I got my Army discharge fair and square,” he says. “There was a ceremony and everything. And my most recent employers tried to kill me. I kinda took the hint and quit.”

“Quit,” Rhodey repeats, only slightly strangled. Yeah, Rogers quit alright.

“Yep,” Rogers says, unperturbed. “A while back a real smart guy asked me what I’d do with myself if I got out. I told him I had no idea. Luckily HYDRA’s solved that problem for me.” Wilson makes another choked-off noise.

Rhodey briefly shuts his eyes and then turns to Wilson. “And you?”

“Former pararescue, sir, but I’m working with Cap now. Not real sure about the details, sir, but that probably makes us some kind of militia.”

“That’s in the constitution, isn’t it?” Rogers says peaceably.

“That’s right, sir,” a remarkably straight-faced Wilson tells Rhodey. “It’s constitutional.”

Rhodey wishes he had the mask down so he wouldn’t have to forcibly keep his mouth from twitching. “So you’re set on this.”

“This needs to be done, sir,” Wilson says, meeting his eyes without jokes this time, respectful but not apologetic. “And we’re going to do it.”
Rhodey resists the urge to rub the bridge of his nose, if only because doing that in the War Machine gauntlets will take off a layer of skin and probably give him a third nostril. “You’ll be going off-grid?”

“Something like that,” Rogers says. “We’re not dropping off the map but keeping a low profile is our best option.”

“What kind of equipment do you need?”

“Explosives,” Rogers says promptly. “And automatic weapons. What’s Stark got?”

“Steve,” Wilson says, “That is… not… very… low-profile.”

“Oh, we’re not keeping that kind of low profile,” Rogers says. “HYDRA’s made me pretty upset. I think it’s only fair I let them know about it.”

“Pretty sure knocking their multi-billion dollar global defense infrastructure out of the sky said it pretty clearly for you,” Rhodey says.

“That wasn’t defense,” Rogers says. “That was a more efficient version of the thought police and it deserved to go down.”

“Is that what you’re going to tell Congress?” Wilson says.

“And more,” Rogers says. “Stark says they’re going to subpoena me like they did the Widow. D’you think I could top her performance by myself or should I invite Stark to join me on the bench?”

Rhodey’s imagination very briefly provides a rough sketch of what that would look like before it strokes out. Tony’s congressional playdates are horrifying enough when he doesn’t have Captain America to show off for.

“Wow,” Wilson says, apparently on the same wavelength. “Man, I knew you were pissed, but not that pissed.”

Rogers smiles grimly. “The people that signed off on Project INSIGHT are going to be held accountable for their decisions, just as I will be held accountable for mine.”

“Seriously, did you practice that? He definitely practices that. I do not believe that he doesn’t practice that,” Wilson says.

Rhodey decides, very abruptly, that this is Not His Problem. This is a politician problem, somewhere down the line, and he is not a politician no matter what Tony keeps not-so-subtly suggesting. Rogers can go measure his dick against every single member of the legislative branch and the judicial too for all Rhodey cares, and in the meantime, Captain America needs materiel in order to continue his crusade against Nazis. Rhodey can get behind that. And he knows from long experience with Tony that trying to defuse this will be a waste of the time Rhodey already doesn’t have.

“Okay,” he says. “Look. Speaking as the guy they’ll send if you two go off the rails: don’t go off the rails. Got it?”

“Yes sir,” Rogers and Wilson say in tandem, one hundred percent wide-eyed sincerity.

“Don’t make me regret this,” Rhodey says, and leads them to the guns.
He watches them pick out weapons and wonders if he should be telling anybody that Captain America has essentially gone full vigilante. There are a lot of people very... concerned about the Black Widow’s actions, plans and whereabouts, but as far as Rhodey can tell, Cap’s been more or less dismissed as a nonentity. Of course he took down the Nazi conspiracy: that’s what Cap does. And then he goes back on the shelf and the real people get to work.

Rhodey thinks Congress will subpoena Rogers, but they’ll have to figure out he’s not a wind-up action figure first. By then it’ll be way too late to make anything stick, if they even could in the first place—if they can’t do anything to Black Widow then Cap’s fucking untouchable. Rhodey’s more concerned with the fact that Tony will want to go play in Rogers’ sandbox once he gets all the stitches out of his chest. One Avenger can create an international incident without even trying, but two Avengers is already a runup to the kind of shit that rips interdimensional goddamn portals in the sky over Manhattan. Rhodey’s going to have to deal with that, too.

Sometimes Rhodey really, really wishes that he could stop being responsible. Maybe just for a couple days. He wouldn’t do anything drastic. He just wants to not have to be the stuffy killjoy constantly telling all these bright young maniacs to stop trying to kill themselves every ten to fifteen seconds.

Then again, if he doesn’t, god knows what they’ll get up to. Rhodey remembers Tony’s last year of MIT very clearly despite the best efforts of time, therapy and repeated applications of tequila. With guys like this, all you can do is try to help them or get out of their way.

He sighs, and the next time Wilson turns around he beckons him over. “Listen,” Rhodey says. “I can’t promise an ETA, but I’ll talk to Tony about getting you some wings.” He nods at Rogers, who is very politely pretending he can’t hear everything happening in this building and all the grounds outside. “He seems like a guy who needs air support.”

Wilson’s face splits into a giant toothpaste-commercial grin. “You ain’t wrong,” he says. “Thank you, sir. I can’t promise we’ll behave, but. Well. I can promise the only people we’re going after are the bad guys.”

“That’s not nearly as reassuring as you think it is,” Rhodey says, but he sticks his hand out to shake anyway.

He watches them go, after, once they’ve packed up what they need in big black duffel bags. Rhodey waits for the facility gates to close automatically behind them, then hits his thrusters and kicks the suit into flight. Time to go back to the circus.

-o-

“I really appreciate this,” Steve tells Sam as they climb back into Sam’s sister’s truck. “I know I’m asking a lot—”

“Steve,” Sam says very seriously, “You took me to meet War Machine. Shut the hell up.”

“I thought you’d already met War Machine.”

“Yeah, but that was just a platoon thing, he just came to give Falcon trainees tips on how to fly a fancy jetpack without getting thrown into the nearest turbine. This time he shook my hand.” Sam shows Steve the hand, just in case he doesn’t quite get it. “This hand, Steve. War Machine shook this hand.”

“Hey, I shook your hand too,” Steve says. “I’ve touched both your hands, and I’m Captain America.”
“Eh, you’re alright. You’re just no War Machine.”

Steve throws Sam a wounded look. “What’s he got that I don’t got?”

“Uh, an ass?”

“He was in a robot suit! You can’t even see his ass!”

“Don’t have to see his to know it’s better than yours, white boy, it’s a pretty low bar to clear—”

“That’s it. Next time I see him I’m telling him you spent the whole time objectifying him.”

“Don’t you dare,” Sam swears, and the rest of the drive is a largely one-sided slapfight that consists of Steve trying to dodge Sam’s flicking him in the ear with The Hand That Hasn’t Touched War Machine.

They swing by Steve’s apartment, because while it might be full of Soviet murder bullets it’s also still full of Steve’s stuff. “I thought Natasha brought you your bag.”

“She brought me a toothbrush, a stick of deodorant and all my smallest t-shirts, not my go bag,” Steve says. “Apparently that’s all I need to present myself in polite society these days.”

“What’s in the go bag?”

“Couple of pistols, ammo, cash, change of clothes, ID. She helped me put it together, actually.”

“Why didn’t she bring it?”

Steve sighs. “It’s probably some kind of message.”

“Does she... want you to go back to your apartment?”

“I hope I’ll find out,” Steve says, resigned. “I don’t think I’ll have time to search the whole place for hidden intel. Or that I’ll even find it if I do. But Natasha knows that, so maybe she’ll take pity on me and there’ll just be a dead HYDRA agent and a stack of files lying on my bedcovers.”

Sam snickers, then realizes just how much of that sort of thing is in his future. “We’re going to have to get good at this spy stuff, aren’t we.”

Steve lets his head thunk against the window. “Natasha better join up with us quickly.”

Sam expects Steve to take some time in there, given the apartment is a little shot up, but he’s only up there for five minutes, jogging back down with a backpack and a tetra-pack of blue food-looking stuff under one arm. “Any luck up there?” Sam calls out the window.

“No fun from Natasha,” Steve says, opening the door. “But I got what I needed.”

“Protein Plus,” Sam reads off the side of the tetra-pack as Steve gets in, shoving everything into the back seat. It looks a lot like that bodybuilding milkshake powder stuff they sell at the gym. “What, you ain’t stacked enough already?”

Steve huffs a little. “It’s the serum. Remember you said fifteen thousand calories? You weren’t too far off.”

“What, really? I pulled that number out of my ass, man, I figured you were just super hungry. So, what, you eat like a hobbit? Second breakfast, elevensies, second dinner?”
Steve shrugs a little. “Depends. My body adjusts my metabolic rate to my circumstances. In prolonged combat it’s full feast-or-famine, so I can go a long time without eating, but I need something like four times the amount of rations after. In downtime I can get away with eating normal portions, but it’s gotta be every two hours, like clockwork.” He nods back at the protein slush powder. “That’s so I don’t have to go find food in the middle of the night.”

Sam eyes the mathematically-perfect curve of Steve’s biceps with more than a little envy. “They did all that with just a serum?”

“Well, there was some radiation involved, too,” Steve says dryly. “And apparently the human body does that sort of thing anyway. The serum just exaggerates it all a little bit.” Steve leans his head against the window. “The doctors think it’s how I survived the ice.”

“So you basically hibernated. Like a giant blond squirrel.”

Steve squints at him. “Squirrels hibernate?”

“Yeah, man, what, they didn’t have squirrels in the forties?”

“My experience with nature starts and ends with hiking my ass through half the forests in Nazi-occupied Europe,” Steve says. “I know it it’s hard to believe, but right then I wasn’t paying a whole lot of attention to the squirrels.”

“Man, be glad you never got deployed to the desert,” Sam says. “We had to pay attention to nature out there. Do you know what a camel spider is? No? Good. Cherish and preserve your innocence.”

Steve shudders a little. “People keep telling me I should go camping. I don’t know how to tell them I’ve been camping. I’ve done eating campfire food and sleeping in dirt and picking bugs out of your clothes and washing yourself in the river. It’s called ‘living two years on the Western Front’ and I don’t recommend it to anybody.”

“Well, I mean, people usually don’t do it for so long, and not in an active warzone,” Sam hazards, but he’s already getting flashbacks to the time he agreed to go on his high school graduation group camping trip where he managed to fall in a river, break his arm and get poison sumac all over his face. Sam does not have a senior yearbook photo for very good reason. “I’ve been camping. It wasn’t… the worst thing I’ve ever experienced?”

Steve gives him a look. “Okay yeah it was pretty bad,” Sam admits. “Like, if you asked me which was worse, high school camping or SERE, I’d really have to think about it.”

“I grew up in Brooklyn,” Steve says. “I don’t get this back-to-the-earth stuff. Prospect Park is just about all the nature I can handle.”

Sam grins at him, because in the seven-odd days he’s known the guy he already knows his favorite thing is when Steve goes full Get Off My Lawn, You Damn Millennials, and Sam considers it his duty to encourage this. Sometimes Steve slips and you can hear his Nyoo Yawk accent and it’s comedy gold. “What, no Boy Scouts in Brooklyn? Didn’t you grow up in the Great Depression eating rats and leaves?”

“Excuse you, my ma made a great rat casserole,” Steve says. “And my leaf and mustard sandwiches are to die for. Nah, it wasn’t so bad. Buck’s family owned their shop, so it didn’t hit them like it coulda, and since my family was just me and my ma it wasn’t like we hadda lotta mouths to feed. The landlord at one of our places was sweet on my ma, too, so we got pretty lucky there.”
“Well damn,” Sam says. “You know half the biographies make it out like you were a literal Charles Dickens orphan grubbing for coal in the streets, right? I’m pretty sure I had to write some elementary school essay about how your severe childhood privations contributed directly to the development of your impeccable moral character blah blah freedom blah blah beacon of liberty.”

Steve snorts a big ugly honk of a laugh. “This beacon of liberty used to do inventory for speakeasies during Prohibition. Buck used to run errands for the bootleg guys sometimes, on account of them all being friends with his da.”

“Wait, forreal? Are you serious? Oh my god, were you mixed up with the mob?”

“What? No, nothing like that,” Steve waves off, laughing, like he isn’t telling Steve his childhood was a real life season of Boardwalk Empire. “Buck’s family garage did all the work for the bootlegger cars, is all. They’d install hidden compartments, boost the engines a little. Buck was crazy about that stuff. His da had him working at the garage since he was twelve, he was so good with the cars.”

Sam, who spent every weekend from the age of two to ten messing around in the garage with his dad, knows a little something about that. But also: real life mobster cars. “Tell me about Bucky,” Sam says, because the guy is sounding cooler by the minute. “What’s he like?”

Steve’s brow furrows a little, like it’s a non sequitur, like he has to think about it. “Tactically flexible,” he says. “Creative. He wouldn’t plan a full frontal assault if a booby trap would do the job and his mission files support that. He seemed to match me pretty evenly on speed, strength, but he can be unpredictable in hand-to-hand—”

“No, uh,” Sam says. Oh, boy. “No, I meant, what’s he like. As a person. His personality.”

Steve blinks at him for a second before squeezing his eyes shut and thumping his head back against the seat. “Jesus.”

“Well, if he’s anything like you are—”

Steve blinks over at him, genuinely baffled. “What, Buck? Hell no. He was way smarter than that. You wouldn’t catch him mixed up in half the shit I was.”

"Rogers, I hate to break it to you, but that describes ninety-nine point nine percent of the population."

Steve snorts. "Well. He weren't exactly the ninety-nine-point-nine percent. He was smart, y'know? Real good sergeant, real good at people. He knew everybody. Everybody liked him. He was the guy you came to if you needed something, y'know? Girl needed a date, guy needed some smokes, officer needed some guns— he made it happen."

Steve props his temple up on his arm, wedging his elbow into the car window frame, smiling a little. “You know who was good at the spy stuff? He was. Him and Peggy— Peg went back to being a full-time intelligence operative after Project Rebirth, became our main intel liaison once we got our unit together. She and Buck got along like a house on fire. The two of them could think their way backwards through a corkscrew. Buck liked to play dumb but I know for a fact Peg was gonna steal him away to intel the first chance she got.”

His smile gets a little tight. “She’d talk about it, sometimes. What we’d do after the war.”

Steve’s face closes off, then, and normally Sam would make a joke, get him talking about other things, but this time he gets the feeling Steve won’t appreciate that right now. Sam settles for giving him a brief squeeze on the shoulder and getting a little too involved in passing some asshole
in a Buick while switching lanes.

Steve stays quiet when they get back to Sam’s house, and it’s late enough that they both slip off to do their bedtime thing without any real awkwardness. They’ve talked all the big stuff over, anyway: the HYDRA hunt starts tomorrow. Tonight’s their last night before the big game.

Sam wondered, briefly, over the course of the last week, if it was really wise to let Steve go off after HYDRA instead of Bucky, because Sam witnessed the Winter Soldier special firsthand and trying to imagine the damage somebody like that could do on the loose made Sam’s brain demand a refund. But if in a contest of Who’s Definitely Going To Murder Innocents the choice is between Bucky Barnes, identity-challenged POW who’s had his brain all but deep fried, and a bunch of HYDRA agents who all joined of their own bona fide free will, Sam’s coming down on the side of the HYDRA guys needing their asses kicked first just as a matter of principle.

And Steve’s conviction is absolute. Sam thought Steve was a rock before, giving that speech in SHIELD headquarters with the unyielding confidence of a true believer, but he hadn’t seen nothing until Steve started talking about Bucky. It wasn’t like people talking about God or their religion, it was like somebody talking about grass being green, or the sky being blue. To Steve, Bucky is a good guy, he can handle himself, and he’ll come find them when he’s good and ready for it. Steve doesn’t need to do anything so complicated as believe in that, because to him that’s just how reality is.

This may or may not get him, Sam and a wide variety of other people killed. Sam figures he’ll deal with that if and when Barnes surfaces. Either way, how much Steve Rogers should trust Bucky Barnes is definitely not a hill Sam wants to die on. Because he will die on it. Steve doesn’t need to whip out the crazy eyes for Sam to recognize when dude is crazy.

Anyway: speaking of bedtime, he’s got to call his momma. After Steve woke up in the hospital Sam went to his parents’ house for 24 hours of after-action fussing, because if he hadn’t his mom would have turned to drastic measures and maybe even sicced Nana on him. Since he doesn’t want to be the universal pariah at family functions for the next ten years or so, he went, and now he’s agreed to daily phone calls without protest. It’s not too much of a change, anyway: his mom’s been texting him photos of her labradoodle like three times a day from the minute she got a cameraphone.

Also, he had to set up a protection detail. Hill offered the resources of Stark Security and Sam took it: his sister’s fine, she’s in Uganda doing her Doctors Without Borders thing, but both his parents live and work in the DC metro area and Sam would rather be safe than sorry. His parents took it in stride: his mom’s a PA to some bigshot lobbyist and his dad’s a senior engineer for Northrop Grumman, so they understand security measures. Between them they’ve got enough NDAs and security clearances to wallpaper their living room.

“Hi Mom,” he says when the line connects. “Before you remind me how bad all my life choices are, I just need to let you know that War Machine touched me, today, on my actual human skin. That came out wrong. But I met War Machine! He likes my flying!”

“That’s very nice, baby. I’m glad your milkshake is bringing all the national icons to the yard.”

“Mom!”

“What? Me and your dad made a real handsome son, it’s only fair we get to be proud of you. Out loud. In church.”

“Mooooom!”
His mom cackles a little. “How’s Captain America?”

“Steve’s fine, Mom. We’re gonna head out tomorrow morning.”

“Do you know where you’re going?”

They do know: Steve’s phone had sprouted an app that provided real-time intel on HYDRA bases, courtesy of Tony Stark, and there was apparently a Delaware facility that looked promising. Sam would be a little worried about hitting that place without ten guys with AK-47s, except Steve kind of is ten guys with AK-47s, conveniently packaged in one massive highly portable white dude. “I don’t think we’ll stay in the States long. A lot of stuff is already being handled here, and most of what Steve wants to deal with is in Europe.”

“Oh, in Europe,” his mom says archly. “You meet this boy last week and he’s already taking you to Europe—”

“Mooooom,” Sam says again, and they’re both laughing but he knows what his mom isn’t saying. “We gotta do this, Mom.”

“I know.” His mom sighs. “I s’pose it’ll be good for you.”

Sam nearly pulls his phone away from his ear to stare at it. “Wait, what?”

“It’s good this came along,” his mom tells him, as if Sam isn’t doing a great goldfish impression at his bedroom wall. “If it wasn’t this it’d be something else, and Lord knows I’d rather you run around with somebody to watch your back. You were getting bored.”

“No, I,” Sam says immediately, even though he knows better than to interrupt his mother.

“You were. I know you, baby. You and your sister never could be happy just doing like everybody else does. You were always going to be heroes.”

Sam squeezes his eyes shut. He doesn’t like to think about it, tries not to, because it’s stupid, the stupidest thing, but— here’s the thing, the ugly thing: shouldn’t he be doing something more? He used to do more: he used to lift wounded soldiers straight out of hell, and now— this. Isn’t he capable of something better?

Is this it, now? Is this all there is?

And it’s bad to think that, it’s shameful, it’s ungrateful, it’s stupid. He knows all the crap behind that thinking, the set-up, because yeah, he went from being a real hotshot, the darling of the Falcon program, adrenaline and airtime every day, to— what? Wake up, go to work, go to bed, try to sleep. Civilian life. Just a guy, not even a real full counselor, not even able to give other vets what they need to the full extent of his capabilities. On his good days he knows it’s bullshit, he knows he helps people, some of them even straight up tell him so, but that doesn’t stop the bad days from coming and on the bad days his brain doesn’t care about any of that at all.

He’d thought that the fire in him had died down a little, after Riley. The thing that made him and Sierra stay up til four in the morning trading flashcards, that kept him doing another lap on the track after the team hit the showers, the thing inside that made him burn when someone else got a higher score, a faster time— he thought it flamed out when Riley did. Sam had come home, and he hadn’t pushed. He hadn’t pushed anything. He just hadn’t felt it anymore, and he kept on not feeling it and not feeling it until he woke up one day to Captain fucking America sprinting past him like an asshole and Sam realized he was bored out of his fucking mind.

Maybe it’s crazy. Maybe it’s fucked up. But it’s who he is. “Yeah, mom,” Sam says quietly, his
voice a little crackly. “Yeah. I know.”

“Yeah, baby.” They just breathe on the line together for a minute, quiet. His mom gives a barely audible swallow. “If this is how you gotta go above and beyond—”

Her voice trembles, just a little, but Sam knows the look that’ll be on her face and it’ll be the same one she wore at his and Sierra’s graduations, their medal ceremonies, his return home from the desert: a ferocious, terrible, unflinching pride. “You’re doing good in the world, baby. You do what you have to do.”

“Yeah,” Sam says. His voice is stronger now. “We do what we have to do.”
Combat is uneventful. He destroys the DC area supply caches and a couple further north, too, and it’s almost boring. The only hostiles he encounters are a few low-level techs too stupid to go to ground, so the Barnes-thing does natural selection a favor and puts them out of their misery.

Destroying property is all well and good, but he doesn’t find anything irreplaceable in the East Coast bases and the real danger of HYDRA is in its people. Most personnel with more than two functioning brain cells have fled—regroup, reassess— and the Barnes-thing is left to wander around some shitty suburb of Pittsburgh for a day before several flashbacks trigger some biological malfunction and leave him drooling and twitching in the bushes behind somebody’s backyard swimming pool. A few hours and one crippling headache later, he’s got the coordinates of a new target burned into his mind like they’re written in white-hot letters of fire.

Getting jerked around by his own brain is infuriating, but it does make him impossible to predict. If he doesn’t know where he’s going next, neither does anyone else. He hits targets as he remembers them. Objectively it’s a terrible fucking strategy, but hey! If there’s anything about Barnes-thing’s existence that isn’t a screaming disaster, he’d love to fucking know.

The hallucinations persist, with the same intensity if not the same frequency as before. Sometimes they’re benign—a swarm of neon butterflies, drifting lazily through his field of vision, exploding into glimmering shards of glass whenever one of them touches something—but sometimes it’s the goddamn Original Barnes Show, all good ol’ Bucky, all the time.

He’s an asshole. Sometimes he’s just there, ignorable, wandering around or sprawled out somewhere in the corner of Barnes-thing’s eye, but sometimes he talks. He repeats his name, he cries, he begs in four different languages. He follows the Barnes-thing around and touches his face. He brags about how he’s the real one, about how he’s the one with a name, as if any of that fucking matters. It is incredibly distracting. The Barnes-thing no longer attacks empty space to try and get rid of him, but dear god, does he fucking want to.

The worst is when Bucky tries to kiss him, which is disgusting. He tries to put his tongue in Barnes-thing’s mouth, hard, like he’s trying to climb inside, and it makes Barnes-thing spit and choke for ages until he gets the taste of grey rubber off his tongue.

Barnes-thing can’t really pick out what’s causing the hallucinations, because it could be one of any five billion fucking things, or a combination, or maybe there is no cause and it could just be a great new feature of his fucked-up brain. He’s not sleeping much and he knows he forgets to eat, so it could be that, but it’s not like he can fix that either. He eats when he goddamn remembers to and he sleeps when he falls down.

He forgets a lot. He doesn’t know if the Chair just triggered naturally occurring memory loss episodes or if it caused them outright, but either way the result is the same. He keeps losing time, losing track of where he is or where he’s going, and it’s so fucking annoying. Torture and murder and blanket human rights violations weren’t enough for the universe, apparently, oh no, he also has to have fucking brain damage. The party just doesn’t stop for Asset-Thing Barnes.

Maybe it’ll get better. Maybe it won’t. That’s irrelevant too: he is here, and this is now. If a couple of pounds of fucked-up neural circuitry is what he has to work with, then that’s what he’s fucking got. It’s not like he can damn well swap his brain out for another one.
The big things stay, at least. He is dangerous. He is on the hunt. He must keep running. It’s been enough so far.

Some things are deeper than memory. Whatever the mission demands, this he knows how to do. He hacks most of his hair off somewhere in Alberta — who let it get so long? So distinctive, and fighting with long hair is a nightmare — then cleans up the rest with a mechanical clipper, shearing it close to the skin. He blanks out for nearly two days after that, doesn’t even remember finishing the haircut, but he must have done just fine, because when he blinks back into his body he’s at a bus stop in — he focuses briefly on the accents of the two grandmothers behind him — Guatemala.

That’s pretty much how it goes. His body throws him out of the driver’s seat whenever it feels like it — a loud noise, the flash of sunlight on metal, the smell of some cologne — and then drags him back in, brutal, making him feel every headache and bruise and muscle adhesion. Every day is a goddamn surprise: he has no idea what’ll trip him up next, if his next decision will turn out to be a good idea or become his next sixteen hours of blackout. And there’s no solution: what’s he gonna do, lock himself alone in a dark room somewhere in unpopulated Siberia? Except oh, wait, been there, done that, and if there’s anything more guaranteed to send him several twists further around the bend, the Barnes-thing doesn’t want to know.

So it’s trial and error. Cutting his hair reveals itself to be a mistake, because it turns out there’s more scar tissue than actual skin on the back of his head and that sort of thing is a little noticeable. Hats are terrible, but extensive surgical scarring is more distinctive than just some long-haired white guy, so he’s stuck doing damage control with pinchy ballcaps and itchy wool beanies that make his skin crawl. Keffiyehs are a little better, but the mission doesn’t let him stay on one continent for too long, let alone in any particular country, so most of the time they’re not an option. He hopes the hair grows out quickly.

He wears the mask whenever he’s not in public, to cut down on flashbacks triggered by something as god-damn stupid as a cleaning fluid that smells like what would happen if pine trees could get diarrhea. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t get kneecapped by other things— someone starts a coffeemaker unexpectedly next door to one of the apartments he’s squatting in and he blanks out for three hours— but it does have him coming back into himself faster. It reminds him: you have a mission. You have a mission to do.

The mask is a magic trick. He takes it off, and the other mask goes up. He puts it on, and his real face shows through. In the mask there is no pretending: his skin face is the one that lies. It’s fascinating, how it knows what to do — he can smile just right at the cashier lady to make her ‘accidentally’ drop a few charge items off the register; he can slump and frown at the metro closures list like every other commuter so the passing militzei patrol won’t pick him out of the crowd. He stands in front of a train station bathroom mirror and tries to see it, to watch it happen, but when it’s just him the face doesn’t give him anything.

He peels the lips back, shows the teeth. Scrunches his eyes and relaxes again. His face feels stiff like this, unwieldy, like it wasn’t meant to be manipulated this way. But he knows it can move: he feels it from the inside, whenever the mission needs his face to play human.

If he can see it maybe he can learn how to do it on his own. Maybe it’ll be less realistic, but it’ll also be a little less like getting momentarily possessed by The Real Bucky Barnes fifty times a day. The Asset-thing knows it’s him. The mission pulls the levers but it’s real-Bucky’s skills it draws on, to make Asset-thing a convincing imitation of walking-talking life.

He gives up after fifteen minutes of increasingly strange facial gymnastics and gives his cheeks a quick scrub in the sink. He doesn’t need to bathe for at least another day, but the beard needs a
Beards are in fashion, at least, along with long hair on men and dressing like you just got rolled out of a gutter. In cities nobody looks twice at his worker’s clothing and steel-toed boots, and in the rural areas it’s easy for him to melt into the landscape. He doesn’t always know what language is coming out of his mouth but if the mission needs him to talk he can trust that it’s the right one.

He picks up some new tricks. The internet is fucking magic, and the modern smartphone is a miracle delivered straight from god. Google doesn’t mind that he has to ask the same question fifty times—in fact, it autocompletes for him, it tells him that he’s asked this shit before. It’s like a goddamn genie in his pocket: Siri, did I just have a seizure? What year is it? What is a Xanax? Who is Molly Cyrus and what the fuck is a twerk?

There are also help websites online. Diagnosis support sites. Forums. There are other people like him out there, people who got thrown backwards through life’s woodchipper and only sort of live in their bodies, only sort of have control of their minds. They have to find workarounds, bug fixes, duct tape measures, whatever will get them going in at least the same direction as everybody else. And they talk to each other about it: I figured this out. Maybe it will help you too. He learns how to fake eye contact, what to do instead of biting his tongue bloody, how to breathe when breathing is impossible. There are manuals for this. There are roadmaps. Someone else walked this path before him, or something close enough like it that their coping strategies apply.

They don’t always apply… evenly. Barnes-thing punches a lot. The— pressure, anger— memory, body-stress, terror, god knows what else, all of it, it all bleeds together and builds and builds until boom, physical takeover, go becomes run becomes hurt something. He stabs walls, punches trees, tears an abandoned bicycle into cutlery and empties a full magazine of .45s into somebody’s parked tractor in the middle of rural Bavaria. He pinches himself black and blue on the inside of his soft elbow for that one, after, for the waste of ammo and for drawing some farmer family’s attention.

He hasn’t killed anybody by accident. That he knows of. He blacks out, sure, but as far as he can tell that’s the only time he’s wholly nonviolent: it’s when he’s himself that he has to watch out. It’s just lucky his boiling point is so high, that he can exist as an immobile knot of anger for a while before it lashes out and takes control of his body. Maybe not luck: body-memory. Experience. He gets the feeling he’s had a lot of practice existing motionless in a state of helpless, bewildered rage.

Luckily the world supplies him with a seemingly endless stream of horrible cheap paperbacks with titles like DARKE RAPTURE and CLAIMED by the Highland WOLF PRINCE. They seem to spawn independently in train stations and grocery stores, with a wide but predictable range of themes, characters and cover art. They’re very soothing. Trying to figure out whether or not the two main characters are actually supposed to like each other always manages to calm him down.

Besides, nobody expects extreme violence from a guy reading something with two shirtless men and a floating wolf head on the cover. He’s gotten the drop on six separate agents on their way home from work that way.

So yeah, he’s got coping mechanisms. He’s chock full of them. He’s got so many coping mechanisms they’re coming out his fucking ears, because without them he’d probably have the operational efficiency of a house plant. Sure, some of this coping involves dismembering former HYDRA agents with their own cooking shears in their nice floral kitchen, but Barnes-thing doesn’t judge. Being negative towards yourself is a bad brain habit that impedes meaningful change and healthy recovery.

It’s not all blood and death either. His camera roll has 4,981 photos in it, mostly of whatever random fucking thing happens to be in front of him. There are approximately four Sharpies and
two pens in his pockets at any given time. Sometimes he can’t reach a notebook, or can’t take a
picture, and so he has to write on what he can: a napkin, his pants leg, the inside of his forearm.
He tried making voice recordings, because sometimes writing blurs and he can’t take a picture of
the inside of his head, but it turns out that if he can’t access written words he’s typically already
lost speech. Those are bad days. Those days he keeps the mask on and stays out of sight.

His notebooks look like they were written by a minimum of three different people. The languages,
handwriting and syntax change constantly, usually in mid-sentence. Only about a third of the
entries are dated, and nothing is in chronological order. There are diagrams, building layouts, a
painstakingly detailed rendering of some kind of car engine. There are four pages with just NO
NO NO NO NO written on them over and over, and a couple more with nothing but violent
scribbles, pressed so deep they tore the paper. He goes through all of it around once a week, only
remembers writing about one-fifth of it — not the same fifth each time — and each time comes
away convinced that he’s completely crazy.

That’s fine. He can be as crazy as he likes, so long as he completes the mission. He can trust the
mission. When nothing else works, it takes the reins and carries him through.

-o-

Natasha meets them at the Mexican border, just waiting at a rest stop outside Tijuana like she’s
sprouted there. Steve almost doesn’t recognize her, when Sam pulls their rental over at the gas
station; a shockingly blonde woman raps on Steve’s window, bright orange lipstick framing her
grin.

“Natasha,” Steve says, after a few seconds of silent panic and a visceral, whole-body desire to
_not sign any more damn autographs_. He struggles out of the car and bundles her into a hug before
pulling away to look at her, a little giddy with relief. “There you are, God. I missed you.”

Natasha seems like she doesn’t quite know what to do with that, but only for a second; she very
kindly decides that the appropriate reaction is not to break Steve’s arms. “Things are that bad,
huh?”

Steve huffs out a breath and lets go of her, slumping back a little against the car. “It’s a fucking
mess out here,” he says frankly. “We need you.”

“Well, you know how much I like to hear a big, strapping man tell me that,” Natasha says, then
leans around to look past Steve’s shoulder. “Hi Sam.”

“Natasha! Thank god. We need you,” Sam says.

“Two big strapping men. Must be my lucky day. What’s the problem?”

“Remember how you said I might be in the wrong business?” Steve says. “I’m not saying you’re
right, but you’re right. Me and Sam are very bad at being spies.”

Natasha frowns minutely. “Stark doesn’t deliver?”

“Oh, Stark delivers,” Steve says. “But he’s not a fully staffed intel division. I know he’s got
JARVIS running analysis but it’s not always location-specific and it’s not real-time. A lot of the
facilities we’re hitting have been abandoned.”

“And unfortunately not all Nazis walk around with easily identifiable swastikas tattooed on their
foreheads,” Sam says. “I cannot imagine why.”

“It’s a style thing,” Steve says. “I’ve never met a Nazi that doesn’t have a weird preoccupation
with their image. In the war my unit tried to disguise ourselves as German soldiers and got busted because our pants weren’t tailored tight enough to pass for real SS officers.”

“So you’re having trouble finding Nazis,” Natasha says musingly. “Well. I guess these days you could say that’s the entirety of my job description.”

They get in the car, and Steve ends up twisted around in the front seat, just wanting to keep looking at Natasha; she’s wearing a yellow sundress and a scarf around her hair and looks like a pinup, sure, but he’s missed her. She was 2IC for most of Steve’s missions and he used to see her nearly every day at S.H.I.E.L.D, even if they didn’t always talk, and since the Congressional hearings she’s dropped off the face of the earth. Steve and Sam watched the news cycle play clips of Natasha’s mic drop from diners and bars, but there was no contact from her directly until Steve got a text telling him to hit this particular rest stop on their way down south. It had been from an unknown number, but the roughly twenty billion or so emojis involved had been as good as a signature.

“So,” Sam says, merging them out onto the interstate. “What’s in Mexico?”


“For us or, uh. For us?” Steve says.

“For us,” Natasha confirms. “Clint left me some party favors.”

“Who’s Clint?” Sam asks.

“Hawkeye,” Steve says, at the same time as Natasha says, “Proof that God really does love idiots. He’s an Avenger,” she clarifies, when Sam just looks at them. “Our sniper.”

“He doing okay?” Steve says, because Natasha had mentioned extraction and Steve knows Clint well enough to infer that meant she probably had to pull his unconscious body out of an active volcano.

“Well, his leg is broken and he’ll be living with a fake ID and a handlebar mustache for a while, but he’ll survive.”

“Ouch,” Sam says, clearly referring to the mustache.

“No, it’s cool, he’s excited. He gets to spend time with his dog.”

“He got a dog?”

“He’s had a dog. Now he gets to spend time with it.”

Steve frowns a little; for all that Natasha and Clint were regulars on his missions over the past two years, the most personal details he knows about them are that Clint’s mostly deaf and Natasha hates coffee. He’s pretty sure they like it that way, but then again, it’s not like he’s asked. “Where does he live?”


“He owns a building?” Sam says. “In Bushwick?”

“Oh yes,” Natasha says serenely. “He won some money off the mob.”

“Jesus Christ,” Sam says. “I swear to god the first prereq for being an Avenger must be having
your common sense surgically removed.”

Natasha gives him a look of pity. “You’re just now figuring that out?”

“So what are we looking at in Mexico,” Steve says, aware that he’s being a little bit of a dog with a bone here and not even remotely caring.

“Cabo San Lucas,” Natasha says. “It used to be a pirate hideaway. Now it’s a resort destination. Lots of private marinas, lots of summer homes. Private airfields, even.”

“Lotta rich folks,” Sam says, glancing back at her in the rearview mirror.

Natasha smiles. “Lots of places for HYDRA to hide its operations.”

“Do we have a list of targets?” Steve asks.

Natasha raises an eyebrow and tosses her phone, catching it one-handed. “I have a four-inch stack of aerial surveillance photos that might maybe turn into a list of targets.”

“Oh boy,” Sam says, in the tone of someone just been told they’re about to have the pleasure of undergoing a root canal. “I’m seeing a lot of data set analysis in my immediate future.”

“Don’t let anyone tell you intelligence work isn’t glamorous, boys,” Natasha says, clapping them both on the shoulder. “Just you wait. Tonight we get to comb through five billion nearly identical surveillance photos until brain fluid bleeds out our eyes.”

It turns out Cabo San Lucas is a good twenty hours down the coast, so naturally all conversation devolves into a game of something called Never Have I Ever, suggested by Natasha, probably because she knew she’d win. “Never have I ever been to high school,” she says gleefully. “Never have I ever joined the military. Never have I ever had a penis.”

“Never have I ever worn lipstick,” Sam says, a little desperately, then chokes a little on his own spit when he sees Steve putting a finger down. “Wait, I need a—”

“Forty bored chorus girls in a stalled cross-country train,” Steve says, which is technically true. This is really not the time to bring up the other occasions. “Never have I ever shaved my head bald.”

Natasha sighs deeply and puts a finger down; now it’s Sam’s and Steve’s turn to give her expectant looks. “Don’t try to DIY your own hair dye out of motor oil and expired Soviet food coloring,” she says. “No matter the situation, I promise you, circumstances are never that dire.”

“Yeah, I’ll be sure to unpin that one on Pinterest,” Sam says. “While we’re on the subject? Camel spit and MRE chocolate pudding might seem like a theoretically sound sunburn remedy when you’re high off your tits in the middle of the desert, but that is one of those special little times when everything your common sense is telling you is wrong. Also, whenever anyone recommends camel spit for anything, the locals are lying to you. Make a note, kids.”

Unfortunately, the trick with playing Never Have I Ever with three war vets is to throw topics fast enough that no one accidentally touches a nerve with someone else, and after the car descends into uncomfortable silence four separate times, Sam finally calls a stop to the game to pull over for gas. Steve takes the opportunity to stretch his legs, piss in the sketchy gas station shed, and pore over the quarter DVDs bin while they idle waiting for the tank to fill.

“Dude, just get Netflix like the rest of us,” Sam says, wandering up behind him with his hands full of Cheetos. “DVDs are so 2008.”
“But Sam, how on earth am I supposed to get the full 21st century experience,” Steve says. “Don’t you know I have to watch every single movie Spielberg’s ever made? Ever?”

That kills a good hour on the road; Sam and Natasha needle Steve on what pop culture he has and hasn’t experienced in the technicolor tragedy that is 21st century cinema. It’s mostly Sam throwing titles and summaries at him while Natasha makes faux-pointed comments about American capitalism from the back seat, and it started as a joke, but when you get down to it, Steve hasn’t actually seen that much. His recommendations notebook is almost full, but so much of it required him to sit down on his couch and navigate the sleek matte boxes of his electronics and hold still for two, three, four hours. He tried, he really did, but every time he went inside his apartment all he really wanted to do was run back out again.

“Come on, man,” Sam says finally. “I know you’ve seen Harry Potter.”

Steve squints at him. “No I haven’t.”

Sam squints right back. “Yeah you have. You’ve drawn Mrs. Weasley like eighteen times on like six different diner napkins, which, okay, I don’t judge, man, but if you’re really that into older redheads—”

“Mrs. who?”

“You know. The fat ginger lady.”

“Fa— you mean my mom?”

There’s a short moment where the only sound is Natasha having some kind of laughter-induced seizure. “Ah,” Sam says delicately, suddenly paying a lot of attention to the road.

“What?” Steve says.

“Nothing. Nothing. Just, uh… so you take after your dad, then?”

“Well,” Steve says. “Ma liked to yell at priests for getting the Bible wrong and by all accounts Joseph Rogers was a very relaxed sort of guy, so, depends on who you ask, really.”

“Yeah, there’s the family resemblance,” Sam says. Natasha’s laughing so hard she’s making little grunting noises. Sam shakes his head. “In everything but looks, huh? I knew you had to get it from somewhere. We should all just be glad you’re not ginger.”

Steve doesn’t mention the fact that he’s only not ginger until his beard grows in, mostly because it’s the reason he doesn’t let his beard grow in. Sam is very right. The world is not ready for a ginger Captain America.

“What about you?” he says instead. He hasn’t met Sam’s family but he’s seen pictures, a family album’s worth of photos covering the inner rooms of Sam’s house. He knows Sam’s got a sister and they look like they could be twins, down to the razor-sharp short haircut, and in every family photo Sam’s parents had looked very proud.

“Well, my mom was Miss Black North Carolina 1979,” Sam says. “So yes, I do get my astonishing good looks and flawless style from my momma. Not so much my dad, who I’m pretty sure has been wearing the same pair of coke-bottle glasses since they were invented. In 1690-fuckin’ 5.”

“Finally, a style icon Steve can relate to,” Natasha says, and it all pretty much devolves from there.
The trip is long enough that they ease into an exhausted silence naturally, and when Sam trades the wheel off to Natasha he and Steve both take the opportunity to nap; Steve gets bullied into the backseat on account of Sam claiming carsickness, the liar, and he falls asleep to the faint murmur of the radio, some Spanish talk show on barely-there volume.

That doesn’t last. Steve snaps awake to the same talk show, lies rigid in the backseat for a long second, eyes wide and staring up at the strange grey foam ceiling. The sun’s at a different angle. He’s in a car. It’s 2014. They’re in Mexico.

Steve risks a look at the front; Sam’s passed out with his mouth open and Natasha’s focused on the road. That doesn’t mean she hasn’t noticed his little moment back here, but maybe not. Steve knows he’s not loud when it gets like this; nightmares make him stiff and silent, mostly. He usually doesn’t even wake up breathing hard.

Steve sits up, trying to surreptitiously shake out the cold, jittery adrenaline of the dream. It had been - God, not even anything coherent, just blurs and dead bodies and fucking artillery.

“Can’t sleep?” Natasha murmurs, so low that Steve knows he can ignore it, if he really wanted to.

Steve hesitates, then sits up more fully, pressing his knees into the back of Natasha’s seat. “Yeah.”

“Bad dream?”

Steve huffs a mirthless little laugh and scrubs his face with his hands. “It’s the stupidest shit, you know?” he says before he realizes he’s decided to say anything. “Of all the things I could— it’s shelling, of all things. Fucking artillery fire. I don’t dream of the ice, or the— anything— else, it’s all just fucking— daisycutter bombs and Dachau.”

Natasha mercifully doesn’t try to catch his eye through the rearview mirror. “We don’t get to decide what we get fucked up about,” she says matter-of-factly.

“I hated the infantry support ops,” Steve mutters. “There’s nothing you can fucking do in a trench. When you’re dug in and it’s just days and days and days of shelling, you go crazy, you fucking— you can’t even see the enemy, he’s miles away. All you can do is sit there. Stick it out and pray.”

He squeezes his eyes shut and rests his forehead against the back of Natasha’s headrest. “Another thing I ain’t so good at.”

“I think you made the right choice,” Natasha says, still in that soft voice, cutting through his bullshit. “Not going after Barnes. I think you did the right thing.”

“We wouldn’t have found him,” Steve says tiredly. He knows he did the right thing. Sometimes he just wishes doing the right thing wouldn’t hurt so much.

Natasha’s quiet for a long moment. “Do you know how I joined SHIELD?” she says. “I was a mercenary for a while, doing all sorts of jobs that put me on all sorts of radars. SHIELD was the only one that happened to have the right resources to actually do something about it.”

“They send someone to get you out?”

“Clint brought me in,” Natasha says. “But he brought me in alive, when his orders were to kill on sight. So speaking as somebody who has spent time recovering from brainwashing while being chased all around the globe by a crazy blond American,” Natasha says, “it ended well, but I still wouldn’t go looking for a repeat experience.”

“Yeah,” Steve mumbles, forcing his knuckles into his eyes. “Yeah, he— he wouldn’t thank me, if I chased him around. Even without all the brainwashing and... memory loss.”
“Some things you can’t do for other people,” Natasha says.

“I know,” Steve mutters. “Doesn’t mean I have to like it.” Bucky’s probably the only guy before their time or since who can do stubborn, prideful jackass just as good as Steve does, and he would get away with it better, too, just because he played that card less often. Steve’s ma used to say they deserved each other. When they were hurting, really hurting, they’d split off to lick their wounds apart, in peace. This the first time Steve has wished it wasn’t so.

Natasha leaves him alone after that, and he’s grateful, but it also means his mind wanders back to picking at the dream, picking at memories of shelling. Christ, Steve hates it. Bucky didn’t like it either— well, none of them liked it, but Buck would go blank-faced and quiet and sort of stiff, those times they were dug in and couldn’t break cover, couldn’t move position. They’d curl down all together, whoever was next to them, Morita or Monty under Steve’s arm with Gabe’s hands over his head, Bucky with a fist in Dugan’s shirt. They’d stay in cover and wait it out.

Steve was always— wilder, in the missions afterward, enough that he even noticed it in himself. Bucky dealt by chainsmoking his way through the cigarette rations of anybody dumb enough to take him on in poker; Steve dealt by ignoring his gun in favor of punching out Krauts with his bare hands. Then Bucky dealt by being too busy bawling Steve out in front of the team, Peggy, Colonel Phillips and any other soldier with functional ears in a ten-mile radius, which also had the double bonus of giving both their dumb asses something to focus on.

They had one air raid during some leave in London, something proved worse than the shelling on the front, which Steve honestly hadn’t thought possible. They made it to a shelter— one of the big ones, connected to the Tube, and it was them and thousands of other Londoners all night long. At first they and some other soldiers tried to play cards, but towards the end Steve and Buck were huddled together in a corner, shoulder to shoulder, both staring at nothing and just barely keeping each other from crawling up the walls.

In hindsight, Steve realizes both of them could hear the Luftwaffe planes droning over the city above, and it wasn’t just Buck tuning in to him like he sometimes did. He should have known: they both stiffened in unison every time another vibration filtered through the yards of cement over their heads, a buzz Steve could just barely feel in his back teeth. At some point one of them had reached for the other, Steve for Bucky or Bucky for Steve, and they’d held hands for the last hours of the night, one bruising deathgrip mostly hidden from the room by their bent legs.

The next night they were out in the field again, back in France, and by mutual silent agreement Steve and Bucky had forgone setting up their tent and just spread their bedrolls around the dampened campfire, under the open sky. They lay awake a long time, not talking. Steve must’ve opened his mouth near six or seven times, trying to say - something, even now he doesn’t know what, but there were no words in his throat. Hey, pal, do you want to talk about it? Want to bring out those things that make you retch and jump and cry in your sleep? Parade them around a little? What, don’t that sound like a good time?

Yeah, Steve knows all about not talking about it. And if he couldn’t say jack shit, then how on earth could he demand the same of Bucky?

He should have known. He should have fucking known Bucky was different after Azzano. And the thing was, he was so different that Steve hadn’t even known where to start, with the rough, hard-faced Sergeant Barnes that wore three hidden knives and barked orders that made more seasoned soldiers scramble to obey. Buck had always been a little wild, sure, and he’d busted his fair share of heads in Brooklyn, but it wasn’t like this.

Steve will probably always at least partly see Bucky as the giggly, gap-toothed kid that always
hugged his ma and taught his sisters to make daisy chains, but even he saw that this new Bucky was— dangerous. A dangerous man. Of all the things Steve worried about with Bucky, ‘possibly now a supersoldier’ didn’t even make the list.

And Bucky still touched Steve. He still turned into their kisses, he still put his arms around Steve’s neck, he still let Steve do every fucking thing and then some in their shitty barracks and shittier bedrolls. He laughed less, maybe, walked quieter, smoked more, but he still looked at Steve like he always did, still yelled at him, still dragged Steve around with an arm around the neck even if now he had to reach up to do it. He seemed— fine. Focused, even. And if Steve had asked, if he’d gone digging, there’s no guarantee he would have found anything Bucky hadn’t want him to find.

Three people in the world could tell when Bucky was lying, and only Mrs. Barnes could do it with one hundred percent accuracy. Steve’s mother could tell but not always, and Steve— Steve could tell, but he also liked to believe. Steve drew but Buck was the one with the imagination: he’d read to Steve aloud a lot, and Steve lost count of the times he picked up the same books later and realized Bucky wasn’t actually reading but spinning his own story straight out of thin air. They were good stories, too: Steve much preferred Oliver Twist the secret agent spaceman to what actually happened in that stupid book. Steve was in the habit of believing.

And when they grew, when those stories changed, became I picked up a few extra shifts, that’s all or don’t worry about it, Joey and the boys owe me a favor, well — Bucky had always been kind to Steve, looking away when Steve’s face said don’t look, roughhousing with him when Steve was sick to screaming of people acting like he was some kind of fragile baby bird. It was only fair that sometimes Steve learned to look away in turn.

So he’s not chasing Bucky now. But: Steve doesn’t pray and hasn’t since he was a child, partly because of his own persistent bloody-mindedness and partly because growing up with a heathen best friend and a ma with somewhat radical views on Catholicism has left him with a somewhat loose relationship with religion. Prayer always struck him as shouting into the well instead of hunting around for the bucket, and if there does turn out to be an omnipotent omniscient god out there somewhere, he and Steve are not going to get along. To put it mildly.

But some things you just have to push out into the universe. In a nondescript car drifting down a nondescript highway, Steve shuts his eyes against the searing orange sunset and prays that Bucky gets everything, everything, anything he might want or need. Good health. Safe sleep. Good boots. Good meals. Steve wishes him warmth, Steve wishes him weapons, Steve wishes the goddamn seas to part if Bucky so much as considers the other shore. If there is any kind of ledger, any kind of balance being counted out there, then that is the very least of what Bucky Barnes is owed.

Steve turns onto his side in the back seat, bending his knees and fitting his elbow to his head. They have Natasha now: they’re on their way, finally, making progress, giving Steve real targets. He can’t walk Bucky’s road for him but he can damn well make sure there’s no HYDRA chasing him from behind.

They make their destination late at night, so late it’s early, and after some security checks they all crash hard in Natasha’s safehouse. The next morning habit has them all up at dawn, and they all forego their exercise regimes in favor of tearing into Natasha’s satellite imagery.

The files this time are just dry aerial surveillance photographs but Steve can feel the rage climbing up through him regardless. He’s looking at pixelated grey terrain but it might as well be the Winter Soldier files in front of him all over again: here is the list of paralytics effective on the asset, here is the electroshock voltage, here are the schematics for effective restraints. Here is the place where HYDRA’s work is done.
It takes them six hours, but they have a primary target and two ancillary ones: an industrial marina complex and its warehouses on either side. Natasha types something on her phone, and a few minutes later the JARVIS app produces blueprints that are likely to be only fifty percent inaccurate. Satellite imagery is enough to establish a very basic personnel routine, too; the place runs 24/7, but with a marked increase in population during the daylight hours.

“They’ll be on high alert anyway, and we don’t have time for me to go and do better recon,” Natasha says, in the homely adobe kitchen that’s now a slightly less homely adobe war room. “And this is almost certainly just a moving center, with low likelihood of valuable personnel or intelligence targets.”

“So no specific objective beyond clearing the place,” Sam concludes.

“What kind of explosives do we have?” Steve asks.

“Grenades, claymores and all the C4 you can shake a stick at,” Sam says with a nod to the pantry, which contains four bags of rice, six bins of dried beans and a hidden door to a freakishly well-stocked armory. “As promised. I like this Clint guy, even if he makes bad mustache choices.”

“Anything bigger?” Steve asks.

Natasha shrugs. “I could wire something together if you give me an hour, but that cuts portability. If you want to bring the building down, multiple shaped charges works better anyway.”

“We are bringing the building down,” Steve says. “We’ll take the C4. I don’t want anything left for them to use. We’ll come in tonight and set the charges and clear what we find. We blow the place after morning shift comes in.”

Natasha and Sam both look at him. “That’s a lot of casualties, Cap,” Sam says.

Steve shrugs. There’s no point in saying he’d ask Stark to bring in an orbital strike if he could. “There’s no one in that building I want alive.”

“There could be prisoners,” Natasha says after a moment. “Hostages. Test subjects.”

“In a munitions and transport facility?”

Natasha taps a finger on the map. “This is HYDRA. We are assuming worst case scenario with them, always. That means we operate as if their front operation is ignorant of what they’re harboring and thus innocent.” Her eyes flick back up to Steve. “Blowing everybody up just because they might be a threat—does that sound familiar to you?”

Steve meets her stare, and for a second he wants to say I don’t care. He wants to say fuck them all anyway. He wants to say you don’t understand: what they did to Bucky —

“We’ll go through level by level,” he says instead. He holds Natasha’s gaze. “We’ll see if anybody inside can give us some answers. We can use the C4 afterward.”

“Alright, Cap,” she says evenly. Sam doesn’t say anything.

They suit up. Sam doesn’t have his wings and Steve doesn’t have his suit, so they’re both matching Natasha for once in full-body tac blacks with no insignia. Sam picks up an M16 and Steve selects a Colt semiautomatic to supplement his shield; Natasha makes a number of small, deadly things disappear somewhere on her person. They’re ready at sundown, loading bags of explosives into the trunk of the rental car Steve knows they won’t use again.
“So,” Natasha says to Steve, placing a bag of detonators into the car; Sam’s up at the front, prying the license plates off with a screwdriver. “What happened to charging in by yourself and single-handedly slamming through fifty guys with your shield?”

“Well, that was fun and all, but then they tortured my best friend for seventy years and then tried to get him to kill me,” Steve says, hefting something like a hundred pounds of C4 into the trunk. “What’s the phrase? Ah, yes: now it’s fucking personal.”

Chapter End Notes

The thing about SS officer trousers: hilariously true.
Barnes-thing’s memory problems start improving rapidly once he catches on to the fact that his body needs massive amounts of fuel, and he was only giving it about nine hundred calories a day when apparently his optimal metabolic range is somewhere around nine thousand. He discovers this when he accidentally picks up a case of famine-relief nutrient bars inside an Angolan Red Cross supply drop, thinking they’re plain old protein, and eats the whole box in one sitting. And then, via the grand irony of his amnesia, he forgets he ate and scarfs down another meal of butter rice, beans and approximately half a kilo of mystery meat (thank you, cafeteria lady with yet another weakness for tragic blue eyes).

The resulting clearheadedness is enough to clue him in that something changed, and some half-assed detective work on his own goddamn life brings him to the groundbreaking conclusion of eat more, you fucking trainwreck zombie disaster. He’s still not fully able to identify hunger among all the other randomized signals his body throws at him, but scheduling his meals takes care of that problem. Smartphones. Little miracles, seriously.

It’s astonishing what kind of a difference it makes. He starts sleeping more than ninety minutes at a time and even throwing up less, and when at some point he realizes he hasn’t been visited by Bucky Hallucination Barnes for nearly two weeks he actually punches the air in triumph. Eating gets bumped up the priority list to just below ‘murder all Nazis’.

While his memories improve going forward, trying to remember the past— the past past— is still a fucking hell lottery. Sometimes he gets some random thirty seconds of music, warmth, girl laughing, perfume, blissfully unconnected to anything else, but sometimes he gets an entire episode of let’s-figure-out-exactly-what-the-Asset-can-survive-this-time.

Apart from flashbacks, which he has no control over, Barnes-thing generally tries to stay out of his own head. Some things he just knows without context or explanation, like what kinds of boat he can drive and which countries have particularly lax customs officers. And some actual memories are there, but it’s like watching a movie in someone else’s living room, through the window, through a scope. He can see it all just fine, he can understand everything that’s happening, he just can’t change the channel or choose the movie or pick when the damn TV turns on at all.

Besides, most of the time the movie is playing shit he really doesn’t want to watch. And it’s a distraction. He’s got work to do.

HYDRA did some kind of conditioning that made sure he couldn’t directly attack his handlers. Unfortunately for them, what they classified as his “handlers” was six people, five now that Pierce is dead. Pierce was the one that had pushed for it, he’s pretty sure: Pierce liked to use him as a personal attack dog a lot more than a precision-strike field weapon. Asset-thing carried out more internal punishments and made more examples of traitors than he’d gone on external missions.

What a shitty way to run an organization, Barnes-thing decides as he shoots another agent through the eye. Killing HYDRA agents feels more familiar to him than the embrace of his own mother.

He can’t call up her face. He doesn’t know her name. She smelled like lavender and rising dough and gin, and she would run her fingers through his hair when he cried —
Barnes-thing pauses, grimly reloading as he rides out the sense memory. He finishes tearing apart the outpost without incident, blowing it up behind him, but his scalp still tingles for the whole day after.

Anyway: not attacking handlers directly is not an issue. Barnes can problem-solve at a distance. Anton Dovin the handler is very paranoid about snipers, so Barnes-thing scares up his favorite anti-materiel rifle and blows his head off through two walls and from 900 yards away. Mathieu Soucy the handler travels in a twelve-car convoy, so Barnes-thing makes sure to blow up the entire private garage just as he’s getting inside.

Two dead, and the other three take notice. They will be more of a challenge, but that’s not a problem either. Barnes-thing likes hunting.

He also, during this time, starts realizing he’s got company.

Barnes-thing was aware, tactically, that he was not the only one routing HYDRA strongholds, but since the majority players were only going after the obvious targets in the INSIGHT datadump he didn’t have to pay much attention. Plenty of governments are doing their own spring cleaning, major corporations are starting very pointedly public internal audits, Interpol is basically frothing at the mouth, but it’s all just shifting variables in an evolving tactical landscape. Barnes-thing only considers this shit when it becomes mission-relevant. He’s busy: his target list is everything that never made it into any files.

But whoever’s doing this particular bit of chasing now is very pointedly on his territory. He had the vague assumption that it was some kind of international strike force, assembled to move fast and hit hard, but despite the fact that they’re going after non-INSIGHT targets they’re not quite overlapping with Barnes yet. He’s got more intel than they do, he tentatively deduces. At least when his brain plays nice and gives it to him.

It still takes him an embarrassingly long time to realize that it’s the Avengers hunting with him.

Some of them, anyway. Barnes-thing first thought they were some kind of cartoon, due to the amounts of toys, shirts, cups, lunchboxes, backpacks, shoes, toothbrushes and god knows what else embossed with their symbols and likenesses. Then some halfhearted CCTV hacking and a random kick of memory coincided to make him realize he recognized the Widow, he remembered recognizing the Widow, and the internet showed him all the rest. He spends a while trying to remember Widow some more— fractured time, good with garrottes, her hair is different colors, she’s…smaller? goddamn his sieve-brain— and that segues into his memories of Captain America.

If it can be called that. Captain America makes his head hurt. Those memories were pretty obviously scrambled on purpose: the whole— thought, concept, the… person— it makes something in his head skip, a record player needle jumping the grooves. Part of it is: he looks at the big red-white-blue costume-star-shield and thinks ugh. He thinks: I can’t believe this shit. He thinks: oh, there you are. He looks at the real photos, not the cartoon drawings, and he sees: the big thick brows, the heavy sharp nose, the little pink mouth all sour like Stevie’s licked a lemon. He thinks: oh. There you are.

But he can’t think about it. He can only have the pieces. If he tries to pay attention, if he tries to focus, everything fractures and he has no idea who that is— the colors blur, all he has is sloppy white-hot rage and spinning contradictory fragments of useless data.

Captain America is the target. Captain Rogers must be protected at all costs. Captain America is a tank with an advanced healing factor. Steve is a toasting rack with lungs like swiss cheese. Captain America loves you. He’d die for you. He just about did.
Barnes-thing’s brain insists that all of these things are true, and produces ‘evidence’ to support this claim. He really, really wishes his head was less full of these ‘facts’. Reality is hard enough to deal with as it is.

Some cursory Googling corroborates that Short Steve did turn into Big Rogers, at least. And he knows Rogers was his last target, though most of that whole… time… is a blur. Some things he remembers, like destroying his trackers and ending up in that creepy goddamned shrine-museum. Other things are just static and big blank holes.

He can’t spend too long researching this shit before his head starts to feel like it’s full of angry bees and that’s just asking for a flashback, so he leaves it the hell alone. Whatever. It’s not like they have a chance in hell of catching up to him.

The Widow, though. He’ll have to keep an eye out. There’s no reason for her to think of him as a friendly, even if she does know he’s hunting HYDRA. She’s tricky, she doesn’t give up and her games have layers upon layers to them, although Barnes-thing doubts she’ll be able to get to him that way. Her speciality is playing upon people’s personalities, their hopes, fears, expectations, ambitions, and there’s just not that much inside the Barnes-thing for her to get a good grip.

Still, she’ll know that. She’s not above fucking slicing his neck in half with some cheesewire, either. If she can’t get into his head she’ll be just as happy taking it off at the shoulders.

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Early on in her tenure with SHIELD, Natasha had a therapist that, in retrospect, had probably been assigned to her as some kind of punishment. On the other hand, she’s still not sure which one of them was supposed to be the one being punished: tell me about yourself, Dr. Katherine-Call-Me-Katie liked to say.

She wants to say: it was all of you who made Natasha a burner name, a two-dimensional name, a name with no meaning— her coworkers, her superiors, every fucking idiot on the street calling her so familiarly, unknowingly claiming a relationship with her that didn’t fucking exist. She should have been Natalia Alexeyevna to them, Romanova if they were feeling frisky, but no: Natasha. It had been like every single person in her life referring to her as sweetheart.

And maybe it makes her a bad spy, to be so attached to a cultural custom from a country that’s not even hers anymore. And maybe it was her fault, because she’d told Clint Barton Natasha, Natasha is my name, because she’d been concussed and sleep-deprived and fucked up enough to offer that kind of possibility— to offer up the potential to be friends. And then he had to go and be all American about it, and really, she should have seen it coming. It’s not like she’d ever had a friend before. She was bound to fuck up some details the first time around.

Clint doesn’t care that she has no face sometimes, that the Real Natasha Romanova™ wears her body like a remote-controlled bomb disposal robot. He doesn’t care that there’s no Real Natasha Romanova at all. Natasha doesn’t need him to understand, but it’s nice that he does. Makes some things a lot easier.

These days, it’s not a problem until other people make it one. Natasha’s just a name— this she has learned, at last. She is more than a name now.
Who is the real you? She doesn’t have time for stupid questions. They’re all real. It’s all her. It isn’t anybody else doing it. It’s her face, her voice, her hands, her choices, somebody else might have put the script in her brain in the beginning but it’s her that makes it real, she is real, there is nothing in here that is anything more or less than her. She, as some windbag once put it, contains fucking multitudes.

Dr. Katherine-Call-Me-Katie had quit SHIELD three months after her assignment to Natasha, and shortly after making director Nick had waived her mandatory weekly therapy sessions. So at least there’s that. Natasha doesn’t see shrinks anymore. Whatever holes her brain falls into she’ll damn well climb out of herself.

She knows that’s not the healthiest attitude, but then again, healthy would not be signing up to be a motherfucking Avenger. Healthy would be moving to some remote tropical island and taking up yoga and iguana-watching full time. Healthy would not sitting at this shitty desk in this shitty safehouse in Bulgaria, running point on a global op that should really, really have a support staff of at least two hundred people.

Tony’s doing what he can, but vetting agents and supplying them with the clearance for a Captain America op was a long and arduous process even before everybody got secret-Nazi paranoid. He’s gone full sugar daddy, at least, so they have funds, they have transport and equipment and bail money, but what they really need is— well, ideally, what they need to do is clone Natasha fifty times and turn her loose on this stuff, but that’s a little outside the realm of possibility.

She finds herself actually fantasizing about it for a second, despite the fact that the aftermath of that is a Black Widow free-for-all deathmatch. It’s safe to say she’s a little stressed.

She has dreams of turning her phones off. Right now she has four, on her at all times: official, dark, burner, spare. The last time she had four phones was during two six-month stretches immediately before and after 9/11, and some might call the Battle of Manhattan a bad time, but one measly day fighting aliens is nothing compared to the endless, bottomless grind of her day job.

Natasha usually likes her day job, but four-phone years make her seriously reconsider her capacity for liking anything. Even the sight of all Sam and Steve’s muscles— on display today in tight henleys— give her nothing but vague feelings of resentment.

“So,” Steve says as he settles across from her. Sam sits down beside him, silent. He hasn’t been too vocal since the op in Cabo; Natasha can tell something’s percolating there, but for all Sam’s emotional openness he sure plays some things close to the chest. If Natasha had more time she’d dig into that to see if it was something likely to blow up in their faces, but as it is all she can do is hedge her bets and try to steer all of them into less emotionally charged waters. It’s like trying to thread an embroidery needle with a pool noodle. “We got something?”

“Yes,” Natasha says. She flips through her stacks of files— she’s gone old school, hard copy everything, an annoying and hopefully temporary necessity— until she reaches the latest data dump from Hill. “Southern Russia, on the Black Sea. The facility is abandoned— the whole plant property is blocked off as a potential biohazard zone, and there’s been no indication of anyone entering or leaving this area for nearly a decade. Until last month.” Natasha taps a finger on a heavily pixelated thermal-scan photograph. “There was minimal activity in the bay three weeks ago, consistent with one mid-sized or several small-sized boats docking in an area where there shouldn’t be a dock.”

“What’s in there?”

“I’m pretty sure this was one of HYDRA’s major early complexes,” Natasha says. “And that the Winter Soldier would have spent a lot of time there.” She sits back. “My guess is that the activity
was some kind of dropoff or pickup. The whole world is chasing HYDRA right now; what’s so important at this place that they’d visit it now?"

She watches Steve consider this. He’d done exactly as he said in Cabo, locking down the facility, trapping the agents inside, going through level by level with extreme prejudice. Natasha had slipped ahead to locate base command, since Steve was shooting first and not bothering with questions later; the agent hadn’t known anything useful, and when that became clear Steve shot him point-blank in the head, still handcuffed to the chair. And moved on to the next one.

They need this softball. Steve needs something to do that’s HYDRA-related without having him skirt any human rights violations, and this is a way to throw him a Bucky-bone without running the risk of actually running into the Soldier.

Natasha does not want Steve running into the Soldier. There is no best case scenario there, not now. It’s best they stick to the HYDRA elimination game plan for everyone’s sake.

That’s not to say she hasn’t considered the angles on this herself. Why would the Soldier go to a base so thoroughly abandoned by his masters? Natasha’s first thought was that it isn’t as abandoned as it looks, but she’s triple checked that and the further she digs the more it shows that the latest activity was that one visit from the sea. It’s reasonable, then, that the Soldier would be the one to go there, driven by old protocol or old memory. If it’s him— and who else would it be? — then he’s long gone by now.

“Alright,” Steve says. “We’ll check it out. We head out tomorrow morning.”

They say their goodnights and go; Natasha sits for a while longer, alone but for the puddle of light cast by the rusty table lamp by her shoulder. She’s going to have work harder on threading that pool noodle. This mission is something, at least, but on the sucking chest wound of their collective stress loads it’s a bandaid at best.

Some of this she anticipated: she knew it’d be a manhunt from the start. When the NKVD dissolved, its personnel simply regrouped into the KGB, the SVR, the GRU, plus or minus a few purged officers: in blood, the creature stayed the same. The uniforms change but the faces don’t, and HYDRA is not a monster, it is an organization, and organizations are made of people. People have to be hunted down.

Initially she was worried about how Steve would deal, ethically speaking, with what would essentially be several long, grueling months of serial assassinations. Given recent data on his emotional state, she no longer considers it a problem. He has damned HYDRA wholesale in his personal moral paradigm.

On the one hand: no need for Natasha to waste time dealing with any moral agonizing or guilt spirals. On the other hand: Captain America is a weapon just as much as Natasha and the Soldier, and they’ve all just been lucky so far that his targeting system has a moral core so strong you could use it to bend rebar. But it turns out that there’s a loophole in the programming, and that loophole is the exact shape and size of Bucky Barnes. People hurting Bucky Barnes are no longer people in Steve’s eyes, and Natasha can see that there’s a list of them in Steve’s head and it’s growing.

That is a problem, because the state of mind Steve’s in, the second he gets subpoenaed all of Congress will go on that list. Anybody getting in his way on this op will go on that list, and that has the potential to be a lot of people. Natasha does not want Steve Rogers to declare war on the world’s governments, mostly because the blast radius from that will be seen from the fucking moon. Muscles schmuscles: Steve’s real superpower is escalation.
She’s going to have to address that. Sooner than later.

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If you go to the southern coast of Russia, near Rostov-on-Don, there’s a condemned water treatment plant with a series of cleverly disguised doors hidden in the basement. If you know the right door, and the sixteen passcodes for the six doors after that, you can take yourself down a bajillion stairs to a cavern-bunker whose architect clearly created his floor plans by dropping serious acid and then breaking out the collected works of M.C. Escher.

Barnes-thing, in absence of anything better to do, does just that. He’s had a week of camping out in Ukraine, tentatively prodding at his brain to see if it would produce any HYDRA locations besides this abandoned mess, but no dice. He’d have preferred a live target, but the remaining handlers have gone to ground - better to let them sit, get complacent - and certain recent events have at least made this place worth a look.

So he strolls on in. Whoever designed original security for this place thought in riddles, not in actual defensive strategy, although he can see the various patches successors applied in an attempt to make it actually secure. They weren’t very successful, because this place was a fucking nightmare even before HYDRA moved in and started all but splashing blood on the walls. It’s a fucking cave: rooms and corridors are hacked out of bedrock, which means pipes and wires stay exposed, which means it’s very difficult to install any hidden surprises. Noise carries far, but it’s all mixed up with the echo and drip and shush of a cavern even without the low subsonic roar of the tide. The sea is close here, and that means all sorts of things grow and stink and writhe in the salty damp thick dark.

The tunnels fold back on each other, double, split, dead end. Only one kind of good security down here: prisoners do not have any kind of easy time trying to get out. Barnes-thing can find his way around now, sure, but he’s not naked, doped up and freshly tortured anymore.

He keeps oscillating between dull horror and crawling familiarity— no flashbacks yet, but the night is young— which is how he knows he’s in the right place: he must have spent a lot of time here, either as the Asset or the Soldier. Maybe both. Maybe just the Soldier. There’s a layer of dust an inch thick everywhere there isn’t an equal amount of mold.

Everything is collapsing back into the sea. He walks in on rusting cages, stained surgical tables, salt-crusted pumps and water tanks and infinite permutations of slime. Water trickles down the walls and seeps up from the ground. And they did fucking surgeries here. Jesus. Did nobody give a fuck about sanitation.

Actually, they probably didn’t. If everything they operated on was like him, then they could dunk their scalpels in a bucket of swamp mud and still run no risk of infection.

He finds one Chair, a very old version with giant rotting sponges at the cranial attachment and all its ancient batteries rusted and detached. Approaching it directly threatens to make him hurl inside his mask, so after a few minutes of dry heaving he decides applying grenades to the problem is the way to go. The boom is very satisfying, even from fifty yards down down the hall.

It’s in the adjoining room that he hits jackpot: waterproof filing cabinets, stacked to the ceiling, and only a little bit singed by his destructive tendencies. When he snaps the rusted locks off and removes boxes upon boxes of files, he sees in one corner many of them have been stamped with a fading red star. Bingo. Makes sense they’d keep this stuff close to the Chair.

He pries open a couple of the plastic boxes, and hallelujah some of the papers are laminated. Some of them dissolve in his grip, and of course there’s slime in here too, joy of joys, but there’s enough
intact that he can sit down on the disgusting floor and start going through these only slightly less disgusting files. Thank god the mask keeps him from smelling anything.

After about thirty minutes of deciphering German, Russian and English in handwriting of various levels of atrocity, he finds a series of diagrams that might, from the right angle, be construed as very exploded renderings of some kind of arm.

This is what he’s here for. Two weeks ago he’d passed his hand over a car door and felt the little hum again: the arm trying to tell him something. He’d been willing to assume the arm could only detect something embedded in his body, like calling to like, but recently, increasingly, it’s started humming at anything running electricity. Twenty minutes with a smartphone, a couple of radios and a VOM revealed that it responds to electricity only, the hum growing and waning depending on the strength of the voltage. It seems to be fine-tuning itself as he goes along.

He has no recollection of using the arm as a bug detector beyond finding his own implants and he’s fairly sure he’s never been briefed on that capability, but it’s not like HYDRA started out knowing all that much more about his arm than he did. He heard them talking about it a lot, over his head: investigate neural connections, examine material composition, determine power source. Fuck knows they spent enough time carving him up just to figure it out. They better fucking have something.

He wonders who made his arm. Whoever it was, they certainly didn’t share any blueprints with HYDRA. He’s not sure how it even got attached to him, but he doesn’t remember anything about that. Passed out on the cutting table with a necrotic stump, woke up with a shiny metal arm. At some point somebody slapped a damn great red star on his shoulder, like a fucking car sticker or something.

He can’t remember getting any kind of real training for it, but a lot of its unnatural movements come naturally. It rotates fully at the shoulder joint, and if he shrugs a certain way the elbow joint unlocks and rotates as well; he can seal the plates in his hand so tightly that not even hairs get caught in the grooves. The external armor segments realign for him at a whim, sometimes on reflex, and respond to the environment without any input from him at all. Putting it in water makes the whole thing seal up, and when debris catches inside the plates start shivering in tiny rhythmic motions until every clump of dirt and grain of sand is shaken out. The whole thing is self-repairing: as far as he can tell, it replenishes itself with substance from the inner core via giving a huge middle finger to the law of conservation of mass.

He doesn’t reveal the core often, because it’s cold, near freezing, and seems to glow without emanating any light whatsoever. It’s a smooth cylindroid running through the center of his arm, almost like bones; smooth, opaque black cables run parallel over it, mimicking muscles and attaching seamlessly at seemingly random points on the core. HYDRA’s tech got stuffed in between: sensors and monitors and trackers, all of it wedged in there any old how. He’s pretty sure sometimes they secured things to his arm cables with plastic zip ties.

He’s got no fucking idea how the armor plates are attached, because when they retract completely it seems like they’re just straight-up floating an inch or two over the core. It’s not even magnetic. He knows it’s connected to his brain and spinal cord somehow, because he can feel it: it’s his arm, with both more and less sensation than the other one. It’s not so good with texture, but temperature is incredibly sensitive and so is pressure. It has extra— connections, in his brain, he thinks, because there’s no equivalent muscle movement in his flesh arm to something like ‘flare plates’ or ‘lock joints’, and temperature information arrives in his brain as abstract knowledge without any sense of ‘hot’ or ‘cold’.

He’s never even heard of tech like this, not even here in the future. Googling military prosthetics gives him images of crude robot hands and bulky, bare-bones connections. He’s not surprised
HYDRA had something better up its sleeve— in his sleeve, ha ha ha ha ha— but even they didn’t seem to even partially understand it. The papers in front of him are rudimentary and explorative, with long pages of theories and experimental notes about myoelectric signaling and biocompatible interfacing that either cut off abruptly or peter into nothing.

Barnes-thing puts down the papers and considers his arm, pushing his sleeve up a little. The forearm plates ripple open from wrist to inner elbow and he pokes a tentative finger at the core: yep, still cold, still in there. Still sheathed in those black cables. Still his arm.

His takes his finger out and the arm seals itself and calibrates, running a soothing diagnostic pulse up and down his spine. That didn’t used to happen either, or maybe it did and his brain just couldn’t parse it. Maybe it’s the improved nutrition or a lucky side effect of not being fucking mindwiped all the goddamn time. Either way, his— capabilities, his awareness of the arm seems to be growing.

Which is— fine? Probably fine. Probably not some kind of dormant HYDRA-installed protocol that will culminate in electrocuting his nervous system or anything. Barnes-thing rubs his nose and stares balefully at the moldy heaps of useless goddamn files.

Which is when he hears voices. Real, echoey, in-this-goddamn-cave-with-him voices. He stopped pulling his mask down to sniff for any traces of people because literally all he could smell was mold and brine, but he hadn’t detected any recent human scents at the surface entrance. They must have come in after him. Are they after him? No, if they were they wouldn’t be strolling down the hallway cracking dick jokes.

Barnes-thing shuffles all the files and boxes back into their cabinets as best he can, trying to triangulate the direction of the voices. Left, left, up— they’re above him; the voices are echoing down through one of the crude stairwells cut through the bedrock. Barnes-thing climbs.

His silence and reflexes let him stalk them through the tunnels unseen, straining his senses to get an accurate read on the group. Definitely HYDRA, of that much he’s certain. Nearly fifty men, speaking English, some with accents. All of them are armored, some of them helmeted and masked, but their rifles are pointed down, carried loose: they’re not expecting hostiles.

And why would they. Barnes-thing is here looking for obsolete files, rotting and a decade out of date, and he got them. Everything sensitive, valuable or particularly damning was moved out of here ages ago. He started his search of this place from the bottom up and hasn’t found anything he’d consider worth sending fifty armed guys for.

He needs to find out why they’re here.

Barnes-thing has a very terrible idea.

He checks himself over: black tac gear, mostly hidden weapons, mask up and on and covering his beard. Serviceable. His latest mess of… stuff is hidden in a public gym locker in the nearest city, as per the protocol he set himself once he collected too many notebooks and romance pulps to stash in the baggy pockets of his civilian disguise. His hair has grown out enough and the bags under his eyes are still dark enough that with the right stance and the right audience, he can still pass himself off as HYDRA’s freezer-burned, brain-dead Asset from six months ago.

Worst case scenario, he loses it and kills everybody. Which is going to happen anyway. Might as well try and see how long as his acting abilities can last.

The HYDRA soldiers are checking each room they pass, moving slow. It isn’t too hard to double
back and circle around through the maze until he’s ahead of them again, and the Barnes-thing puts himself in the center of the empty corridor like a particularly creepy mannequin just as the first row of HYDRA guys turns the corner.

“Holy fucking—”

Barnes-thing stands in parade rest, spine straight, hands loose, eyes blank. “Я готов отвечать,” he says.

Approximately twenty guns are pointing at him, but Barnes-thing isn’t sweating. He’s banking on the fact that A), he’s worth more to HYDRA than all these guys put together and they know it, and B), HYDRA ain’t so good at that internal communication crap. The people who know the Winter Soldier is rogue and hunting won’t exactly be shouting it from the rooftops, because telling people your pet murder machine has gone a little bit rabid on you is just the slightest bit bad for morale.

“Jesus Fucking Christ,” says Agent Number 1.

“Holy fucking shit,” says Agent Number 2.

“That thing’s still alive?” says Agent Number 3, who has just won himself First Brain Hero Award of the conversation.

“ Shut the fuck up,” Agent Number 4 says. He’s wearing a full-face tac mask, but his voice makes something in Barnes-thing twitch. He knows him. Vodka something. Rumbo? “Why are you surprised? You’ve seen what it’s been through.”

He’s doing a good job of faking scornful, faking confidence, but he’s just as shocked as the three stooges over there. The rest of the agents behind them stand in uneasy silence; Barnes-thing recognizes none of their faces, and sees no recognition in theirs. New hires, mercenaries, rookies brought out of reserve, all of the above: maybe one in three guys is holding his rifle like he actually knows how to use it.

“Why is it here?” says Agent 1.

“This was one of its holding bases, alright?” Rumbo snaps. “Probably the only one still standing. The dog fucking came home. Soldat,” he says, turning to Barnes-thing. “Что делаешь?” he demands in an atrocious accent. “Почему здесь?”

“Doesn’t it speak English?” Agent Brain Hero says.

Rumbo turns around and smacks Brain Hero across the face with an armored glove, nearly knocking him over. “Don’t ask stupid fucking questions,” he hisses, turning back around.

Barnes-thing considers him. He doesn’t remember Rumbo being so violent with his own squad, but then again, what he doesn’t remember could fill the Library of Congress. Rumbo could have been tazing his men in the balls every fifteen seconds and Barnes wouldn’t remember a thing if his brain decided not to.

He does remember Rumbo’s horrible Russian. The Asset only spoke English to its handlers, and Rumbo was field command at most.

“Вернулся на базу,” Barnes-thing finally says, in his deadest robot voice. The delay in reply won’t even be considered unusual. He was already more glitch than function by the late nineties, he knows that much, and Pierce assuming sole ownership hadn’t exactly improved anything.


“Jesus fucking christ.” Rumbo sneers and turns away in disgust. “Fucking brain-dead piece of shit retard.”

“You could try, uh, you know,” Agent 2 says, making a vague slapping motion in the air.

“Why the fuck would I do that.”

“Pierce did it?”

“Do I look like Pierce?”

Everybody takes a step back at that one. Barnes-thing confirms his tentative earlier assessment: Rumbo is definitely more unstable now.

“No sir,” Agent 2 says quickly. “I just meant you could maybe—”

“Shut your fucking mouth,” Rumbo says. He’s clearly thinking what Barnes-thing is thinking, which is that either none of these idiots attended any of the Asset’s internal executions or they were too dumb for the lesson to stick.

Rumbo’s lesson stuck. Rumbo won’t lay a hand on him. He knows he’s not a handler.

“This doesn’t change anything,” Rumbo says, raising his voice a little to address the whole group of agents. There’s a threadiness to his speech when he gets louder—throat injury, maybe respiratory damage. “Our objective is the same. Robinson, report,” he adds, clicking his throat mike. “Find anything?”

Rumbo’s earpiece is inset into his helmet, but Barnes-thing can hear every word. “Yessir - there’s an unidentified, uh, creature in the tanks in quadrant three—”

“Hold position, I’m on my way,” Rumbo says, clicking his mic off. “First Pierce’s pet zombie, now this— Tomwell, fall in, you’re with me. You,” Rumbo says, pointing at the Genius Trio. “Stay here. Guard the Asset. And for fuck’s sake don’t fucking do anything.”

“Yessir,” they all snap off, and Rumbo traipses away with what must be Tomwell and his squad. That leaves the Barnes-thing in a drippy damp hallway with twenty-five guys and Triple Threat over there clearly in charge. Barnes-thing silently starts counting.

“I can’t believe we fucking found this thing down here,” Agent 1 mutters after only fourteen seconds. He’s looking at Barnes sidelong, equal parts fascinated and disbelieving. He’s definitely never seen the Asset in action.

“I thought they kept it in some kind of freezer,” Agent 2 shares helpfully.


“Well, you know. Like computers. They gotta be cold to work. It’s full of chips and stuff, innit? And it’s got that arm.”

“I guess,” Agent 1 says, brow wrinkling. Barnes-thing wonders if you can roll your eyes so hard
you pass out. If there weren’t so many hostiles watching he would give serious consideration to testing the hypothesis.

Agent 3, who has so far been squinting suspiciously at Barnes, gives a frown. “Did it get bigger?”

“What?” Agent 2 says.

“I think it got bigger,” Agent 3 says, still squinting. Take a picture, pal, this is what happens when you actually start meeting the fueling requirements on your goddamn war machine.

“The fuck are you on about?”

Agent 3 takes a step closer. “Is its hair shorter?”

“Jesus Christ, Matthews, why are you so obsessed with what it fucking looks like.”

“I’m just saying. Who gave it a haircut, huh? How long has it been down here?”

Agent Matthews is rapidly rescinding his claim to the Brain Hero award. If he gets any smarter the Barnes-thing might have to introduce him to the concept of being thrown headfirst down some stairs.

Luckily Rumbo chooses that moment to loudly announce his progress back down the hallway. “—and I suggest, Robinson, that if you ever want any kind of promotion ever again you learn to tell the difference between a lab experiment and a couple of goddamn sea cucumbers,” he snarls, stomping in with a very chastised-looking Robinson behind him. Rumbo jerks his head at the Golden Trio. “Fall in,” he growls, then growls at Barnes-thing for a moment before snapping out, “Са мнои.”

The Barnes-thing follows. Rumbo clearly doesn’t want him with them— smart man— but just as clearly knows it would be worse to have him out of sight. A couple more snapped orders places Barnes-thing squarely in the middle of the HYDRA group, surrounded on all sides by twitchy guys with guns. Barnes-thing settles into the familiarity. It’s a typical Sunday afternoon for the Soldier.

The group is clearly here searching for something. At each tunnel branch Rumbo splits them into groups and designates quadrants again, sending teams off to clear the rooms and hallways. They find a couple of rotting crab shells, another sea cucumber and every possible permutation of slime, but judging by Rumbo’s expression, none of that is what they’re looking for.

Rumbo always stays with the Barnes-thing, watching him silently, suspiciously. Barnes-thing stays blank as a board and wonders what he’s going to do when these merry men inevitably go downstairs. He’s left a crater the size of a Buick in the Chair room down there. Maybe that’s when he’ll bug out and kill everyone.

And then they turn a corner and run smack into Captain America.

Well, not quite smack into. There’s a ten foot wide ditch full of seawater separating their two sides of the room they just walked into, a higher-ceilinged cavern with passages branching off on all sides. But it’s him: no uniform, no red-white-blue, but sure as shit that’s Steve Rogers and his wings-friend and jesus christ it’s the goddamn motherfucking Widow, shitting fuck.

They all spot each other at the same time. There is a split moment of stillness, prolonged by sheer disbelief: it’s obvious neither group had any expectation of running into anyone at all, let alone an enemy. Barnes-thing knows he should keep his eyes on Widow, but he can’t look away from Captain America. He looks horrible. He looks stricken. He looks like there’s something wrong
And Barnes-thing gets a flash of how he must look, muzzled and marching in the midst of HYDRA. He can’t help it, he meets Steve’s eyes, and the look on his face is so awful that Barnes finds himself reaching out to grab the nearest agent and slit his throat.

Everything instantly goes to shit after that. It’s the wrong moment, the wrong technique, Barnes-thing didn’t think when he stabbed and so of course now there’s screaming, gurgling, arterial spray. He has to drop immediately to avoid getting shot in the back, or sides, or front, or literally anywhere because now everybody is shooting; Barnes has to take his first corpse down with him as a meat shield. “He’s gone rogue!” some precious idiot yells. Glad you got the memo, pal.

Unfortunately, all Rogers must have seen is Barnes-thing going down, because there’s a bellow from his direction a split second before the damn shield decapitates somebody directly above Barnes. Nice throw, asshole, now this guy is literally bleeding directly onto my face. Barnes-thing takes out his irritation by crushing one agent’s ankle and shooting three more under the jaw.

They don’t even get a chance to finish falling over before Rogers is suddenly right there, kicking some guy in the chest so hard his ribcage visibly caves in. Another two guys get thrown headfirst into the water; Barnes gets a glimpse of some very crazy blue eyes before Rogers whirls away, crushing the nearest guy’s trachea with a vicious jab to the throat.

Things do not improve significantly from there. Around half the HYDRA guys follow their training, follow their squads and their officers’ orders, but the others have fully committed to spray and pray, which is getting them killed in short order. Widow’s found cover somewhere and is firing with two guns; good girl, good bet when you have minimal armor and there’s basically nowhere that isn’t full of crossfire. Rogers’s wings-friend—what’s his name, Barnes-thing is almost certain he knew it at some point—leapt into the water channel, which must be pretty shallow because now he’s braced inside it like a trench, firing over the top.

And in the middle of it all is Rogers and the Barnes-thing, teaching a lesson on How Not To Melee that absolutely nobody is learning from.

“Fall back!” Rumbo roars in his cracked voice, and the Widow starts directing her shots at him immediately. A few even hit, but he’s one of the most heavily armored soldiers there and he stays upright and shooting. Barnes can’t get a bead on him, wrong angle, and anyway he’s a little more concerned with the fact that the giant blond hurricane in front of him is running out of things to punch.

Captain Steve America Rogers might love Bucky, but the Barnes-thing is only Bucky when he can’t help otherwise. He can’t trust his memories of the Helicarrier, he can’t trust his memories of the Captain, and if Rogers can ruin Barnes-thing’s grip on operational efficacy just by making sad faces, what the hell will happen when he opens his mouth? Barnes-thing’s memories of the helicarrier launch are basically scrambled egg, but he knows Rogers overrode a primary mission imperative just by letting himself get punched. He didn’t even need a Chair. Whatever mind control powers he’s got, the Barnes-thing isn’t about to give him a chance to use them.

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The Soldier bolts, and Natasha sees all of Steve’s firm intentions not to chase Bucky blow out of his head so hard she practically feels the breeze. The Soldier disappears down one of the side tunnels and Steve pelts after him without even bothering to pick up his shield.

Natasha’s a little busy firing with both hands to do anything about that, but Sam continues to deliver by scooping it up and doing a reasonable job of using it the way it was intended, i.e. not
throwing it at the first thing that moves. The Soldier left just enough HYDRA agents alive that Natasha and Sam have to engage instead of chasing him, and he probably meant to leave enough to occupy Steve, too, but right now you couldn’t stop Steve if you ran him over with a steamroller. He disappears into the tunnels.

Directly to her right, a masked and helmeted HYDRA agent in serious armor uses one of his dead buddies as a meatshield for as long as it takes for him to maneuver to the mouth of one of the side tunnels. Natasha’s reloading, can’t take him out, but she watches as he abandons the body and runs off down the tunnel. Opposite direction from Steve.

Natasha doesn’t hesitate. She goes after Rumlow.

It’s not fun. A footchase down here is an exercise in how often Natasha can bruise herself on stalagmites while slipping on yet another patch of nameless slime, and the only consolation is that Rumlow is tripping and cursing along with her just twenty yards ahead. She can’t even shoot him in the back of the knee or something, because she’s got six bullets left and the way today is going if they run into any more surprises she’s going to need them.

Two minutes in there’s a grunt and a slippery, gritty noise somewhere to her left, and then the Soldier barrels past at breakneck speed, vanishing down another tunnel. A second later Steve careens around the corner, bounces off the opposite wall and crashes away after him, so fast he’s nearly a blur. Natasha’s brain, entirely of its own accord, provides her with the utterly unhelpful accompaniment of a Yakety Sax soundtrack.

And once again Rumlow doesn’t even try to follow them. He’s sprinting through the corridors with single-minded determination, and Natasha catches him sending glances at the rooms they pass, the forking tunnels. What is he looking for? Why is he here?

Somebody came to this base three weeks ago, and Natasha’s starting to wonder if it was the Soldier after all. If it was, why would he come back? Rumlow and his men aren’t here for him— did the Soldier lead them down here? Why? What story could he have told? Fifty men? What for?

It’s all questions she plans on asking Rumlow. Not in so many words, of course. And definitely not that politely.

Rumlow darts into a room up ahead, and when Natasha bursts in after him she finds herself in a rotting laboratory, equipment and tables and shelves piled haphazardly and strewn across the floor. Rumlow’s halfway across the room, dodging the junk, and so is she when he lobbs a grenade over his shoulder.

Natasha has to execute a leap that would make even her childhood tumbling instructor cry tears of Soviet gymnastic joy. Even then her hair singes and the concussive blast slams her against a table leg, and jesus christ she should have seen that coming, because pulling the pin and then waiting to throw to time the explosion was a favorite trick of Rumlow’s all throughout STRIKE. Natasha rolls to her feet, biting back curses, and tears off in the direction Rumlow had gone.

It takes her nearly an hour to admit to herself that she’s lost him.

Natasha reaches the surface exit— the one they came in, anyway— just as Sam does, and her gun points at him automatically for a second before she remembers to flip the mental switch for friendly. He gives her a look that’s too tired to even play at affront, and she shakes herself all over once like a dog. “Sorry.”
“I take it you didn’t catch Rumlow,” Sam says. He’s got the shield on one arm and one of the HYDRA guys’ rifles in the other.

“No. All dead down there?”

“As far as I can tell. Seen Steve?”

“Briefly. Last I saw he was in hot pursuit.”

“Should we go after him?”

Natasha grimaces. “We have to clear the place first.”

“Great.” Sam hefts his rifle and sighs. “Well. I sure hope you have ammo left, because if not we’re going to feel really stupid if there’s ten guys waiting around up there to give us their best regards.”

“Yeah,” Natasha says, “Let’s do this,” and they stack up behind the thick steel door that leads to the old water plant.

It takes them nearly forty minutes to clear the place, and they find hide nor hair of anything that isn’t a cockroach or a rat dropping. Natasha checks obsessively for hidden exits to the complex underground, but if there are any here they’re hidden beyond even her capacity for discovery.

Outside the building there are several trucks and cars belonging to the dead HYDRA agents: universally shitty, decrepit or rentals or both, burner cars every one. Good thing Natasha had parked their own ancient orange zhiguli on the other side of the plant, off the road and behind a stand of trees. She goes through them all with Sam watching her back, and together they turn up a whole lot of nothing. They can’t even tell if Rumlow got topside before them and drove away in one of the cars; they have no idea how many there were originally, and the cracked road leading to the plant offers no clues.

“Next time we should figure out a way to keep watch,” Sam says tiredly, sitting down on the parking lot curb and propping the shield up beside him. “I don’t want to do that again.”

“Yeah,” Natasha agrees dully, staring at the building. “We have to go find Steve.” Neither of them move.

Luckily, ten seconds later the main plant doors slam open behind them, disgorging a muddy, gritty Steve Rogers with a look on his face that tells Natasha he’s already passed livid, plowed straight through frustrated and arrived headfirst at an emotion she can only describe as “detonation imminent”. Sam cranes his head back to look; Natasha sees the lines of exhaustion on his face deepen. It goes without saying that Steve did not, in any satisfactory way, find Barnes.

Here we go. Natasha folds her arms very tightly and prepares to try and lie as little as possible to Captain America about his undead best friend. Or whatever it is that was most recently known as the Winter Soldier. She doesn’t want to do this, should really wait for a better time, but it’s happening now and she can feel it, feel it turning ugly. She feels like six hundred snakes in a false human skin and Steve’s ten seconds from biting his shield in half.

Or not. Steve ignores the shield— and Natasha and Sam— completely in favor of striding over to one of the cars, kicking it so hard it flips onto its side and then going at its undercarriage with both hands. He manages a couple of steel-denting punches before losing his grip on technique entirely and clawing at it like an animal, grunting, hooking his fingers in, wrenching at the metal until it starts to give.

Sam cringes a little at the shriek of tortured steel. “Is he— ”
“Tearing metal with his bare hands? Yes,” Natasha says, not quite managing to conceal just how impressed with that she isn’t. “The super soldier version of throwing your sippy cup and breaking all your toys.”

“Should we…”

“Well,” Natasha says. “He’ll just throw a tire at you right now.” A wheel axle cartwheels past them, like punctuation.

“If you say so,” Sam says doubtfully. Natasha shrugs. She can see the blood splattering from Steve’s palms already but she knows the damage will be sealed in minutes, disappeared in days. He can go rip apart another car tomorrow if he wants to. He can rip up cars every single fucking day of the week and be none the worse for it. Natasha spends hours and weeks and years slathering on scar cream, applying industrial-strength foundation, going in for round after round of laser skin surgery, and she fucking wishes it were just vanity: spies must be unremarkable, spies must be unmemorable, and scars aren’t. Yeah, looking terrible in a bikini is really the biggest concern on her mind.

“Rogers,” she calls when what’s left of the car looks like it lost a fight with a rhino on bath salts. “Debrief. Report.”

Steve stops, chest heaving, his hands bright red and dripping little spots into the dust. “I lost him,” he says, staring at the wreck around him. “Fourth level down. I think. He kicked me down the stairs and then doubled back up. The tunnel branched. I.” He shoves his hands through his hair, not even noticing the way it smears blood across his forehead and scalp. “He was— right there. Right there. I could smell him.”

“At least now you know he’s alive,” Sam says.

“Yeah,” Steve says mindlessly. “Yeah. He’s alive.”

“Steve,” Natasha says, maybe a little too carefully, a little too slowly, and this is what she gets for honesty, because Steve sees something in her face and turns on her.

“You,” he says. “You knew.”

“I knew someone was destroying HYDRA caches and killing HYDRA agents,” Natasha says. “Many of which were not named in the datadump files, and only identified after their destruction or death—”

“He’s killing them?” Steve says. “He’s—”

“Steve,” Natasha says. “There is a very strong possibility that he was operating on HYDRA internal elimination protocols. He still could be. He might not even know it. Listen to me,” she says, sharper as Steve turns his burning eyes on her. “It’s standard protocol when a system like HYDRA collapses. He would be the leadership’s primary tool in getting rid of loose ends.”

“He pulled me out of the river,” Steve says, slowly, gaining steam, blood squelching as his hands ball into fists by his side. “He pulled me out, Natasha, and you weren’t there— you didn’t see —”

“It doesn’t matter if you two really did have your Little Mermaid moment in the Potomac, Rogers,” Natasha snaps. She tries, she does, but sometimes she wants to hit him over the head with a crowbar, and right now she’s closer to it than ever, her blood singing with leftover violence. “Even if he did, the most likely scenario is that he went back to HYDRA anyway, and the first thing they’d do is send him to kill lower-level personnel to keep them from spilling secrets
“Why didn’t you tell me?” Steve yells. “God damn it, there’s no good enough reason you should have kept this from me! If Bucky’s killing HYDRA— ”

“I said I wasn’t sure,” Natasha bites out. “I tell you, then what? What would change? Our mission is the same, our mission is to take out HYDRA, and saying ‘He’s alive, most likely still a hostile, no change from DC’ would do nothing but distract you and endanger— ”

“No change from DC? He just helped us fight the — ”

“And that proves what?”

Steve snarls wordlessly, looking badly like he wants to get his bloody hands on her next, barely containing it. Sam uncrosses his arms; yeah, he sees it too. Natasha’s lips pull back from her teeth in a parody smile. “Let me tell you the truth,” she says. “If it were me, I’d figure I had better odds taking on fifty HYDRA guys with Cap on my side than the other fucking way around. And then I’d just disappear after, like he did, and don’t start with me, Rogers, don’t start, I have to consider this a possibility because you won’t — ”

“You don’t understand! I don’t give a damn about the odds!” Steve’s face is red too now, looming; Natasha just barely snuffs the urge to palm-strike his nose a couple inches into his skull. It probably wouldn’t even slow him down. “Maybe you don’t get it, Natasha— ”

“Oh? I don’t get it?”

— but he’s my friend, and that means something to me, I need to— ”

“He was mine too,” Natasha bellows, and oh, shit.

Steve gapes at her, upended mid-word. Natasha snaps her mouth shut, guts recoiling. She’s better than this. She’s better than— this— vomiting things out, throwing them up out of herself, ungraceful unwanted unplanned. Telling the truth is so fucking ugly.

Well, he wanted honest, didn’t he.

“You know him,” Sam says, like he didn’t quite hear right. Natasha almost startles; she nearly forgot about him. She’s more rattled than she thought, and Steve has yet to move past looking like Natasha told him she strangles children for a living. Fuck him, she and his Bucky had both done that, anyway. “You knew him in Russia?”

“He was my partner for two years,” Natasha says, because she’s just hemorrhaging secrets today. Why not tell, anyway? Isn’t she trying to be honest? Isn’t that why she became an Avenger? And now that she’s started it flows out of her like all her violence: Steve’s bloodied hands on the car, her words.

“You partner,” Sam says carefully.

“My partner,” she repeats. “HYDRA was definitely behind the development of my… origin program, and so there was— overlap.”

“I thought you used to be a mercenary,” Steve rasps. He looks kneecapped.

“Sure,” Natasha says. “It seemed the thing to do, when I got bored being the darling of the KGB.”

“How did you— how did you meet him?”
Natasha’s lip curls. “There were other Widows,” she says. “But I was the best. They deployed me often. But a lot of my work involved crossing borders, traveling, extracting information that led to violence—identifying break points, facilitating coups. It was judged to be too much for me alone.” Her mouth twists. “Little teenaged me was furious, of course.

“But then they assigned the Soldier to me, and I was less furious.” What an understatement: fourteen-year-old Natasha’s desperate hero worship still makes thirty-mumble-year-old Natasha twitch with secondhand embarrassment, but the Soldier hadn’t batted an eyelash, if he’d even noticed. She knows now, having read the files, that they’d started upping the frequency of the wipes right about then, and he’d been by turns blank and confused whenever they weren’t dealing with something mission critical.

“He was nothing like I expected.” She had first seen him when the ten-year-old Widows had been brought to a training demonstration, an obstacle course followed by the performance execution of three prisoners, and at a gesture the Soldier had moved too fast to track. He had performed everything perfectly. Natasha had left that episode in a haze of awe and determination, high on fear and patriotism and not a little bit of envy, and the whole thing had been not unlike taking a little space nerd kid to the bridge of the Enterprise to meet Captain Kirk on Career Day.

But when she actually met him—

The Soldier’s speech slurred when he spoke, and he spoke so quietly. His shoulders hunched when she got too close—him, forty kilos heavier and fast enough to gut her twice before she could even grab hold of a knife. She’d been on her best behavior, trembling with the need to impress, and she would have done anything, spread her legs or slaughtered a handler, shown him they were the same, that she was the best, too, but all he seemed to want to do around her was shrink into himself.

So Natasha bit back all her words, didn’t speak unless spoken to, and it seemed to relieve him, so she kept it up. They passed entire missions in silence, and mutually expanded their use of hand signals until he’d learned to read Natasha’s face, cover to cover. She learned his, too, but it was harder: his mask was on almost all the time, and even without it his face was slack and unreliable, detached from his inner workings.

Still: she was the best. She learned his lexicon, the set of his shoulders and the angle of his head, and their rapport bloomed into a symbiosis that turned their assigned partnership permanent. She stabilized him, she heard the handlers say. They were good assets. They did good work. They were a good team.

She would pretend to be his daughter in public, a good girl, dutifully guiding a mute father who wasn’t quite right in the head. In close-range gunfire or explosions he would tuck her into his body, wrapping his flesh arm around her skull, pressing one ear tight to his chest and covering the other with his palm: protecting her eardrums. Sometimes they would clean each other’s knives. Once, very, very carefully, Natasha picked a blood-clotted tangle out of his hair.

Clint was Natasha’s first friend, but the Soldier was her first partner: the first thing she knew of true teamwork—real teamwork, real trust. No wonder, really, that she fell in later with an American sniper who used sign language. Natasha may have called many people comrade, but as she realized much, much later, with the Soldier was the only time she meant it.

He doesn’t remember her. He’s shot her. It’s nothing personal. In his shoes, she would have done the same.

“He became too unstable to keep out of cryo,” Natasha says, not without a certain amount of bitterness. “And by unstable I mean ‘started developing signs of personality’. The USSR was collapsing around us; it was cheaper to fridge him and try to reeducate us.” She shrugs. “He was disappeared. I defected a year later.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Steve says, but this time it sounds like it’s being scraped out of him.

Natasha just stares at him for a moment. “I don’t owe you this story, Steve,” she says finally. She wonders if she should inform him of the fact that he— and Sam, now— are the only living people who have heard it. She hasn’t even given it to Clint. “Not even if you were there first.”

“We could’ve had updated intel on his— ”

Natasha barks a laugh. “More updated than DC?”

“You still should have told me,” Steve repeats.

“Steve,” Natasha says, and it comes out just as exhausted as she feels. “It’s not like he remembers me either. What’s the point?”

Steve’s face is pinched, his jaw set. “If I’d known— I could have said something to him. Just now. We could have gotten through to him, I did it before, we could’ve had an— an ally— ”

“An ally,” Natasha says. It’s like he didn’t hear a word she just said. “We don’t— We have to deal with him as he is now, not him in 2006 or 1991 or 1945. When we catch up with him he’s going to be different and we don’t know who he’ll be. We don’t get to tell him who to be. Do you get that? Do you understand?”

“I don’t care if he’s different, Jesus! I’m not the same— ”

“Are you even listening to what I’m— ”

“Guys!” Sam barks, and that at least gets them to look at him. “We have to calm down,” Sam says tiredly, and that was where Natasha was going with this, wasn’t it, before it all went off the rails. “I’m serious. Cool it. This is going nowhere.”

“Yes,” Natasha says, controlling her breathing, forcibly taking her nervous system back down. “Yes. You’re right. Thank you.”

Steve’s hauling in deep breaths too, still staring at her. “Natasha,” he says.

“We have to be objective about this,” Natasha tells him, the rage draining away, leaving her veins filled with what feels like grey dishwater. “I get it, alright? But we can’t afford to be irrational on an op.” She pushes her knuckles into her eyes, rubbing hard. “Rumlow got away. Солдат— Bucky got away. We weren’t ready, we lost our shit, we lost them. And— Steve, I want to say this now, we can’t have a repeat of Cabo.”

Steve’s head goes back a little, like a startled dog. “What about Cabo?”

Natasha looks at him. “I want HYDRA dead just as much as you do,” she says. “But if that means we become war criminals, we have to pull back and reevaluate.”

Steve’s face is still red but his eyes are starting to go cold, freezing over with the same dead resolution she saw when he told her there was nobody in that building he cared to leave alive. “We’re justified, Natasha.”
“Are we?” She turns fully towards him, looking him in the eye. “How far does that go? How long until it— ”

“If it were Riley,” Sam says.

Natasha and Steve shut their mouths. Natasha silently swears a little. It’s not like she forgot, but Sam works hard to make it easy to ignore that all of them have a horrible warhusband tragedy going on.

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot,” Sam says. He’s looking at his hands, loose between his knees. “After Cabo. I’m not gonna lie, Steve, I thought you might be crossing some lines, at first, but then I thought: if it were me. If it were him.”

Sam looks up at them. “I don’t know that I wouldn’t do the same,” he says. In that moment he looks the way Steve does, sometimes: a hundred years old, ancient, knowing he’ll see a hundred more. “I don’t know that I would choose different. If it were me.”

He looks down again. “And, y’know. Kind of hard to justify going easy on Nazi bastards.”

“Sam,” Steve says, after a long moment. He seems to run out of words after that. Natasha shifts her weight a little; experience has taught her that when a situation calls for “comforting”, the best thing The Real Natasha Romanova can do is to stand quietly, ideally in another room. Except shit, Steve’s not any good at this either—

“I think I need a hug,” Sam says quietly, almost to himself. Steve’s hangdog expression triples in intensity and Sam barely gets a second of looking at his feet before he’s scooped up in bulging super soldier biceps. Natasha deflates in relief, then spends a few minutes staring at the sky and radiating a pointed ignorance of all the muffled sniffing and wiping of faces over in that general direction.

“What now?” Sam says, once he and Steve have extricated themselves.

“I’m going after Rumlow. He had an objective,” Natasha says, grimly. “He’s had contact with remaining HYDRA leadership, or at the very least knows something I don’t. I don’t like that.”


Natasha sighs. She has several dozen files from Hill detailing the most recent activities attributed the Winter Soldier. Some of it is even accurate. “I wouldn’t worry about him,” Natasha says aloud. “On the scale of priorities, HYDRA really does have bigger things to worry about than trying to reclaim the Soldier. Even Rumlow wasn’t here for him— there was something else, he was looking for something even when I was chasing him. Seriously, Steve,” Natasha tells him. “The best thing we can do is concentrate on eliminating HYDRA. And Sold— Bucky seems to be doing fine so far.”

“Is he wanted by the feds?” Sam says.

Natasha shakes her head. “They don’t know what to look for. None of the Winter Soldier files were in the datadump. The only reliable eyewitness accounts as to his actual identity are from you, me, and Steve, and Hill’s got a chokehold on that information.” Maria’s been doing Natasha a lot of favors recently, only partly because she feels guilty that of the two of them, Nick trusted the one with an actual trustworthy track record. “If he doesn’t put himself on any radars, at most he will be assumed to have gone down with INSIGHT C.”

“He’s going around murdering people,” Sam says, in an impressively nonjudgmental tone. “That
sounds like he’ll show up on some radars pretty damn soon.”

“Right now it’s all being read as HYDRA infighting,” Natasha says. “And he is a professional. Interpol is not enough to get him caught.”

“HYDRA knows he’s alive,” Steve says.

“HYDRA’s known he’s alive. They don’t exactly want to go around spreading that information, not while there’s a chance they can still recover him.”

“Right,” Steve says. “Right.” He runs his hands through his hair again, and this time all the blood is dry, flaking off in a rusty shower; Steve looks at it crusting on his shirt, then his hands, a look on his face like he’s never seen them before.

“You should take a break,” Natasha says firmly. “Both of you. Go to—Croatia, it’s right next door, practically. See the beaches. There’s cliff diving, Steve, you’ll love that. Your favorite thing, and you don’t even have to pack a parachute.”

“What about you?” Sam says.

“Rumbo,” Natasha repeats. “No, relax, hunting one guy instead of trying to architect this entire shitshow will be a vacation for me. I promise.”

Sam doesn’t quite look like he believes her. “And then?”

“And then I need to make some calls,” Natasha says. She’s held off on this before, because it’s not like these are calls she can place lightly, but it’s time, it’s the right thing to do. “It’s about time we got our shit together. We shouldn’t be doing this alone.”

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He ends up somewhere in the very lowest levels of the caverns, guided by dim instinct and the assumption that Rogers would try to corner him by the surface exits. There’s a vague sort of certainty that there are other ways out, and that certainty sends him deeper underground, into the dark. There’s bioluminescence down here: pale bluegreen lights, clinging to the walls and floating gently in the puddles and pools.

He stays down there for a long time, panting turning into gasping turning into huge heaving gulps for air. He keeps the mask on, but after a while he manages to put his head between his knees. He’d slap a nun right now if it would get him thirty minutes alone with three burgers and his copy of PASSIONE in DARKNESSE.

Slowly, he becomes aware of the sound of water moving in a way distinct from the background sloshing hum. He follows it, a little blindly, for lack of anything better to do; he’s not thinking, yet, of how he’s going to get out of here.

When he reaches the sound of the water, he can feel/hear that this is the biggest cavern yet. In front of him, waves lap gently at a muddy little beach: moving water, connected to the sea. He wouldn’t be surprised if there was an exit straight out of these caves into open water, at least when the tide went out.

He wouldn’t be surprised at all. The faint glow of the bioluminescence isn’t much of a light, but it’s enough for Barnes to pick out the sleek, massive shape parked halfway out of the water.

Well. Barnes-thing straightens up. He’s pretty sure he’s found what Rumbo was looking for.
i keep forgetting to link my tumblr!! i draw bucky barnes a lot. Like... a lot. Join me if that's your thing!
The thing is dark, beached, a dead shape lying dragged half out of the water. Barnes-thing knows better than to just walk up to strange foreign objects lying around in dark slimy caves, so he spends a little while sidling around it, trying to get a better look. The dim bio-glow shows him smooth, dull surfaces and mechanical-looking edges, so his first thought is *submarine,* but when he circles it further he sees the shape has wings, stiff shapes spread out and almost completely submerged in the water. Some kind of seaplane? Why the hell would they stick that down here?

But the more he looks, the more it pings in his brain that the matte metal thing is not... quite... right. His knowledge of vehicles is encyclopedic but narrow, in the sense that his scope is limited to “can I operate it”, and that information arrives in his brain as *yes* or *no*. This is most definitely a *No.* He can’t even tell if he’s looking at its head or its ass.

He circles some more. It’s got a flat bit and a wide bit, set up in a sort of triangular configuration that makes it look like a menacing wedge of cheese. With wings. Pretty stubby ones, but still. There’s something...

He takes a tentative step into the bay-water, squinting in the gloom: the wings are straight sharp angles, but the way they’re attached is - familiar. They’re segmented, plated. Like a joint that’s meant to move.

Slowly, as if dragged, Barnes-thing’s gaze goes to his own arm.

In defiance of the damp and slime and gallons of sweat soaking his scalp, the hairs on the back of his neck begin to rise.

He backs away. He backs away until he hits a wall, some more slime squelching unpleasantly as his shoulderblades try to dig their way into the rock. He doesn’t know why he’s so - so - the arm is *his,* it’s never hurt him, it only served HYDRA by proxy, and he’s got no proof this - thing, this ship, is even related.

That segmented plating is really very distinctive.

He’s going to touch it. He *knows* he’s going to touch it. It’s a pull on a level deeper than conscious thought, like a toddler reaching for a razor blade because it knows it’s shiny and it doesn’t give a good goddamn about anything else. There are all sorts of good tactical reasons to go over there, perform a threat assessment, but he knows that’s not why he’s going to do it.

That’s disturbing. Barnes-thing bares his teeth and wishes for fucking once he’d run into something that *isn’t.*

He edges into the water, moving as cautiously as he can when he’s knee deep in dirty surf. The beached thing is taller than he is by a good three feet, looming over him as he creeps closer.

His metal arm can’t tremble, but sometimes it does run little calibration loops up and down from palm to elbow. It’s doing that now, the plates shivering as he carefully touches his fingertips to the hull.

Nothing happens. He waits for a minute, nervy, but when nothing continues to happen he presses his palm flat. Nothing. It just feels like metal. His arm’s not humming, either: whatever this thing
is, it’s dead in the water.

Might as well have a look around.

He sloshes through the water to the fat end of the thing, one hand still pressed to the hull, and when he rounds the corner he sees it’s got a sliding entrance hatch and it’s already gaping open. The entrance is half submerged, flooded, the weak waves of the underground bay pushing the water inside back and forth. The only noise coming from inside is the dull shush of the water.

Well, he didn’t come all this way not to go inside. He steels himself, draws one of his remaining knives and ducks in.

It’s… anticlimactic. It’s not as dark inside as he first thought; what’s a featureless matte plane on the outside is a sizeable windshield on the inside, and the bioluminescence filters through just fine. It reveals a little cabin, sort of rectangular, about twelve feet long, with waist-high consoles by the windshield, at the nose of the ship. It would look almost exactly like a rather large pilot cabin except for the fact that there’s no kind of seat.

HYDRA probably tore it out for something. Probably meant to gut the rest of it, too, tear it up to figure it out just like his arm, and just got interrupted by the worldwide conspiracy exposé. That makes him feel a lot better, actually. This thing’s just a clunker that took a detour on its journey through the chop shop.

Barnes-thing edges in further, leaning in a little to try and make out any kind of identifying markings on the walls. He’s starting to think the day is looking up. He’s more and more certain that whatever government or company or group made this thing also made his arm, and there’s got to be some kind of manufacturer’s mark somewhere. A fucking patent registration number. Something. He’ll find it. And then he, armed with the power of Google, is going to find the quote-unquote miracle workers who made his arm and ask them some very pointed questions.

The angle of the cavern bay and the cheese wedge means the floor is at a bit of an incline, and the water, not that deep to begin with, peters out a few feet in. Still, the motion of the waves and tides means there’s just a few inches above the waterline that are unexpectedly slippery. It’s enough to make the ex-Winter Soldier slip, trip and catch himself with his metal palm on one of the consoles.

That’s when his arm lights up.

-o-

“So,” Sam says. They’re sitting side by side in a train station in Rostov-on-Don, staring at the tracks, a backpack each between their feet. Steve’s shield is in a massive straw shoulder bag, along with their body armor; there’s a couple handguns in there, too, but that’s all the gear they’ve got with them. Natasha had forcibly taken the rest. “Vacation. What should we do?”

“Don’t know,” Steve says.

“You’ve never been on vacation, have you.”

“Not really.” Natasha had driven them to the train station, and she’d given them itinerary suggestions, travel options, but Steve had seen her mind was on to the next thing. She hadn’t elaborated on the calls she wanted to make, and Steve and Sam hadn’t asked. None of them had been feeling very chatty. The lingering atmosphere of bruised failure hadn’t exactly been
Natasha’s right. She’s right. One way or another, HYDRA or no HYDRA, Bucky’s made it clear he doesn’t want to be anywhere near Steve. It’s fine. It’s just like the time Buck got dumped by Deb Rubin and got real quiet and upset and wouldn’t talk to Steve for a week. There’s less moping and writing of overwrought poetry, probably, but it’s the same. Buck’s hurting; he needs time. Steve knew this, he knows this, and when he ignored it look what fucking happened.

And he’s alive and definitely kicking, which has somewhat allayed Steve’s half-formed fear dreams of Bucky starving somewhere, bleeding out, collapsing, unable to take care of himself. Steve didn’t exactly get in a thorough examination, but between catching sight of Buck in that cave and getting kicked down the stairs he at least got the impression that Buck put on some weight. Steve doesn’t give a good goddamn if Buck’s still following HYDRA orders or not so long as he’s alive and healthy. Everything else can be sorted later.

So. Bucky’s fine. Bucky needs time. It’s the mother fucking least Steve can give him.

“Natasha said Croatia,” Sam hazards. Steve tunes back in, sort of. Their train is going to Sochi, where they’ll take the ferry across to Turkey. Steve only knows this because of the words printed on their tickets, because every single goddamn place they’ve been started to blur together around week two. “You wanna do Croatia?”

“Sure.” He doesn’t care where they go. The sense of detached unreality that coated him after his wakeup in 2011 is back in full force, making him feel like a tetherless lead balloon. Sam’s voice sounds a little like it’s coming from another room somewhere. Natasha was right. He’s not sorry but she’s right. No, he is sorry, he’ll apologize to her and Sam too, God, Sam, but not the rest. Not the rest. He’s not sorry. He left his ability to be sorry about HYDRA somewhere in the last fucking century.

Maybe this is what happens every time he doesn’t die when he should have. Maybe the thing in him that generates mercy loses another piece every time he gets pulled out of the water, pulled out of the ice, and he can’t even care it’s gone. Maybe the thing that cares about that got iced too.

“Steve,” Sam says.

“Hm?”

“You wanna go to Croatia?”

“Mm.”

“Steve,” Sam says, and this time there’s a thread of strain in his voice, cracks coming through. “Listen, I. I can’t carry you myself, Steve. If we - together, we can do this, but you gotta pull your weight. You gotta stand up. I’m sorry, man, but I can’t do this for both of us. I can’t do this alone. You gotta stand up.”

“Sam,” Steve says, turning, and sees in horror that Sam’s eyes are wet and reddening. “Oh, god,” Steve says, reaching for him, automatic, and Sam goes, both of them turning their heads in and bracing on each other’s shoulders. “I’m sorry, oh, lord. Sam, I’m sorry.”

“We can do this, man,” Sam says thickly. “You and me.”

“Yes,” Steve says, pulling back a little so he won’t get snot on Sam’s shirt. “Okay, Croatia, let’s - alright. Vacation. What do we want to do?”

“Look,” Sam says, wiping his eyes, “I’ll be honest with you, man, I ain’t got the energy to do
more than like, click on American Tourist Package Number 3 on fuckin’… Expedia or whatever. We’re gonna be lazy, alright? That’s what vacation’s all about. Let’s leave this shit to some asshole who’s actually paid to do it.”

“That sounds good,” Steve says, a little wetly. He hunts around for his handkerchief and blows his nose. “Maybe we’ll graduate to touring a Top Ten Buzzfeed article or something.”

Sam gives a sharp bark of laughter. “The site you’re looking for is TripAdvisor,” he says, swiping his hand across his face one more time. “But that was close, man. Close.”

-o-

His arm lights up. There’s no other word for it. His brain processes the sensation as light even though there is none, no change but the feeling, nothing but his arm telling him awake and ready and on - and then there is light. It’s not from his arm.

The ship wakes up.

Barnes jerks so hard he drops his knife, as the whole craft moans to life around him like some kind of mechanical sea kraken. Lights flare, then die down to a dim grey glow; he can see instruments and panels and readouts, symbols scrolling fast across the screens. Somehow the concept of removing his hand from the console is unthinkable. The floor tilts under his boots, leveling, the seawater waterfalling loudly back out of the hatch, and Barnes-thing crouches, frozen, as the hum of engines fills the air.

He really should be running. He should yank his hand back and get out and not stop until he sees daylight, even if that means getting caught by Rogers. Any second now the trap will slam shut and he’ll be carted off to another couple of rounds in hell, but it’s so - so - bright, in his head. There is shock and awe but no fear, no pain in the message: his arm is telling him: awake. His arm is telling him: on. He has a rapidly growing suspicion that what that translates to is hello.

Well, actually, more like: hello!!!!!!

He very gingerly peels his hand off the console. The… information from his arm dies back, but the ship stays live and humming around him. The hatch is still open, to his relief, and the ship itself hasn’t moved much; they’re still wallowing in the shallows of the underground bay, the water lapping at the very lip of the hatch.

He’s not going to touch anything in case it tries to… talk to him, but the more he looks around the more the hunch in the back of his mind grows and stretches and unfurls.

He can read over a dozen languages, but he doesn’t recognize any of the symbols scrolling across the screens. Everything is lit in a dull unnatural sort of grey, and the panels and screens of the instruments look more flexible than glass or plastic would allow. There’s no chair in front of the console, not even anything that looks like it had a chair attached, and the ceilings are just a little too high, which, in a jet, is not something the engineers go for. At least. Not human engineers.

When Barnes-thing googled the Avengers, almost all the official accounts derailed, sooner or later, into the fact that A) aliens exist and B) will apparently attack us. Asgardians. The Chitauri. The Battle of Manhattan. He would have spent a lot more time on that, except he’d been doing this googling in between stalking Handlers 1 and 2, setting up ways to kill Handlers 1 and 2, and trying to extract useful intel from his memories of Handlers 1 and 2 without bringing an avalanche
of flashbacks down on his head. That was a chore and a half. Handlers didn’t get to be handlers by hugging the Asset and treating him to milk and cookies.

So he was a little distracted, understandably, from the fact of aliens.

Well, actually, more like: aliens!!!!!!

Barnes sits down on the floor, a little abruptly. He’s not going to find any kind of manufacturing number. This morning he had no idea he was going to fake his way through slaughtering a HYDRA assault team, run into Black Widow and then play hell-tag with Captain America, a game which he just barely won. And now he’s inside a UFO. The certainty is like a rock inside him. He’s inside a UFO. He’s inside a UFO, and he’s like ninety percent sure he can drive it. Because he’s got an alien arm.

He spends a couple minutes with both hands - alien and homegrown - pressed to his mask. He can’t tell if he’s giggling or just panic-gasping again. A UFO. And his arm. A UFO!

Hell yeah, he’d send fifty guys with guns out for this. In fact, fifty is pretty goddamn low. Maybe that’s all they could spare, with their current global clusterfuck still in full swing. And no wonder it was down here: the staffed bases had a high likelihood of being compromised and overrun despite their better security. Better to hide it down here, in a long-abandoned cave where nobody would look...

He wonders what kind of weapons it’s got.

Well. If he fingers it a little it’ll probably tell him.

Very, very carefully, he reaches up to put his palm on the console again.

!!!! it says.

Barnes-thing licks his lips. “Hi,” he rasps.

!!!!

It’s… possible he may have not thought this through. ‘Receiving transmission’ is not the same as actually understanding it, and for some inexplicable reason HYDRA completely failed to include Alien in his language packet. He seriously doubts this thing understands English.

“What Weapons,” he tries anyway. “Guns?” Still nothing, just the same pulse of !!!!!. It’s like being greeted by the thought-equivalent of a caffeine molecule. “Bombs? Explosives?”

No dice. Barnes peers around the cabin. Weapons and navigation systems are usually distinct and separate entities; maybe he’s just got his hand on the wrong console or something. And maybe he shouldn’t be going straight for the guns, Christ. If this thing is communicating directly with his brain via his arm he doesn’t want to accidentally bring this cave down on himself by thinking boom at the wrong moment.

He frowns at the bank of instruments. “Any chance you got a user manual?”

-0-
“Well,” Sam says, surveying the terrain with his hands on his hips. “When I signed us up for the tour group, this is both nothing like I expected and exactly what I had pictured in my head.”

“Speak for yourself,” Steve says, from where he’s surrounded by a cloud of visored, fanny-packed, violently permed halmeonis in Adidas tracksuits and Reebok sneakers. The entire group is bristling with selfie sticks and they’ve been taking photos with Steve for the past twenty minutes. They haven’t left the tour bus parking lot. The tour guide has given up trying to chivvy them along and is now very clearly playing Temple Run on his phone.

It turns out when you book a guided trip last minute, you get shuffled into whatever section still has bus seats available. This means that their little group now consists of Sam, Steve, Petar the tour guide and approximately thirty Korean grandmothers.

Steve, who was instantly mobbed, fed, and probably legally adopted by every single one, is a bewildered but happy camper. Sam is mostly resigned to being called Will Smith for the duration of the tour.

“You know they all think you’re Channing Tatum, right?” he tells Steve.

“How?”

“The Magic Mike guy. Although I’m pretty sure the one who keeps playing you Titanic songs on her phone thinks you’re Leonardo DiCaprio.”

“I don’t know who any of those people are,” Steve says, a little muffled through the wrinkled hand turning his head for the best selfie angle.

Sam sighs. “We’re watching Magic Mike at the hotel tonight. Now come here, it’s my turn for selfies. My momma’s set me a quota.”

They roll out eventually, except the halmeonis continue to show absolutely zero interest in anything that isn’t Steve’s baby blues, ill-fitting dad clothes and general overwhelming whiteness. They snap a lot of photos, but all of them seem to have the prerequisite of having Steve in them. It’s also a little disturbing how okay Steve seems to be with getting groped by women who are - okay, technically they are in his age bracket, but not biologically. Mentally. Whatever.

On the other hand: nobody has gone a full minute without eating something since the moment the halmeonis descended on Steve and started whipping Tupperware out of their massive designer handbags.

“I don’t know what this is but I don’t think I can eat anything else ever again,” Steve says through a full mouth, briefly surfacing from a container of champong. There’s a famous building or something across the courtyard behind them; Petar the tour guide is trying valiantly to soldier on through his speech while the halmeonis chatter amongst themselves and nod approvingly at Steve’s atrocious dining manners. “Where are they getting this? It’s not like we’ve stopped to cook. Or buy groceries.”

“Don’t ever question a grandmother about her dark powers,” Sam says. “I asked my Nana once how she made her hair do that curl thing and the answer she gave me took ten years off my life. Just don’t go there.”

Steve nods acceptingly, chewing a piece of spicy squid. He squints thoughtfully across the square. “So… how does she -”

“I said don’t ask.”
The days start passing in a warm multicolored blur. Steve becomes an expert at using a selfie stick; Sam accumulates an alarming amount of souvenirs for his family and even manages to mail most of them during their frequent group stops for snacks, selfies and bathroom breaks. Petar, in a fit of wisdom, gives up on explaining the wonders of Zagreb and dedicates himself entirely to upping his score in Temple Run.

Sam now turns around automatically when somebody says Will Smith, which is a habit to be broken as soon as possible. Steve, on the other hand, has embraced his new identity as Channing Tatum with suspicious grace.

“I’ve seen them grabbing your ass, Steve,” Sam says. “I think we can safely assume all these grandmas here have seen Magic Mike.”

Steve shrugs. “They’re feeding me?”

“You’re selling your body for some jjapchae and a couple of bowls of soup.”

“Have you tried this soup?”

Sam just raises his eyebrows over his sunglasses. Steve shrugs. “They don’t ask me to sign anything. Or do anything, really. I don’t even have to smile in the photographs.”

Not that they don’t demand other things. “Tatum-ssi,” Grandma Hiyong says, appearing over Steve’s shoulder on their bus. “Why your nose so ugly?”

“I’m sorry?”

"Nose is so ugly now, not like in movie anymore. You get nose done wrong?"

“Uh… I’ve broken it… a couple times…”

Grandma Hiyong gropes his bicep consolingly. “Still okay. Come to Korea, much better surgery. We can fix your nose for cheap.”

"Hiyongah!" Grandma Yebin snaps from across the aisle. "So rude!"

"Thanks," Steve says dryly.

"Besides! His eyebrows is more ugly. Like . Fix eyebrows first!"

Sam only stops laughing long enough to lament the fact that he didn’t think to record this shit. Petar swears as his temple runner falls off the cliff.

So yeah, on the whole, not the worst trip Sam’s ever been on. (This little vacation, anyway. Taken as a whole, their international Hydra hunt ranks just below his Afghanistan deployment on the scale of Worst Trip Ever - but only just.) He’s even seen Steve smile a couple times, at photos of grandchildren and bowls of champpong.

Then again, just because Steve’s grinned a little doesn’t mean he’s not still Steve.

Sam glares across the room at the set of doors Steve just disappeared through: they’re eating lunch at a very nice medieval-style restaurant, where everything is stained glass and oak furniture and those weird x-beam situations across the walls that tell you This Architecture Is From Europe and plenty Ye Olde to boot. It’s very nice and the service is very prompt and the food is very good, which means Sam’s a little extra pissed at how Steve’s creeping out to call Natasha for status reports like he’s out ringing his sidechick and thinks Sam just won’t catch on.
Steve creeps back through the parlor doors all sneak like, like Sam isn’t gonna notice the only other guy in the entire restaurant under sixty had been gone for the exact amount of time needed for Natasha to yell at him some more.

“Vay-cay-shun,” Sam enunciates before Steve even gets to the table, because nothing short of blatant assholery gets through Steve’s skull. “That means we let go of shit for like twenty fucking seconds. That means we relax.”

“I know,” Steve says unhappily, not even pretending not to know what Sam’s talking about. “I just -”

“Look, Rogers, if you’re stepping out on me for your phone I’m gonna white mom it and take it away from you, so you gotta pull it in, alright? Pull some of that focus in on this trip that we are on together,” Sam says meaningfully. “If I gotta cry again so you pay attention to me, I will, don’t think I won’t aim that low.”

“Oh god okay,” Steve says, looking hunted.

“Frankly, my dude, I don’t think you are appreciating this enough,” Sam adds, twisting the knife in a move copied directly from The Wilson Matriarch Family Book Of Ways To Rule The World.

“I am! I do!” Steve says, then, adding guiltily, “I will!”

“Okay,” Sam says peaceably, and then settles back in his chair with his menu propped up against the table. “Hey, I know this is Eastern Europe, but do you think they’ll do mac and cheese here?”

“I dunno,” Steve says cautiously, clearly expecting another stab to the soul. “Last time I was here I wasn’t here for the food.”

“Great! We’ll share this exciting new experience together.”

Eventually - a day later, to be exact - the tour does end, and they have to part with their loving entourage, but Grandma Hiyong and the others leave their mark: Sam and Steve get strongarmed into downloading some messenger app and are now part of a group chat that is 90% photos of grandchildren and 10% Korean memes. Sam assumes they’re memes, anyway. He’s still reeling from Steve’s mumbling, guilty-faced admission of an Instagram.

He’s been paging through said Instagram for the past thirty minutes of their latest bus ride. It’s a weirdly endearing cross between inept, oblivious and unbearably hipster, as social media accounts go; his feed is entirely photos of sunsets, food and street art, and he’s got a whopping three photos of his own: a potted plant, some trees in a park, and a sunset featuring the Brooklyn Bridge. He’s got 8 followers, and when Sam checks he sees all of them are random autofollow promo accounts. Sam cackles under his breath, scrolling through. Adorable.

“I just wanted to see what the fuss was about,” Steve grumbles, trying to cram his baseball cap further down around his ears in mortal embarrassment. “Everybody was on me to get a tweeter or whatever and this just… seemed like the best option…”

“No, man, I love it,” Sam says, changing Steve’s username from sgr1918 to OG_BROOKLYN and navigating around ‘til he can hit the follow button on FALCONSA. “Keep it up. I love the sunset, it’s nice.”

“Thanks,” Steve mutters as he takes his phone back, but he’s looking all shy and his ears are going pink.
The ship does not produce a user manual. Placing his hand on other likely-looking panels just gets
him the same !!! all over again, and poking everything else just does a whole lot of fuckall. There
are different displays and readouts but nothing he touches does anything and there aren’t any
handy buttons to push or dials to twist, which is probably for the best; if he touches anything else
it’ll probably make the wings fall off and then launch what’s left into the moon.

Speaking of. He carefully leans over the bank of instruments, trying to get a better look out the
windshield; the consoles are also wider than is comfortable for a regular sized person, and Barnes-
thing is on the bigger end, as humans go. He has to brace himself on his metal arm to get a proper
look out the windshield - !!! again - and tries to get a good view of the wings.

It doesn’t look like they’ve done anything; the exterior of the ship and the cave looks unchanged.
His puts his other hand down to lean forward further, and the second it touches the console it -
-feels like an arc of light snaps through his entire body. He gasps, twitching, as something like
circuit completed washes through his brain: it’s bright with the suggestion of motion, action, and
suddenly there’s a lot more coming his way than just !!! -

He staggers back. He’s panting again. It didn’t feel like electricity at all, really, but something
there was just too - close. It’s really occurring to him that this thing is connecting to his brain, and
just because it feels like mind-melding with a heavily medicated puppy doesn’t mean it’s actually
harmless.

He looks down: his human palm had landed mostly on one of the other console-squares,
prompting the - circuit connection. Ignition key. Whatever. Well. Good to know that apparently all
it takes to drive this thing is using both hands. Great. Fantastic.

He wavers in the little cabin room, watching the consoles unhappily. His options are A) he can
leave this thing down here for HYDRA to come back to, and salvage, and extract god knows
what kind of hell-technology from, or B) he can put his hands back on the console. It does not
escape his notice that Option A involves either swimming out through god knows how much of
the ocean and/or a lot of lurking around down here, in the dark, with no food or light or romance
novels. He’d have to make sure America & Co. is gone, too. Option B is looking more attractive
by the minute.

Worst comes to worst, the UFO will just fuck up his head. Some more. What’s the worst that can
happen?

This time, he braces and breathes through the wild shiver of light-feeling that surges up out of the
console. This is not like getting electrocuted, he tells his nervous system sternly. This is nothing
like it. Stop fucking whining.

Then he looks up, out the windshield, and slams both eyes shut because the resulting flood of
information is like getting a halfbrick straight to the kisser. It’s coming through his hands, he can
feel it coming up through his hands, but it’s arriving in his brain and using his eyes and Jesus
Christ he’s getting the parietal lobe version of sunspots.

The scariest part is he understands it. He can tell the ship is showing - trying to show him -
alitude and geospatial positioning and thermal imaging and atmospheric pressure and jesus christ,
is that - rock density? It is. It’s showing him the material density and mineral composition of the
cavern wall. Jesus. He just - knows that’s what he’s looking at. He knows.

It’s in his head. He can tell there’s some information that isn’t getting processed at all, probably because this ship wasn’t designed to interface with a squishy human cereberum. Some data is using his visual cortex - he eases one watering eye open and gets the thermal map of the cavern - but other information is getting slotted in any old how, as tingles and sensations and spatial knowledge in his brain. There’s no numbers, nothing he could actually translate into anything useful, just an - understanding. Like: his location. He’s Here. Where’s Here? It’s a place that’s between There and There and There. Here. There’s no map, no coordinates. He just knows where he is.

He can already tell this is going to be a barrel of laughs. Looking away from the windshield gets rid of all the visual data, but all the… feelings data remains, and in fact starts expanding, like it’s eating up the bandwidth the visuals were using. His awareness of their position blooms outward, the cavern sketching itself around him like a three-dimensional map, an image in his mind drawn in sonar. Radar? Ugh.

But now he can feel they’re technically above sea level, and the amount of rock between him and open air is surprisingly - not much. Most of the cavern renders itself in his head as an echoey maze above and behind him, and in front of him is a couple meters of limestone that will reveal a narrow exit tunnel in low tide. He stares at the sea-facing wall-image in his mind and thinks longingly of getting the fuck out of here.

An invisible shudder runs through the cabin. His ears pop, and he only has time to register that the entrance hatch just fucking sealed itself before everything goes FUBAR.

The UFO punches through the sea-facing wall like a bullet through butter. For a second Barnes doesn’t even know what happened, because there was no corresponding acceleratory G-force inside the cockpit, no sense of movement, just a moment of full darkness and then a sudden view of open sea and midnight sky. It takes him a couple seconds to realize that the pop! he just heard was the breaking of the sound barrier, and that everything is blurring like that because he’s going very, very, very fast.

The next thirty seconds are mostly swearing. The concept of “speed” doesn’t seem to be something the aliens were overly concerned with, or at least the way his brain’s processing it isn’t getting through to the ship. It definitely understands he thinks something’s wrong, because it activates visual cloaking, erases its thermal signature and throws up a full complement of energy shields. He’s not unhappy about any of that, but he’d be a lot happier if all of it would happen when he isn’t approaching Mach 2 with no signs of deceleration, oh fuck oh shit the smudge on the horizon is rapidly, rapidly getting bigger, fuckfuckfuck that’s land -

Barnes-thing figures out steering just in time to yank the ship’s nose upward, sending them rocketing up into the night sky. They don’t seem to be slowing down, insofar as he can tell now that there’s nothing in the windshield but stars, and there’s still no G-forces at play inside the cabin. He’s still standing upright even though the ship is pointed perpendicular to the horizon, and by all rights he should be plastered against the back wall with his skin rippling off his face.

There’s a momentary grey blur, and Barnes-thing realizes they’ve just punched through a cloud layer. He’s got to figure this out fast. He’s pretty sure that was Europe he just avoided smashing into, and while there’s definitely less things to crash into up here he’s not wild about getting a love tap from a commercial airliner.

Stop, he thinks at the ship, at the control panels, at the vibrating, eager engine cores. He squeezes his eyes shut. He doesn’t dare take his hands off the console. Stop. We have to stop. I don’t even know if this thing can handle entering the stratosphere and if we don’t stop NOW we’re going to
There’s a moment of perfect, utter stillness. The engines whine down; the !!!! fades into a faint little !. The artificial gravity remains in effect, but now Barnes can feel it when the ship, in absence of upward acceleration, starts a slow, lazy tumble in the air.

The view in the windshield changes. Black sky turns into blue light, blue and green and brown, speckled with swirls and patches of white. Continents, oceans. Clouds.

It fills his vision. The planet curves, distant, at the very edges. His hands slide off the console; his mouth is open under his mask. He’s high up enough to see the curvature of Earth. He’s high enough to see the weather on three different continents. He can see Africa. All of it, not just one little bit of country, he can see the whole fucking thing.

But only for a second, before the windshield slides to black sky again. Then Earth, then sky, then Earth again, faster and faster, and Barnes-thing realizes he’s getting this once-in-a-lifetime flipbook show because his UFO is spinning end over end in free fall, a zillion miles above the ground.

“Mother fucker,” he swears, and slams his hands back on the console.

-o-

“The number you have reached is no longer in service,” Natasha’s voice says, “Especially for giant blond morons who don’t understand what vacation means and probably can’t even spell it - ”

“Hi Nat,” Steve says. “How are you doing?”

“Great,” Natasha says. “You can tell, because I actually picked up the phone instead of chucking it into the nearest sewer.”

“Great. That’s great. We’re great too.”

“What do you want, Rogers.”

Steve squeezes one eye shut preemptively. “Any news?”

“Rogers.”

“What! I just - ”

“What do I have to do to get you to stop calling?” Natasha demands. “Do I have to disconnect my phone line? Take down the entire mobile telecommunications network in Eastern Europe? It’s been awhile since I’ve done that, but for you I’ll make an exception - ”

“I just - ”

“Steve,” Natasha says. “I’ll call you when I have news. Until then, lay off. Smell the roses. Eat a syrnik. Don’t call me again.”

Steve frowns at the dial tone and sighs. He stares out at the city for a bit, then pockets his phone, climbs down the wall off the roof, wriggles back into the bathroom window and passes through
the latest restaurant to the patio, where Sam is nursing a Coke. Steve settles back in his chair.
“You wanna go get hammered tonight?”

“That was a long-ass time you took in the bathroom,” Sam says, squinting at him through his sunglasses. “Thought you couldn’t get drunk?”

“I have faith in our combined ingenuity.”

“Do I have to read you my substance abuse pamphlet? Wait, who am I talking to, you are literally the guy who did steroids before they were cool.”

“Look, either I put a curly straw in a bathtub full of gin tonight or I go find a bar fight,” Steve says. “Which one are you up for?”

“Oh my god, white man,” Sam says. He takes a closer look at Steve, pushing his sunglasses up on his forehead; whatever he sees makes him sigh and sit back. “We’ll get you your bathtub. Jesus. But only ‘cause my momma made me promise not to get arrested in a foreign country, y’unnerstand?”

“And you make fun of my accent,” Steve mutters.

“Hey! This here is Virginia Southern. It’s sexy. You just sound like a two-dollar Cagney impersonator.”

“Do you even know who Cagney is? Also, what’s sexy about pronouncing it ‘Bill of Rats’?”

“I’ve heard you pronounce ‘also’ with four syllables, Steve. There’s no cure for that. Don’t think I don’t know what’s hiding under your fancy newscaster language-words.” Sam downs his Coke.


-o-

In the mountains of Peru, a breeze winds through the sun-dappled highland meadows, rustling the grasses in its wake. The clouds are close enough to touch, here, enveloping whole peaks and valleys on their endless drift through the local geography.

It’s lovely. Bees whir; llamas flick their ears as they pick their way over the fields. There’s not a soul around to see how the air above one of the meadows suddenly shudders and shifts, a patch of grass below flattening as if bent by a very high wind.

The patch moves around for a bit, the grasses straightening a little then going flat again, as if whatever thing causing it is uncertain, or maybe a little drunk. This goes on for a little while.

There’s a thump as something very heavy and very invisible drops heavily to the ground, flattening a vaguely triangular patch of meadow some ten yards across. A few seconds later a dark thing shaped like a high-tech wedge of cheese shimmers into view.

Birds sing. The breeze rustles. The rear of the cheese-wedge hisses open, a ramp touching down. The llamas watch, chewing, as a wobbly-legged figure in Kevlar staggers out, stumbling down the ramp and into the grass.

Barnes-thing stares around with eyes that can’t seem to unwiden. He feels like his hair should be
standing on end. He sits; or, at least, his body folds in a way that ends with his ass in contact with the ground. After a few seconds he finishes the collapse. Dirt. He loves dirt. Never has a man been happier to have his face pressed against what might be llama droppings.

That had been. Jesus Christ. What the hell. He’s amazed he fucking landed that thing. “Slow” was not something it understood, let alone wanted to do, and regaining control mid-freefall had been like having his brain get jerked to a halt on the end of a bungee tether. He’d thought longingly, desperately of the ground, and when the ship accelerated again, this time down, he’d thought equally desperately of lying very still somewhere and very firmly not moving in any way whatsoever at all.

So it dropped to a perfect stop in midair - here, roughly fifty yards off the ground. Barnes managed his shaky navigation down and across the meadow by imagining the ship parked ten feet ahead, then another ten feet, then lower, then on the ground, like living in the world’s shittiest stop-motion picture. The ship didn’t respond to directions, it responded to his complete mental images of how he wanted the future to be.

Driving like this is a lot fucking harder than it sounds.

Barnes-thing rolls over. He’s not going anywhere for a while. There’s a loop playing behind his eyes of that surreal, helpless moment of freefall, miles above the earth in a ship he could just barely control, and it’s translating into a very insistent desire to have his whole body no more than ten inches away from the ground at all times. He’s going to lie here for a while and experience dirt to the very best of his ability.

His arm is sending its little diagnostic pulses through his body, like a cat that knocked every single glass off the counter and is now trying to get back into its owner’s good graces by purring up a storm. Good fucking luck. He just flew an alien spaceship. Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. He’d been kidding about launching himself into the moon.

If HYDRA knew his arm was space candy, they sure as shit didn’t know it let him fly this motherfucker. If they knew his arm connected to his brain like that they would have found a way to fucking - download some Nazi into his head in his entirety. Nausea turns in his belly as he imagines some rabbity four-eyed fucker getting even more of his body.

He’s got a very specific image of some bastard in his head, no name no context attached besides the usual twitching horror and bone-deep revulsion. Probably one of his more tenacious doctors. Ha. Doctors. Whatever oath they took sure as shit didn’t even get within spitting distance of the Hippocratic one.

There’s the crunch of footsteps beside him. Barnes twists, tensing even though he’s still sitting down and out of knives, but it’s just one of the llamas.

It stares at him. Barnes stares back. The thing looks like a cross between a deer, a sheep and a pile of dirt. It appears to be fifty percent overbite.

After a moment of deep consideration, the llama spits at him.

Slowly, Barnes-thing lies back down. It’s where he was happiest out of this whole goddamn day and he’ll be damned if he’ll be the one to cut it short.

-o-
“Don’t they have any bathtubs bigger than this one?” Steve says.

“Steve, this is a jacuzzi,” Sam says.

“Not a very big jacuzzi,” Steve says.

“It’s big enough for a few stomach pumpings,” Sam says, “and a lawsuit,” and goes to grab the rental car keys from the hotel room coffee table.

Twenty minutes later, they’ve tracked down the grossest, seediest pub in Croatia - “The way you’ll go on getting drunk, we don’t want any bartenders asking questions,” Sam tells Steve - which they can tell they’ve found when they sit down at the sticky understuffed stools and ask the bartender for some of the strongest stuff he’s got.

The bartender looks between both of them them like they’ve both whipped their dicks out and taken a piss right on his bar counter. He pulls out a translucent blue glass bottle with about three-fourths of the liquid still sloshing around inside, almost dark enough to hide the fact that there is something swimming in it.

“No, man,” Sam says immediately, trying to slide the bottle off to Steve. It makes a splurch sound when it sticks to the surface of the bar.

“Yes,” Steve says firmly, a man complicit in his own execution. “A big glass of that, please. Actually, how much for the bottle?”

The bartender says a long sentence in Croatian that Sam assumes boils down to “I am not certain I want to be legally responsible for melting your liver, American Tourist.” Steve nods and pulls out his wallet, removing a stack of kuna and placing them on the bar.

The bartender’s mustache writhes; the resulting smile has at least three gold teeth in it. “Dobrodošli, gospodine,” he says, which Sam can translate to Hello New Best Friend Let’s Get You Drunk As You Like.

“Great. Keep it coming,” Steve says, pulling the bottle over and uncorking it with one hand.

Sam sighs. “If we get arrested I’m taking away all your credit cards.”

They do not get arrested. It doesn’t really seem like that kind of drinking night; Sam suspects Steve only called barfight because his responses to any emotion are either “repress everything” or “punch something” and he seems to have topped out his reservoirs for repression. This is mildly terrifying, so Sam resolves to stay sober. Kinda sober. Soberer than Steve, anyway, which is what counts.

Steve’s chugging alcohol by the liter now, and they’re sitting at the bar corner closest to the bathroom because his super magic princess metabolism means he keeps having to pee. Each time he comes back he describes a new piece of horrifying toilet graffiti. Sam started to suspect Steve was making them up after the third one, but he refuses to go and see for himself after the description of “two guys doing this to a... sort of an alligator, I think, except I’m pretty sure alligators don’t have genitals like that.”

“I ain’t looking at no bestiality, white man, no matter how poorly drawn,” he tells Steve. “Absolutely not. I’ll piss in the damn street.”
“I don’t know if the poorly drawn part makes it better or worse,” Steve says, from where he’s studiously pouring himself another shot. The bartender keeps giving them increasingly concerned looks, probably because Steve is still upright and talking and not at all catatonic despite being on his second bottle of Mystery Sauce.

Sam is drinking vodka, because vodka is vodka in every language and he is still too sober to even look too hard at Steve’s bottle. He knows the thing floating in it is a different thing from the first bottle and as knowledge goes that is already way, way too much.

“Worse,” Sam decides, after a little too long. “Definitely… worse.”

“I don’t know. Seems like it’d be more disturbing if they put more effort into it.” Steve downs another shot, shudders, and immediately starts refilling his glass. “What do they make this stuff out of? It’s actually working.”

Sam pulls a face at the bottle. “How are you drinking that. It smells like bleach. It smells like drain cleaner.”

“It’s not that bad. Just like having ulcers again, honestly.” Steve leans down a little to make sure the liquid pouring into his glass doesn’t spill over the lip. “Maybe if I drink enough of it I can forget everything that ever happened between 1932 and 2014.”

“Oh god.” Sam gulps the last of his vodka and beckons for a refill. “Alright. You’re right. My mistake was entering this bar with some self-preservation still intact but I’m good now, I’m ready, I’m on the same page. Drinking. Drunk. Drinking games. Let’s do it. Let’s go.”

“Drinking games?” Steve says.

“Oh boy. Do I have something to show you. Perfect.” Sam slings one arm around Steve’s neck and snags the Sauce with the other. “This is gonna be fantastic. This is gonna be great. This is what I went to college for.”

-o-

“Tell me,” Steve slurs, “about Riley.”

Sam looks blearily at him. Steve is pretty drunk; their drinking games pretty rapidly turned into a scientific method-esque exploration of how best to get him blitzed, and it turns out he slips into solidly wasted territory after chugging four or five shots of Blue Glass Mystery Sauce. He can even stay there for nearly twenty minutes if he keeps taking little sips every minute or so; he’ll bob up into sobriety, visibly realize it and chug some more, restarting the cycle.

Right now he’s on the downswing, which means he’s having trouble focusing both eyes in the same direction and lost all sense of tact a few miles back. That’s fine, because fellow drinker Sam is feeling pretty floaty too and ranting about Riley seems like an amazingly great idea that he should do right now.

“Riley,” he says. “Fuck that asshole. I love’im. Huge dick. Total idiot. Abs you could grate cheese on.” He waves his arms, trying to convey the magnitude of... dude that Riley was. “Personality like a Mack truck. Only guy who kept up with me in the watercon training sessions. Didn’t beat my record!” Sam’s waving finger nearly takes Steve’s eye out; “Shit, sorry man, but he didn’t beat my record! Couldn’t beat me.” Sam feels his face stretch in his dumb sloppy Riley-
grin, even if now it’s half the size it used to be. “Kept up, though. Kept up with me. Sucked dick like a champ.”

Sam feels a little of the fervor deflate out of him, letting the melancholy seep in. “I miss him,” he tells the table. “I miss sex.”

“Tell me about it,” Steve mumbles, in the tones of a man who knows exactly what foxhole you’re coming from because he’s been there himself and in fact has built a summer home there with a back porch, garden patch and two garages. “It’s been decades.”

“Man,” Sam agrees feelingly. “I just, I don’t wanna fuck just anybody, you know? It’s not like wham bam thank you man, I can’t do it like some dudes, there’s gotta be some feelings, there’s gotta be a connection.”

“I know,” Steve says mournfully. “Do you know what Grindr is? I wish I didn’t know what Grindr is.”

Sam cracks up, then tries to focus, because he’s sensing they’re having a Moment here. “Shit, is this the first time we came out to each other? Like, came out-came out. Checkin’ each other out on the National Mall don’t count, no matter how unsubtle some of us were about it.”

Steve does that thing where he closes one eye in some kind of weird face maneuver that he deploys when he’s too stubborn to be embarrassed. “That obvious?”

Sam grins muzzily at Steve’s big pink face. “Baby, day we met you hit me up with the most obvious come-on I’ve got since Kelsey Peters proposed to me in third grade.”

“I did not!” Steve says even as he blushes stop-sign red.

“Don’t even try it with me,” Sam says. “M’drunk but I’m not that drunk.”


“Did you just call my ass art?”

“Not just your ass,” Steve says, then immediately looks like he regrets opening his mouth, or ever learning to speak human language words at all.

“Captain America thinks I’m art,” Sam says happily. “I’m putting that shit on my resumé. Besides, I totally knew. Totally. You’n’Bucky, you a love story. Star-crossed lovin’. Like Romeo and Juliet if they joined the Army and killed Nazis and got fuckin’ jacked as fuck.”

“Oh my god,” Steve moans. “Go back to talking about Riley’s dick.”

“Only if you tell me about Bucky’s dick,” Sam says, feeling strongly that tit for tat should be in play here. “We’ve definitely reached that level of overshare in our relationship, right?”

“Fuck if I know,” Steve says. “Give me that vodka, let’s talk about cock.”

-0-

“He used’ta sing, he used’ta sing a lot. He’d sing all’a these songs, the real popular ones,
He used’ta sing, he used’ta sing a lot. He’d sing all’a these songs, the real popular ones, showtunes, radio songs, and he’d sing'em when he was, uh, all over me, all in my ear, all low. Hands all over me. And next day I’d hear the song on the radio or the street or at work, anywhere, and have to fix my fuckin’ pants in a hurry. Whattan asshole.” Steve rubs his cheek against the slick wet glass of the bottle. “An asshole. I can never listen to those songs again.”

“Riley gave massages,” Sam mumbles. “Big long massages. Ha! All over. And he’d go down on popsicles, just fuckin’ fellate ‘em. Taught himself to deepthroat fuckin’ popsicles! And corndogs. And bananas. Anything that even looked like a dick on a stick. Did Fourth of July with his family once an’ I can’t eat corn on the cob or look his momma in the eye ever again.”

“I wish I could meet ’im,” Steve says. “He sounds like a swell guy. Real good guy.”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees. “He woulda liked you. Gotten in bar fights with you. Woulda told me we should angle for a threesome and I woulda told him no because even I can only tolerate so much white dude in my bedroom.” Sam takes another swig of vodka. “Also, you’re more married than a nun to Jesus and I know not everybody’s man feels a-okay about a threeway.”

Steve groans a little and covers his face with his hands. “This is - it’s so, it’s so fuckin’ - strange. I mean, it’s not, the twenty-first century didn’t invent threesomes, but back home I got my eyes blacked more’n once just for lookin’ queer, and the, the backbending Buck had to do to get people off his case, and never mind all the shit with the cops, and - and now there’s - movies. Marriage. Neil Patrick Harris.” He laughs, a little wetly. “I hope Buck’s using Google. I hope he - I hope he reads all the articles. He, he always used to - joke about - getting married, he’d make all these jokes, and we’d laugh but. He’d talk about it. We never thought we’d see anything like it in our time.” Steve presses his hands to his eyes. “I hope he sees.”

Sam, struck with a sudden, expansive love for Steve and the airport’s worth of baggage that comes with him, waves a hand and says, “Bucky. I wish I could meet Bucky. Guy who fixes cars instead of rips the steering wheels out of ‘em.”

Steve focuses on him again, and the weight of his attention settles over Sam like an arm around his shoulders. “I’m sorry,” Steve says, his mouth a little wobbly around the edges. “I’m sorry mine came back and yours didn’t.”

“Aw, man,” Sam says, because two and a half sheets to the wind he can still recognize an aw man situation and this tops out that meter by about a thousand. “You can’t do that. You can’t be sorry about something like that.”

“That’s just it. I’m not sorry. I’m happy,” Steve says, with as much venom as two bottles of Mystery Sauce and an ocean of sadness will allow. “I’m happy, I’m overjoyed, I’m thrilled to pieces because he got tortured and forced and - and - turned into - and I don’t care, I’m ready to sing my fuckin’ heart out because he’s alive. What the hell is that, huh? What kinda person can be happy about that?”

“You don’t look very happy to me,” Sam is compelled to point out.

Steve gives a sharp little huff of a laugh. “Better than I was. I was - I was dead, Sam - ”

Steve snaps his mouth shut, wiping at it with his wrist, staring at the table. “He’d smack my head if he heard me talk like this,” he mumbles.

Sam swallows, shaking his head. “When I read the file,” he says. “When I read the file, about what they did to the Soldier, I thought. About Riley. I thought. If this is the cost - if I could wish to have him back - but if this is what happens to him - ” Sam swallows again. “I don’t know. I don’t know that I’d pay. And I thought, what does that make me? And the answer is it doesn’t matter.”
He squeezes the glass in his hand, making his blurry mind focus on the cold, the pressure on his fingers, the slick wet texture. “We don’t make those choices. It’s not up to us.”

“But that’s what hurts,” Steve says lowly. “Don’t it. That there is wrong out there, and there’s nothing we can do. Nothing we can do to set it right.”

“Stop the presses,” Sam says, “another man is mad he isn’t God.” The way he says it makes Steve look up, questioning, and Sam answers. “My momma told me that damn near every day I lived in that house. My sister too. She got it more than I did, actually.” Sam rubs a hand across his face. “Day you meet Sierra Wilson is the day you meet the shortass little shrimp fighter than you are. You know what she always told Mom? Mom would tell her no man can be God, and she’d yell I am no man! Yeah, thought you might appreciate that.” Sam smiles into his hand, tight. “Anyway. Point is. You do what you can, right? Sierra’s a doctor. I’m - doing this. You up and became a superhero.”


“No, man,” Sam says, equally insistent. “You got that - you got that fire, man, you got that whassitcalled, you got righteousness. You got conviction.”

“You got fire,” Steve says, grabbing at Sam’s shoulder so they’re staring right in each other’s eyes. “All I got is super steroids, you, you’re the guy. You do the right thing. You, you can be Captain America.” Steve’s face suddenly crumples, like his eyebrows and his mouth are making a running dash for each other. “No, don’t. Don’t do it, Sam. Don’t take it. Anybody can do it but they shouldn’t, they shouldn’t, it eats you and it doesn’t fuckin’ stop to chew.”

“No, man,” Sam says, grabbing Steve’s shoulder so they can have some symmetry going on, so Steve can feel him holding on to him. “No. You’re right here. You’re still here.”

Steve’s mouth wavers, his eyes big and wide and uncertain. “Am I?”

“Aw, man,” Sam says, because that’s just too sad. “‘Mere. You’re still here. You’re still kickin’. I told you, man, you ain’t gotta do this, you can do anything. Anything you like. You can get out. You can put it down.”

“You make me believe it,” Steve says, muffled, into Sam’s shoulder, and after that what else is there but to order another bottle and do another couple of rounds of crying into each other’s t-shirts.

-o-

It takes him a while to get both eyes open at the same time, and when he does he regrets it. They’re lying on something cold and hard, or rather, Steve is lying on something cold and hard and Sam is lying on him. The air smells pleasantly of sea breeze and salt water. A seagull screams bloody murder somewhere overhead. Steve would try to pick out more details except the sun has become a laser drilling directly into his head.


Sam groans, slides off him and makes a series of noises that could either mean kill me with a
machaete or we need to put out the sun. Steve agrees wholeheartedly and rolls over on the concrete. “Jesus Christ,” he croaks, trying to spit. “What do they… oh, god… What do they put in their alcohol?”

“Death.”

“Sounds about right.” Steve tries to spit again and only produces a sad hacking noise like a backed-up coffee grinder. He eyes the dock and wonders if he can belly-crawl to the edge and maybe stick his whole head underwater. Whether he rehydrates or drowns is honestly not a huge concern of his right now.

“Oh god,” Sam moans beside him, clearly also having succeeded at the advanced both-eyes-open maneuver. “Oh god where are we.”

“Outside,” Steve says.

“Why.”

“I think we wanted to look at the stars.”

“Well I bet we sure got a real good look at them from this... marina parking lot,” Sam rasps. “Why would we. Why the fuck.”

“Well,” says Steve, now examining some of the blurrier memories of Last Night with growing apprehension, “That was about when we got kicked out of the bar. And then we… uh… Did we. Did we really sing the national anthem? At the sunrise. By the water.”

“Yeah,” Sam says, muffled. “I think it granted spontaneous American citizenship to a couple of fish and some boats.”

“That sounds accurate,” Steve says weakly.

“God. Jesus. Christ. Where the fuck is our car?” Sam says, both his hands cupped around his face to let only the bare minimum of sunlight anywhere near his eyeballs.

Steve unplasters himself from the concrete on his second try. “Where the fuck is the bar?”

They find the bar. Eventually. Sam stops to throw up twice and Steve stops to put some food in himself, because his stomach is making the deeply unsettling grinding noise that means it needs fuel now or god help him and his consequences. Sam takes one look at Steve’s pile of unidentifiable Eastern European meat pastry and throws up again.

“Man,” Sam says, wiping his mouth and taking Steve’s offered cup of coffee. “That’s just not right, you didn’t even throw up once.”

“Filled my lifetime vomit quota by the time I was fourteen,” Steve mumbles around a mouthful of meat pastry. They’re retracing their steps, which takes twice as long because Sam, having lost his sunglasses to Last Night, refuses to walk facing the sun. Steve can’t complain; his appetite demands a pit stop at two more bakeries, which means they find the car sometime around noon.

They play rock paper scissors over who has to drive. Steve, compromised by his ongoing process of inserting pastry into mouth, loses two out of three and grudgingly takes the keys.

When he pulls them out of the parking lot the sun’s blazing full force but there’s a breeze in the air, and Sam’s rolled down all the windows to let it push around the heat in the car some. “What do you want to do next?” Steve asks, once they’ve put a significant number of miles between
themselves and the site of their inebriated misery. They’re driving down the coast now and it’s nice, really, the occasional flashes of water through the trees.

“I think we should do something that doesn’t involve drinking,” Sam says, wearing one of Steve’s caps with the brim pulled way down low. “Or grandmas in any way. Of any nationality.”

Steve’s brain sends out a query for appropriate enjoyable pastime and unearths several memories of salt, sand, sweat, surf and fries, with a couple added images of Bucky in shorts and an A-frame that he quashes mercilessly. He got all his crying done last night, thanks. “How about the beach?”

Chapter End Notes

every single one of y'all's comments is a precious gift and i want to rub my face in every. single. one.
“Ah… Señor?”

Barnes-thing snorts awake in a burst of controlled violence, and it’s damn lucky for everybody that he’s all out of weapons and ends up jerking around in the dirt like a beached fish instead of drawing his usual two pistols and pulling the triggers. The two guys looming over him jump back a little, which is better than nothing even if they’re clearly unaware they just nearly gave death a nice firm handshake.

Barnes-thing ends up crouched in the grass, glaring up at them in hostile uncertainty. The two guys are short, brown, weathered, wearing dirty cargo pants, dirty ball caps and those neon round-toed rubber sandals named after alligators or something. One of them has the words JUST DO IT emblazoned across his t-shirt. They’re both looking at him with concern; Barnes-thing notes, with some concern of his own, that one of them is holding a rope, at the end of which is, yes, another llama.

“¿Estás bien, señor?”

Barnes-thing stares at them. He’s not exactly up to speed on current events, but he can recognize that he’s a little out of place. And these two guys, upon coming across a some idiot lying in a field in a weird mask and stinking combat gear, decide their first step is to ask if he’s okay.

Then again, they did bring a llama.

“¿Señor?”

“Sí,” Barnes-thing says automatically, eyeing the llama with deep suspicion. “Sí, estoy bien.” As bien as he can fucking get, anyway.

“Ah….”

And now Barnes follows their gaze up and over his head and behind him, where the UFO is floating a good ten feet above the ground like the world’s strangest balloon. It’s sort of gently sculling from side to side, even, like it’s being moved by the breeze.

“Ah… ¿Eso es tuyo?”

Is it his? Well, sure, pal. Captain Cyborg of the USS Motherfucker right here. “Sí,” Barnes admits after a second, grudgingly, because even if it’s not his it’s damn well not anybody else’s. “Es mía… astronave.”

The two guys sort of look at him dubiously but don’t argue. Barnes-thing struggles to his feet, which makes his head spin and his vision pixelate briefly, and staggers over to the ship. Then he stares up at it for a while, because it’s hovering about two feet out of his reach and in this state his brain considers this an unsolvable problem.

“¿Necesitas... ayuda? Señor?”

“No,” Barnes says. The only thing stupider than jumping up and down trying to - what, grab hold of his own ride? - in front of these guys is asking them to help him do it.

“Mi abuela tiene una escalera de mano,” one of them says, hesitantly. “Voy a -”
“No,” Barnes says again, louder. The llama, clearly having had enough of this, trots a few steps forward and spits at him.

Barnes-thing jerks and jumps backward; one of the guys says something in a language that isn’t Spanish that probably translates to “oh dear”. But the adrenaline surge makes Barnes-thing’s arm ripple in calibration, and lo and behold the USS Motherfucker decides this is its cue to swivel around and descend with a groaning hum and presents the open entry hatch to Barnes at ground level.

It also has the added bonus of making the llama back away as far as its tether will let it, and Barnes-thing braces himself against the ship and gets his heart rate under control. Wiping llama spit off himself makes him realize he’s still soaked in blood, seawater and unmentionable quantities of slime, all of which has now at least partly dried; his hair crunches when he tries to run a hand through it. A cold-water scrub in a public bathroom isn’t going to cut it this time. Jesus Christ. He’s going to need civilization.

He turns to look back at the two guys, and it suddenly hits him that these men are witnesses, and for a second the programming closes over his head like a wave of black water. His flesh hand gets as far as reaching out before he jerks it back, hard, they’re not - witnesses, they’re not acceptable collateral, he’s not the motherfucking - fist of - ghost story -

No no. No no no no no no. Not anymore.

Barnes-thing’s not leaning against the entry hatch anymore so much as he’s holding on to the edges for dear life. He doesn’t want to kill these men, even if they do associate with horrible spitting animals and wear hideous rubber footwear. They’re watching him with worried eyes. They asked if he was okay. He doesn’t want to kill them so strongly it’s an actual sensation in his throat, a prickling kind of pressure, like nausea’s less awful second cousin.

Well. That’s… nice. Great. He should probably get the fuck up out of here while it lasts.

He sort of makes a jerky shoulder movement at the two guys, scrambles into the UFO and lets the hatch seal after him. The ship rises a few feet in the air, hums, and disappears.

A few seconds later it shimmers back into view. The rear hatch opens and Barnes-thing sticks his head out, grimacing. “Where’s the nearest - ah, fuck, uh, donde es la ciudad más cercana.”

They point. “Gracias,” Barnes says. The hatch slams shut.

“Was that an alien or just a gringo?” one of them asks a few moments later, watching the ship wobble around for a solid minute this time before disappearing.

“I don’t know,” the other one says. “But either way I’m pretty sure he was hungover.”

“Maybe still drunk. Definitely not all the way sober.” The guy nods slowly, still staring at the space where the ship disappeared. “Marcos, are we all the way sober?”

“If we are, let’s not stay that way for long,” Marcos says. “If he’s an alien here to enslave humanity starting with the nearest town, we’re the idiots that pointed him right to it.”
Hunting all by herself like this takes her back to her mercenary years, what Clint calls her nihilistic teenager phase and the world’s intelligence agencies collectively refer to as The Worst Twenty-Seven Months Since World War Two Holy Christ. No master but her next paycheck, and a no-master Natasha was something that made Steve’s little forays into apathetic cruelty look like a puppy hugging party at a Quaker preschool.

Back in the day, the thing formerly known as the Black Widow had a reputation as the retrieval specialist you called when whatever you needed retrieved might as well not exist. Her price was exorbitant, but her results were worth it: she could steal relationships, kill ideas, create people out of whole cloth. The mistake people make is thinking that means she spent those years soaked to her eyebrows in blood and intestines, because everybody thinks dirty work is actually dirty. Natasha spent ninety-eight percent of that time smiling and stroking and sucking, because you actually do catch more flies with honey; why stab people when, with the right combination of words, glances, and perfume, you can convince them to stab each other? Why torture people when you can get them to trust you instead?

Natasha has a complicated relationship with the concept of trust. She was raised to view it as a cross between a weakness and a weapon, but when she went out in the big bad world she realized it was worse, it was a drug, it was like heroin. Better than acknowledgment, better than approval: it was the ultimate win. It’s the gold medal skeleton key. When somebody trusts you, you have everything, and Natasha is the girl who wants it all.

But the punchline was: she doesn’t want to do anything with it. She just wants to have it, hoard it, a dragon sitting atop its pile more precious than gold. She wants to grab big handfuls of trust and rub it all over her face and roll in it like some kind of horrible monkey.

It’d been a real wild journey, realizing that. It was the crowbar in the crack between her and her mercenary existence, when she realized the giddy thrill of joy she interpreted as success came only when she knew she had the mark’s entire confidence in the palm of her hand. Not when she used it, or broke it, or when the mission objective was officially achieved - no, only the earning of that trust.

She began to wonder what it was like to get to keep it.

Enter Clinton Francis Barton, the world’s most talented dumpster fire, and on his back all of SHIELD foaming at the mouth, and all of a sudden Natasha’s a real life American citizen (sometimes) and officially on the side of the Good Guys (sometimes). Suddenly she’s an Avenger.

She hasn’t contacted Nick since INSIGHT. The one thing worse than having trust taken away is realizing you never had it in the first place.

But if nothing else Natasha is no quitter, and while failure is failure, just because you fucked up doesn’t mean you get to give up. Her relationship with Nick isn’t the only thing she misevaluated, and compared to her poor little hurt fee-fees the global Nazi death cult grown directly in her workplace kind of takes precedence.

So. First things first.
Brock Christopher Rumlown, head of STRIKE Team Alpha. They’d run missions together for years. He had been under her nose for four fucking years and she hadn’t seen the truth of him. In the delicate nuclear reactor management game that is international intelligence work, that’s not just a critical systems failure, that’s a god damned extinction event. That’s some meteor-killed-the-dinosaurs shit. They should take away Natasha’s little spy badge and her little spy diploma and send her back to fucking spy school in the tundra for an elementary-level course rework.

Little bit of a gut punch, there.

The INSIGHT files hadn’t released anything crippling - about her. Everybody else wasn’t so lucky. SHIELD was created to develop unusual weapons and identify and contain unusual threats - making it pretty much the love child of the DIA and DARPA on steroids - and the files released were a staggering blow to not only the USA but many other nations whose secrets had been tidily gathered up by SHIELD’s due diligence.

It certainly released a very accurate set of files on one Natalia Romanova’s known aliases, current capabilities and history, but most of the world’s intelligence agencies already had most of those pieces and didn’t really see a need to collect the rest. The Battle of Manhattan had effectively taken the Black Widow out of the game when it came to field operations, because it’s a little hard to be an effective covert agent when the whole world has photos and clips and gifs of your alien-fighting face.

The Battle of Manhattan also prompted the development of the covert mesh holomasks, because SHIELD desperately wanted her to remain on the active duty intel ops roster. Natasha refused to use them, citing her need to maintain her skills in tradecraft; if she couldn’t disguise her own face without relying on some gadget, she told Wajnowski, department head of R&D, then she had no business playing spy at all. Who did he think she was, James Bond?

Wajnowski had given a reluctant little laugh, and she’d smiled all sincere, but it’d be a dire fucking day indeed when she’d wear one, she remembers thinking, and then oh god the irony when along came INSIGHT Day and the need to con her own boss’s boss. Just like old times, really. Seems like Natasha just can’t let a decade go by without completely nuking the shit out of her employers. How’s that for a standout résumé.

Then again, it’s not like the fucking cunts weren’t asking for it.

Not that she’s bitter. Not - really. One of the most valuable skills the Red Room left her with is the ability to choose how she feels about most things. She chooses her reactions from a predetermined catalogue; she compartmentalizes. What happened to the Natasha of last year, last month, two minutes ago: that is not the Natasha that exists now. The past is a land of vacuum-sealed selves that exist for her only as a teaching tool, an archive, a museum. It gives her perspective, distance, it gives her options, but that doesn’t mean it happens on automatic and it sure as shit isn’t effortless. It’s work. It’s a skill. It takes a toll.

If discovering her definition of success was the crowbar, this was the crack. She remembers learning how - some little age between six and ten - learning how to do it, how to carefully package up her rages, her disappointments, her tenderness, her joy, tupperware it and tape it up and place it on some neatly labeled mental shelf. A gallery of reactions, waiting for the Widow to use. Easy-peasy: just reheat. And she doesn’t resent that, it’s amazingly useful, it’s just - what got tabled up was so often not what she wanted to serve.

Doing dirty work means lying with a smile, and doing it well means meaning that smile, meaning every single kiss and touch and gesture. It means grinning and flirting and laughing and never, ever being angry - not true angry, anger like the oozing black voids that sit labeled on Natasha’s neat mental shelf. She’d reach in and unwrap the yesses, the smiles, the I love yous, and
meanwhile everything else would sit in there untouched and rot.

She will never, ever stop saran-wrapping pieces of herself - good lord, why would she? But when you clean out one side of the shelf while overloading the other, well. Things smash off the shelves. Things break.

Sure, being nice gets you more mileage. But it takes so much more work. She is so very tired.

Natasha rolls over on the bed and lets the nastiness unfurl inside of her like an oil fire.

Brock Christopher Rumlow. Once upon a time she would have slunk up to him in a bar, a cafe, a restaurant, given him the eyes and the face and the voice that told him I’m the Widow, yes, you know I’m untrustworthy, yes, I’m a liar, a traitor, a snake, yes, but it’s the kind of snake you can handle. Natasha would have slid between his defenses like a knife and no matter that she had shot Pierce, testified before Congress, fought beside Captain America - she would have made him believe she was a double triple quadruple agent and of course he could control her. Rumlow, at the end of the day, is just another man. She can make any man take her home.

That was always her job before, to slip in and listen and learn and report back so that later a team of hyperaggressive dudes in full paratrooper gear could descend on the target and get to do all the door-kicking and skull-punching bits. But it’s just her, this time. And she is not a spy, not anymore.

She's an Avenger. She's a superhero. She can play a different game now.

Footsteps come down the safehouse hall. The bedroom door creaks open. The light flicks on.

“Hi Brock,” Natasha says, and smiles.

Sometimes you get to be a little nasty.

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The USS Motherfucker dumps him several miles outside a city that he suspects is definitely not the nearest center of civilization the two llama guys pointed him to. He gave up trying to judge distance in this thing and just shut his eyes and thought hard about cities, trying to frame it in a way the ship might understand: heat signatures, lots of heat signatures, people, lots of different material composites in one place -

- and it happily brought him to hover over a sprawling city in the mountains. He’s waffling over how to park the thing somewhere it won’t be seen when he drifts over a massive salvage yard, and, well, that solves that problem.

The USS Motherfucker is a good six feet longer than the average car, but in this labyrinth of scrap metal it’s not like anybody’s going to check. He stays invisible until the ship’s belly bumps the dirt, and then he spends a solid five minutes just thinking things like stay on the fucking ground and do not float away I really mean it and dirt, dirt, hurrah for dirt, we love dirt until he feels there’s a slight chance the ship won’t start bobbing in the breeze the second he steps away from it.

Not like he can blame the thing. If he’d been stuck in some watery cave for god knows how long he’d want to spend every free minute surfing air, too.

He consoles himself with the fact that anybody who does encounter the Motherfucker in full alien weirdness mode will not be able to do much about it, and if they alert HYDRA to its presence via tweetsnapping or some such thing they won’t get to it faster than he will. And they don’t have no fancy fuckin’ arm and will need a shitting tow truck to move his goddamn ship, which is not
going to be a quiet affair. Barnes-thing squares his shoulders and starts the hike into town.

Halfway down a quiet side street something in his brain twinges. He shakes his head like a dog, changes course, and hits upon an unassuming little building that has a HYDRA supply cache in its basement.

It’s not much, just a locked cellar with a rack of handguns, a stack of MREs, some cash and some phones, but it might as well be the Rockefeller Christmas tree with presents stacked hip-deep to Barnes. Every single HYDRA phone is bugged, but that’s not a problem for the guy who was painstakingly drilled on all HYDRA tracking technologies so he could hunt down other HYDRA agents who needed a disciplinary visit from the Winter Soldier.

Unfortunately there is absolutely nothing here that can constitute a change of clothes, so he has to go back out and scare up a hotel room while looking and smelling like the bottom third of a compost bucket. He’s lucky it’s getting dark out, and that the HYDRA safehouse is in a part of the city that’s mostly cement walls and rows of locked metal gates. A couple of stray dogs lope out of his way, unconcerned; the few passing civilians he sees don’t even give him a second glance.

He’d burn the place down but there’s a daycare literally right above it. Assholes. He settles for crushing the lock mechanism and snapping off the door handle, which as solutions go is more petty than effective; still, it’s not like he’s going to be here long enough for HYDRA to catch up. Hoisting his duffel bag of guns and cash higher on his shoulder, Barnes-thing demands Google show him where the hostels are.

The nearest hostel, when he finds it, is placed directly over a bar that has a neon sign screaming MUSICA DEL MUNDO! in its front window. This turns out to mean that they play a different genre of music every night, with special theme nights featuring different countries and sometimes time periods. The hostel check-in lady explains all this unprompted and assures him of their excellent soundproofing, which means absolutely fuckall when you’ve been genetically reengineered to detect a mosquito fart in the next building.

Barnes-thing takes the room. He needs a goddamn bath and he doesn’t care if the entire Brooklyn Philharmonic serenades him through it. He’s in Chile, which means a stack of cash pushed across the check-in counter gets him treated like a patron without horrible mystery fluids coating every available inch; the second the heavy brass key is in his hand he legs it up the stairs, desperate to peel the crackling layers of yikes off his body.

The first ten minutes are spent setting up a couple of very rudimentary booby traps on the door and windows, and the next ten are a lesson on why it’s a terrible idea to let blood and leather dry together in contact with human skin. When Barnes-thing finally gets his ass in the tub he has to spend the first two rounds of bathwater just scrubbing.

He blanks out a little at the feeling of water all over the naked body, but when he blinks back into himself his left arm is mechanically scrubbing at his right armpit, so, ugh, whatever. The water’s still warm, even. Getting a wet washcloth anywhere near his face makes something in his brain scream, but there’s nothing in his belly to throw up and he can wash his face with his goddamn hand. He turns the water up hotter and breathes deep in the resulting steam. Baths, he decides, are well worth minor inconveniences and are a good and acceptable thing.

Finally, when a formerly brand new bar of soap is no more than a sad little sliver, the water around him runs clear. That fucking washcloth is never going to be the same again, but he is clean.

The thought of spending even one full night here (unsecured location, known HYDRA presence
in the city) is making his skin crawl, but - he has a little time, surely. A few hours. Enough time to - regroup. Reassess. Figure out what the fuck just happened to him. Run some more bathwater and just fucking sit still for five minutes.

He gingerly leans back, props one foot on the edge of the tub, wraps his metal hand around his newest Glock and uses the other to tap open his phone.

Typing with one thumb, he googles aliens.

It takes some time to wade through the sensationalism and hooey and get to the solid intel on extra-fucking-terrestrials and just how they relate to good ol’ planet Earth. Apparently there have been several species to establish contact, if by ‘contact’ you mean ‘blow up something where humans can see’. Barnes-thing discards all the info on space whales and Chitauri almost immediately - though he bookmarks a couple research papers to read later purely on the basis of aliens!!! - and focuses on the species known as the Aesir.

He studies the photos. All five of the known specimens look like big, tall humans in weird medieval costumes, sometimes with extra shiny bits. In comparison, the Chitauri are much too tall to comfortably fit in the USS Motherfucker’s cabin, and don’t seem like they have much of a need for a sculpted humanoid metal arm.

The Aesir, on the other hand, fit that bill to a T.

Then he comes across photos of something dubbed ‘The Destroyer’, allegedly a technological device brought forth by “Loki” to terrorize some nowhere town in New Mexico, and there’s that distinctive metal plating again. Mother fucking bingo, Barnes thinks, splashing his knees side to side in vicious satisfaction. Where can he find this Loki character?

No known aliens are currently on Earth at this time, Google tells him. Because their magic rainbow slide stopped working. We sent the magic glowy cube thing that could fix it back with them, Google tells him, and Barnes-thing just barely stops himself from slamming the phone into microchips and plastic powder against the bathtub.

So they’re not on Earth now: fine. They’ll be back, if only because humans as a species can not leave well enough alone. It’s only a matter of time before somebody reverse-engineers their magic slide thing and goes knocking on Asgard’s front door, most likely prompting some kind of intergalactic war. Isn’t the future amazing.

And apparently “Thor” is an Avenger. Jesus Christ. Barnes-thing just cannot catch a break with this Rogers shit, can he. It always fucking comes back to this guy, doesn’t it, and Barnes-thing actually has his arm wound back to throw the phone as hard as he can in full amnesiac tantrum when the entire fucking world ends.

It’s like getting smashed with the audio equivalent of a battering ram. Barnes-thing levitates out of the bathtub, lands on the floor in a combat stance, rapidly loses the combat stance due to wet, soap, slippery, fuck, scrabbles across the tile with Glock in hand and makes it out of the bathroom to throw open the hallway door and figure out what the sweet Roosevelting Christ is making that eardrum-shattering noise.

He’s not the only one with that reaction: there’s a couple of doors slamming in the hallway, and one white girl with weird canvas pants and a buzzcut has slammed out of her room with a look of pure murder on her face.

“Are you fucking kidding me,” she bellows down the stairs in English, presumably at the front desk lady or maybe just the world in general. “Playing mother fucking dubstep in the middle of
the night, great soundproofing my ass - ”

“What the hell is that?” Barnes-thing roars over the din.

“Dubstep,” Canvas Pants bellows, “is just techno that’s been ruined by hipster subcultures and is an affront to everybody with functioning ears - ”

Then she turns around, takes one look at him, squeaks and claps a hand over her eyes.

Barnes-thing looks down in alarm; he relaxes when he sees both his metal arm and the Glock are hidden entirely by the door. Then why -

It occurs to him that the suds clinging to him from the bath, meager to begin with, have given up the ghost entirely and he is, in fact, exposing the entirety of his genitals to this woman.

Barnes-thing gives a squeak of his own and slams the door shut.

The music thunders on. Barnes-thing stomps back to the bathroom and tries to ignore it, but it’s like trying to ignore an icepick being repeatedly shoved in his ear. He can’t help but listen to it, and halfway through groping around for his dropped phone on the bathroom floor the pounding wall of sound turns into - something else, and -

There’s rhythm there, and backbeat. The noise ebbs and intensifies; it tells a story, it’s music, it’s real. It’s the realest thing he’s ever heard. It sounds like two tank treads trying to fuck in a malfunctioning blender. It sounds like a possessed lawnmower got in a fight with a chainsaw. It sounds like noise, noise channeled and tortured and welded into a new shape against its will and then forced out into the world, loud unforgiving unstoppable unsorry. It sounds like screaming by something that was never meant to scream.

Barnes-thing sits naked on the wet bathroom tile and listens, mouth open, gun forgotten, to the soundtrack of his mind.

-o-

“What’s with the face, Brock? Don’t you like finding beautiful women in your bedroom? No no, don’t go - you don’t know what kind of surprises I’ve got waiting for you.”

When somebody knows all your tricks - no, correction: when somebody thinks they know your style, thwarting them becomes very easy. Rumlow worked with the Black Widow for four years, so he knows she would never leave a seemingly obvious escape route without booby trapping it up, down, right, left and sideways. So he thinks there’s no point trying to run back out the way he came.

He also knows just standing there like a spooked rabbit is a fast way to get fricasseed. In the face of freezing or fleeing, Rumlow goes for Option 3, snarling and attacking her, so when Natasha’s done kicking him up and down the width and breadth of his safehouse she ties him to a kitchen chair.

“Goodness, Brock, what’s gotten into you?” she says brightly, the Widow persona turned up to eleven, adjusted slightly for her American (white, male) audience. “You weren’t like this before. You’d have at least heard me out a little.” She grins, toothy. “And remembered I can wipe the floor with you with one hand.”

“You fucking bitch,” he snarls.

effects from that time we dropped a building on you?"

Rumlow spends some time spitting out every sexist invective under the sun and throwing in a couple of the generic ones too, presumably for variety. Natasha smiles like a sphynx and waits. Seriously, Rumlow really did used to be smarter than this.

He seems to realize that, too, and subsides after a minute, panting hard, glaring at her. “Want to hear a story?” she says. “Sure you do. And don’t interrupt, Brock, or I might decide to stop playing nice with you.”

Rumlow watches her balefully. “Or what? You’ll get me hard but won’t get me off?”

“I - said - don’t - interrupt,” Natasha says, backhanding him with each word, and when she draws back Rumlow’s coughing, flecks of spit and blood on his chin.

Still, this isn’t his first rodeo either. He grins up at her, teeth pinkening with blood. He still thinks this is the worst she’s going to do to him. “Ooh, did kitten grow claws?”

After all, he’s seen the Black Widow interrogate before. He thinks he knows her style.

Natasha sighs. “You just don’t learn, do you,” she says, faintly irritated. She looks around the kitchen, picks up a metal ladle and winds up for a nice big swing.

By the time she’s done with him Rumlow’s spit out two teeth on the floor and there’s another one definitely pretty loose in there. His scarred cheeks are split in a couple places and there’s saliva foaming on his chin, dripping down his heaving chest; he’s probably bit through his tongue. An eye is starting to swell. She avoided his throat but his breathing is cracked and ragged anyway, more strained than it should be. Looks like the burn scars weren’t the only souvenirs he picked up from Insight Day.

“Not your best look,” Natasha says critically, her hands on her hips, ladle turned out in her grip like there’s a soup pot somewhere behind her that’s she’s about to get back to. All she needs is an apron, honestly. She smiles at him, her friendly hello-coworker smile. “But hey,” she says. “You ready for that story now? Wanna hear about how I first joined SHIELD?”

She waits for him to nod. It’s slow and grudging but he gets there. He doesn’t know what to expect, now: the script’s all wrong and the Black Widow isn’t playing nice and Dorothy is not in Kansas anymore.

Natasha takes another kitchen chair by its back and drags it over, plopping herself down and crossing her legs, hands folded primly over her knees. The bloody ladle drips steadily onto the floor, easy in her grip. She’s met more than her fair share of monologuers, and she’s always wondered what on earth was going through their precious little heads when they wasted all that time rambling on about their manifestos; now, though, in a secured location, with Rumlow sweating and bleeding in front of her and all the time in the world, she can kind of see the appeal.

Boy, all this supervillainy stuff sure is fun. She ought to be real careful she doesn’t get tempted to the dark side.

“When I first came in, they were really trying to sell me on the idea that I was doing the right thing,” Natasha says. “Told me I was helping people, gave me missions where it was almost guaranteed I’d get some kind of tearful civilian thankyou. But I was doing the same thing as before, really. Kill a little, lie a lot. Same business. I just let different people tell me who the bad guys were.

“I think that’s why I jumped so hard on the chance to be an Avenger,” she says thoughtfully. “It
was something different, something new. The next step in my career. And not much moral grey
area in saving the world, right? I mean, don’t get me wrong, I love my job, I wouldn’t be this
good at it if I didn’t, but. I think I wanted things to be more - clear.”

She props her chin on her hand and stares out the kitchen window for a bit, letting the silence
spool out. Rumlow’s laboured breathing has yet to slow down.

“And you know, it’s not like I haven’t been where you are, either. I’m a defector, remember?
Turned on my people. Sure, they weren’t nice to me, but they were still people I worked with,
lived with, talked to every day. They were the people who raised me. From a certain perspective,
I’m not any less guilty than you are. From a certain perspective, I am guilty of far more.

“I am a traitor,” Natasha says. “Professionally. It’s my thing. And I did not recognize you and all
your Nazi friends growing in my people’s midst. I didn’t see it. You guys beat me at my own
game.” She smiles at Rumlow. “Congratulations! You beat the Black Widow. If they gave out
shiny little trophies for that you’d definitely get, like, three.”

Rumlow’s silent, watching her, waiting for the punchline, so she gives it to him. “But then you
didn’t kill me.”

She pauses for effect. She really should have a long-haired white cat to stroke. Maybe some kind
of silk dressing gown?

“You ever study international military history, Brock? Ever learn about the Russians?” Natasha
kicks back in her chair a little, turning her gaze back out the window. “In Napoleon’s time, when
the French advanced into Moscow, the Russian army burned whole cities down just to keep the
enemy from finding shelter, or food, or sleep. Napoleon found only ashes. And then - the winter.”

She balances the chair on two legs, rocking slowly back and forth. The ladle turns a lazy circle in
her grasp. “Then in World War Two the Germans decide to try their luck. They get far; they set
their eyes on Stalingrad. We ship the fuel, the grain, the cattle, the food right out of there and leave
only the civilians, who make the Wehrmacht pay in blood for every fucking inch. They had to
clear the city room by room. They bombed the city to the ground, Brock, and they still couldn’t
take it.

“And then: the winter.”

Natasha lets the chair slam down to the ground. “You don’t win against the Russians, Brock. The
best you can do is kill us. And you can take the girl out of the motherland, Brock, but let’s just say
I’m still a little more Soviet than I should be, these days.” She stands up. “And you didn’t kill me.”

She pauses. “But that’s just ancient history, right? You’re not really Nazis, are you. You were just
following orders, weren’t you. It was nothing personal, really. Right?”

She spins the ladle thoughtfully, making it flip over the edge of her palm. “But I’m famous. People
watch me. People watch the Widow and think that she is losing her touch. Professionally
speaking, Brock, you are an embarrassment.”

Natasha looks Rumlow in the eye, then, and smiles the Widow’s most loving smile. “And I’ve
decided to take this personally.”

This is apparently what strains him to breaking point. “What are you telling me this for?” he bursts
out. “What do you want?”

Natasha raises her eyebrows. “Why, Brock. I’m just practicing this crazy new thing called
honesty. And you, as we say in the business, are in the wrong place at the wrong goddamn time.”
Rumlow stares at her like she’s just declared herself queen of the Oompa Loompa Moon Colony. She keeps smiling, waiting for him to get it, that she doesn’t want him to talk, that she’s not here for what he knows, that he has nothing to offer her at all.

And he does. Rumlow’s not stupid, after all. And he knows that sometimes, on very special occasions, the Black Widow was an assassin, and not a spy.

She can see his pupils dilate. “I can give you names,” he blurs out, a tendon in his neck spasming. “I know where some of the handlers went. I can give you coordinates -”

“Brock, I found and entered your safehouse. I’ve got a file on you detailing how many times you took a shit this week.” She lets the Widow face crack a little, just a little, just enough to let him see. “You think I need you to tell me anything?”

“The Soldier,” Rumlow says quickly, breaking out into a fresh sheen of sweat. “He’s gone rogue -”

“I know, Brock,” Natasha says kindly. “I was there. Besides,” she says, starting to circle him, “Who’s to say the leadership didn’t send him to you on purpose, hm? Maybe they’ve decided it’s you who’s gone rogue.”

“No,” Rumlow says. “No, you don’t understand, I was his - he worked with us. He worked with STRIKE, we were his field team, and he only answers to handlers and now he’s been killing them -”

Natasha cocks her head, pausing in front of him. “What were you looking for, in that cave?”

“I don’t know,” Rumlow says, rushing his words quickly enough that they trip over each other. “We didn’t know, we just knew there was something, something big. Technology, game-changer technology, the leadership hid it but nobody knew what it was, only that it was big and hiding down there somewhere. We needed to get it before those Afrikaans bastards got to it -”

“So HYDRA is splitting up,” Natasha muses.

“It’s fucking chaos,” Rumlow says. His breathing is growing a little more laboured, and the lacerations on his cheeks stand out red and angry on his pale face. “I got paid to round up a bunch of guys, find the tech, bring it in - the handlers’ve gone dark, nobody can get ahold of them, I’ve been getting my orders from motherfucking lab monkeys for the past two months.”

“Hm,” Natasha says.

“I’m telling you. He’s hunting them. The handlers. Everybody who could went to ground, and now the fucking - scientists are all that’s left. And now those little bastards are jumping ship, too.” Rumlow spits, as best he can with his face swelling up. “Fuck knows where.”

“Hm,” she says again. He’s getting comfortable again, now that he thinks he’s found the script. She scares him, he talks; he thinks she’s just playing her own bad cop. Well, fine.

Universally speaking, almost everyone is more useful alive. Natasha’s not a fan of killing people, primarily because it’s just so hard to bring them back. You never know when you might need something living in their heads. She’s made keeping people alive into an art form.

But sometimes you get to make a motherfucking exception.

Natasha carefully places the ladle in the sink, laying it down with a gentle little tink noise. “Thank
you for your input, Brock. It’s been very valuable.”

Rumlow’s eyes widen. He knows what it means, when the Widow tells you that. “No,” he says.

“Yes,” Natasha says.

“No - I’m not done - “

“Yes,” Natasha says. “You are.”

“Fuck you,” he spits, white showing all around his pupils.

“Oh, if I had a nickel for every time I heard that,” Natasha sighs, and pulls out her knife.

-o-

At some point the music ends. Barnes isn’t sure how long he spends on the bathroom floor, blinking stupidly and trying to remember...anything, but at some point one single, shining idea makes its way through the glittery fog cocooning his brain: forget that he’s sitting with his dick out in a puddle of chilly soapwater, he needs to get his hands on that music.

He staggers out of the bathroom, muscles aching, and he’s got his hand on the hallway door when he realizes that if he doesn’t want to parade around naked his options are A) his stinking, gently decomposing combat gear or B) some kind of toga-loincloth ensemble tied together out of bathroom towels.

Something in the Barnes-thing rebels. He goes with Option C, not giving one single solitary fuck, and takes his fucking chances with the possibility of creating new urban legends about the Naked Burglar of Santiago. Besides, if he can’t acquire clothing somehow, in the middle of the night, in the middle of a city, unseen, regardless of what he is or isn’t wearing, then he doesn’t deserve pants. Or oxygen, frankly.

He climbs out the window.

He’s not sure what the hell just happened to his brain, but he’s reasonably certain it’s not a trigger implanted by HYDRA conditioning because all it’s making him want to do is track down whoever was playing that music and take it from them. He doesn’t care how. He’ll carry the damn gramophone around with him if that’s what it takes, he decides, scrambling his way across a particularly rough patch of rooftop tiles.

It occurs to him, as he clammers stark-ass naked over a darkened city, that he hasn’t eaten in - a while, or slept, actually, and it might be making him ever so slightly erratic. But it’s a small thought, and it does not manage to penetrate the technicolor fog currently surrounding his rationality. Also, jesus, do these people sharpen their drainspouts? What the fuck. He’s run barefoot over broken glass before and it hadn’t given him as much trouble as these fucking roof shingles.

And then lo and behold, there is a window right across from him, and in the window is a couch, and on that couch is a pair of sweatpants.

Ten minutes later the Barnes-thing is back at the hostel, this time in a lavender cardigan buttoned all the way up over his bare chest and a pair of thick sweatpants that say PINK all up one thigh. They are not pink. They are black. Thinking about this obvious error in manufacturing carries the Barnes-thing into the MUSICA DEL MUNDO!, which is nearly empty save a couple of guys cleaning up. Barnes-thing stalks over to the one fiddling with wires by the giant speakers and only remembers he’s still barefoot when he trips over a soundstage cable.
The greasy-haired guy with the wires and shiny silver fruit laptop looks up briefly, but only starts paying attention when it becomes clear that Barnes-thing is headed straight for him, and looks increasingly alarmed as Barnes-thing comes to a gently vibrating stop in front of his shitty DJ desk.

There’s a strange moment when Barnes realizes he doesn’t have the mask on but that there’s no people-faking script cueing up behind his teeth. It’s possible the music has created a situation for which Bucky has no protocol, which, frankly, is another point in its favor. Either way, Barnes-thing can get this done on his own.

Probably. “¿Eres el DJ?”

Greasy blinks at him. “Oh, uh, sorry man. No, uh, no habla espanol.”

Barnes-thing feels his human face make a smile, but judging by the look on Greasy’s face it’s not very convincing. “Good,” he says anyway. “Good. Are you the DJ?”

“Uh, I guess. I’m just staying at the hostel but they like, invite people coming through to play their music? And I was like, uh, why not, man. Got a chance to spread some love through the world, you gotta take it, right?”

Fucking sure. “But it was you, earlier? Playing the - dubstep?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“How?”

“I know, man, they don’t even have, like, turntables here. The speakers wouldn’t even connect to my macbook, I had to just aux cord it and play it straight off my ipod.”

“Ipod?” Barnes-thing repeats, catching the only relevant word out of the stream of gibberish. “Ipod. Show me.”

“Uh... it’s right here, man,” Greasy says, producing a little green rectangle thing wrapped in a tangled white cord; upon closer inspection, Barnes realizes that’s a pair of headphones.

“That’s it?” he demands. “The music is in there? The - dubstep, what you played, it’s all in there?”

“Uh... yeah?”

“Good,” Barnes-thing hisses, snatching the little green rectangle out of the man’s hand and legging it out of there.

There’s a cry of “Hey!” behind him but Barnes-thing is not slowing down for love nor money, and he scuttles back up the side of the building in record time, rolling headfirst back in through his room window. He throws his guns, phones and cash into a pillowcase, kicks his disgusting combat gear into another, hitches both over his shoulders, clenches the ipod in his sweaty flesh hand and hops back out onto the roof.

The sprint back to the USS Motherfucker is a blur, paused only to drop his pillowcase of tac gear into the river. When he gets to the scrap yard the ship is fucking floating again, but there’s no one around and this time the minute he gets within ten feet of it it dips down and eagerly presents him with the hatch.

Barnes-thing throws in his clattering sack of materiel and scrambles inside, something between
giddiness and terror making that bright pressure build in his chest. He swats the console to turn the cloaking on and then fits himself into the corner farthest from the hatch, knees up, arms tucked close; slowly, carefully, he opens his palm to look inside.

The iPod is tiny, lime green, and fits neatly in the palm of his hand. It’s got a little screen and a little wheel in the middle, to control the music. It’s got the music in it. He’s got all of it held right here in his hand.

He doesn’t know why he’s so crazy about - this. Crazier than usual. Maybe it’s just the first thing that’s reached inside him and touched things and didn’t hurt, did no damage at all. It’s the first thing to touch inside of him and make him want more.

Barnes-thing pets the ipod gently with one metal finger, and the arm gives him a very small trilling hum. Not much electricity, but some. The iPod’s screen is dark, but it’s alive in there.

He closes his eyes, suddenly exhausted. He sinks down to the floor entirely and curls around the ipod, keeping it in his flesh hand, feeling the coolness of it and the strange smooth oval edges. He rubs it against his cheek, presses it to his mouth, the flat of it, then the side; on impulse he licks it, taking the faint metallic flavor on his tongue. Music, right in his mouth. His hands. It’s his now.

He falls asleep like that, with the tangled headphone cord tickling his lips. It’s the first time he sleeps without his mask.

-o-

Clint only screams a little when he wakes up with Natasha perched on the arm of his couch, which he probably refers to as his bed. “Dear sweet Iowan Jesus,” he gasps, putting down the Beretta he’d pulled from between the couch cushions. He’s sporting a fresh black eye, a pair of Thor boxers and what looks like coffee stains on his massive leg cast. He fell asleep with his hearing aids in. “Fuck me with an unlubed fence post. Hi Nat.”

“I told off Steve for being vicious,” Natasha says. “Then I went and chopped up Rumlow like steak tartare. And I thought it wasn’t hypocrisy because I’m me and Steve’s Steve, but - ”

She bites the insides of her cheeks and holds the flesh there for a long second, worrying it. “I’ve been doing this wrong. I thought I could be an Avenger and the Widow both, but I think I was - wrong.”

“Oh.” Clint rubs his face. “Yeah, okay. I can deal with this. Let’s - Let’s just - ” he uses one hand to sign half of coffee and uses the other to grope around for his crutch and lever himself up off his terrible plaid couch.

Lucky, lying under the coffee table, thumps his tail twice but otherwise doesn’t so much as twitch. He’s Natasha’s favorite dog. She’s a fan of dogs, sure, as long as they stay in kennels and picture books where they belong.

Clint stumps past his stack of pizza boxes and six-monitor computer desk setup and Natasha ghosts after him, following him into the kitchen. She used to start the coffee pot for him after breaking in, before waking him up, but upon realizing he prefers to chug it bitter, overbrewed and kettle-never-cleaned black, she no longer bothers.

Instead she climbs onto his ancient kitchen table and sits in the middle, crosslegged. It’s her usual spot when Clint’s cooking. In light of the INSIGHT datadump, an agent of Clint’s caliber would be staying in a safehouse, but Clint’s building is a safehouse; sort of. The fact that it’s a safe house for every junkie and homeless kid in Bushwick technically negates the covert ops definition of
‘safehouse’, but this is something Clint does not find concerning.

Natasha has decided not to find it concerning either. Clint can take care of himself. Also, she’s reinforced the shit out of his apartment and designed half his security subroutines herself. Anybody trying to break in here is going to have the worst and shortest day of their life.

“Alright,” Clint says, once approximately half a pot of stale coffee has made its way into his stomach. He limps over to sit down heavily at the table. “Rumlow’s dead?”

“Yes.” Natasha fishes a USB out of her bra and puts it down on the table, scooting it over to Clint with one finger. “His safehouse location, movements and contacts for the past two weeks. He was operating on orders for the Rostov-on-Don fiasco but I think he’s been burned since then.”

“Haha,” Clint says into his coffee cup. “Burned.”

Natasha wrinkles her nose at him to let him know that’s not funny but that he could get her to laugh if he tries harder. “Burned enough to be a little crazy. He was erratic, making bad decisions, taking risks.” She nods at the USB. “He’s had contact with a few interesting people. Some I’m pretty sure he was explicitly told not to contact.”

“And it’s not even my birthday,” Clint says, picking the USB up and walking it over and through his fingers. He gives Natasha a sidelong glance from over his coffee cup. “Where was he?”

“Tajikistan.”

Clint nods slowly. “There was some chatter about a dead operative in Dushanbe, yesterday,” he says carefully. “An American. There were police reports ‘n’ news stories.”

Natasha shrugs. “I’m not doing cleanup anymore.”

“Cool.” Clint nods while taking a swig, somehow not spilling coffee in every direction. “So, that kind of operation.”

“Yes,” Natasha says, tension starting to coil up her spine. She forces herself to relax each muscle one by one. “I think it’s time for me to be a little more public about my - disappointment.”

Clint nods again, slower this time: his face is still blank-eyed and creased with sleep but Natasha can hear the calculations starting to tick away in there. “That’s - not bad, actually,” he says. “PR’s not a problem - for anyone else it would be, but for you - this kind of info isn’t gonna travel any farther than the people who need to know. And pretty much any country wants you on their payroll a lot more than they want you dead. Nobody’s gonna wanna burn any bridges.”

Natasha shrugs again. It’s true: when you’re as valuable as the Black Widow is, all your little indiscretions get blamed on gas leaks or faulty wiring or some imaginary local serial killer. for the Black Widow, any amount of gore is tolerated in black ops so long as you don’t become dangerous to the wrong people.

“And right now, kinda everybody still thinks it’s the Pentagon giving you orders,” Clint says, directly continuing her train of thought. “Even after the whole INSIGHT and Congress thing. I’ve had a couple people sniff around trying to give you job offers, but they were all idiots, everybody with smart money still thinks you’re Team USA - is that where you want to be?”

One of the reasons Clint Barton has survived this long is because he’s the fastest, most reliable way to contact the Black Widow, and giving him a hand is a way to earn if not her favor then at least her indifference, which is more precious than it sounds. In certain circles there are people who will pay quite a lot to make sure someone like Natasha does not care about them.
At SHIELD, it was a truth commonly understood that Agent Coulson was the Black Widow’s handler, at least until he “died”. (Natasha is just not going to go there.) It was a truth somewhat less commonly understood that Clint Barton holds the number one slot on the very short list of people Natasha listens to, and as such supercedes the orders, opinions, feelings and lives of anyone in the slots below.

Clint Barton is, among a very long list of other things, a soft-hearted carnie that juggled his tac knife, comm mike and hearing aids in an armed blackout transport because he wanted to cheer Natasha up after she had a panic attack about being on her way to officially cement her defector status and give up a fuckton of secrets to buy her safe passage through SHIELD. That alone, separate from all the other stuff, is reason enough to be here; if Natasha’s going to consult anyone, she’s going to consult Clint first.

“I’m off the market,” Natasha says, carefully. “I’ve decided. Superheroes don’t have a national allegiance.”

Clint’s eyes fix on her face. “Okay,” he says, putting his coffee down. “Okay.” He signs how are you feeling?

Natasha looks down at the stained grain of the kitchen table. Complicated, she signs. Then, after a minute, angry.

“Angry at who?”

Everybody. Them. Me. I didn’t see it.

Nobody saw it. Everybody didn’t -

I AM SUPPOSED TO BE BETTER THAN EVERYBODY.


“Yes,” Natasha says, her fists slowly unclenching on her thighs. She’s pretty sure she just fucked up her entire back by locking up like that. “Yes. I am.”

“And you know how you’re gonna do it,” Clint continues, still in his coaxing voice. It’s clumsy and endearingly halting with the way Clint so clearly broadcasts that he has no idea what he’s doing, and that’s the only reason it works on Natasha. “Right? The, uh, superhero way. You said - you said the hypocrisy thing, and that you, uh, can’t be an Avenger and the Black Widow at the same time. Wanna talk about that?”

“I told Steve off for his salt-the-earth strategy for HYDRA, because Steve has an image and a sense of personal integrity to protect,” Natasha says. “When he’s back down from his vengeance high he’s going to appreciate the way I didn’t let him set fire to the entire Geneva Convention. But the Widow does not have that problem.”

Clint frowns thoughtfully at her. “Yes?”

“I can’t be the way I was before,” Natasha explains. “Not if I want to go forward. We can’t win this kind of war with secrets. That means accountability. I’m going to be responsible for what I do, and people will know it.” Natasha’s heartbeat is steady, her palms do not sweat, but she imagines she can feel every single individual muscle fiber in her body in that moment. “That’s not who the
Black Widow is.”

“Okay,” Clint says. “I’m gonna assume you want my take on this - yeah, okay. Right. So, uh, this might sound kinda stupid, but firstly, you don’t owe anybody anything, and, well, that one helps me a lot, personally. To remember.” Clint scratches his head again. “And the second thing, uh, well… Black Widow’s whoever you say she is. Right? An Avenger is whatever you say it is. That’s the thing about being the best, right? You get to define what best is.”

Natasha frowns. Redefining personas is not something she’s a huge fan of, largely because the need to add or drop characteristics is a result of bad intel and happens in-mission, on the fly; it means someone hasn’t done their homework.

But Clint is one of the smartest people she knows, and in their years of bad ideas and blundering, when it comes to internal perspective readjustment, he’s yet to steer her wrong.

“A new Black Widow,” she says aloud. Tasting the idea.

“I mean. It’s still you. You did already save the world,” Clint says. “Twice, even. And, like, you know what they say about that - once is an accident, twice is coincidence…”

Natasha blinks at him, startled out of her thoughts. “Thrice is enemy action?”

“Ye - No! No, your enemies would not want you to be an Avenger,” Clint says. “That is definitely not… a thing they want you to do. Aw, metaphor.”

Natasha, despite herself, feels the smile creep across her face. “Okay,” she says. “I will think about this.” Then, a little belatedly, she signs thank you.

Clint waves it off, looking relieved. “Cool. So, uh… how’s HYDRA?”

Natasha's mouth twitches despite herself. “Shitty,” she says. “But not shitty enough. They’ve got their act together well enough that they only just burned Rumlow, and only because we crashed their op, and that only happened because we walked into them on accident. Completely blind. I had no idea they were going to be there, and it wasn’t just a fireteam, Clint, it was practically a platoon. Looked like four or five squads.”

Clint grimaces. “That’s a hell of a lot of guys to mobilize.”

“Exactly. We should have had warning. We’re incredibly lucky it wasn’t an ambush, and that Soldier was there and decided to turn on them instead of us.”

Clint nods, frowning. “Yeah, yeah.” He taps the USB against the table. “I’ll get this to Hill; she’ll put the analysts on it, maybe we’ll get something good. Meanwhile - I’ll ask around. If they’re mobilizing a strike force like that, somebody somewhere gotta have heard something.”

“Yes. We need to find out why they’re not talking.”

“So you can go out and convince them to talk.”

“It’s on my list, yes.”


Natasha sits quiet for a moment, letting Clint see her rocking back and forth on her indecision. “You remember you asked me how I learned to be such a good spotter and I told you about my sniper partner?”

“Yes.”

“Oh wow. Oh, wow.”

Natasha permits herself a little coil of smugness. “Yes.”

“How was it? How was he?”

“The best,” Natasha says immediately. “I really had to work to find his sniper nests and I never saw him use an angle or drop chart. He uses the metal arm as a stabilizer and bipod, by the way.”

“I knew it,” Clint hisses, looking green with envy even though he also does all the trig in his head and manages to shoot just fine without any kind of stabilizer half the time. “Damn.” Then, “How was he?”

Natasha knows what he means. “He was - he was alive in there.” She slowly squeezes and relaxes her grip on her knees. “Not much, and it wasn’t exactly - encouraged, but he was there. And he was - nice. As nice as it was possible to be.”

She flicks her eyes up to Clint. “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t tell anybody,” she says. “Until I got mad at Steve and yelled at him.”

“Oh, hey, that’s great!” Clint perks up. “It took you years to yell at me. What got you to - oh, the Geneva Convention thing. Hah. So how’s that going.”

“Badly,” Natasha admits. “I got his attention when I confronted him about it but that’s it. He goes completely off the rails when it comes to Barnes, and he knows that, and he doesn’t care.” She grimaces. “Steve saw him, at the cave fiasco, and - I think it took some wind out of his sails when Barnes ran away from him like he had the plague, but that’s not going to last.”

“Not exactly a quitter type, that guy,” Clint says philosophically. “Can we spin it?”

“Not well. Steve - expects things,” Natasha says, briefly showing teeth. “He thinks he doesn’t but he does. He wants things from Barnes, and speaking as a girl who’s walked a mile in those Soviet shoes, people wanting things from you - it could go either way. And if it goes the wrong way we are in the shit, Clint, because the Soldier is pulling a me circa 1999 and if he thinks Steve’s no better than a new handler he’ll try to kill him and Steve will damn well hand him the knife. And if it goes the right way -” Natasha grimaces. “Well, the best Steve might get is a pet serial killer who looks a lot like his dead boyfriend.”

Clint scratches his head, then signs were they?

Natasha waves a hand. “Doesn’t matter, Steve’s acting like this is his firstborn. If they were fucking or not is moot at this point.”

“Were you?”

Natasha does not quite manage to keep the smugness from making a reappearance. “As good as.”

“Deets.”

“He started growling at a handler who liked to grope me. The first time they whipped him, but then Soldier did it again, and again, and then I think he said no to something even though they were electrocuting the shit out of him practically daily. After that they knew they had to get rid of
him.” Natasha smiles. It’s not nice. “Everybody knew he was going to detonate sooner or later. I had honestly thought they executed him, until he showed up in Odessa. Apparently they decided selling him to the Americans would take out two birds with one stone.”

“They weren’t wrong, either,” Clint says. “Jesus. This guy is the Terminator. You think Pierce knew who he had? That it was Bucky Barnes?”

“Oh, I’ll bet a lung and a kidney on it,” Natasha says. “I’ll bet it gave him a cute little thrill inside every time he thought about it. Might’ve given him the occasional stiffy.”

Clint’s forehead wrinkles. “So - the American branch found a new way to control him? Different from the Soviet way, I mean.”

“Not according to the files,” Natasha says. “Still used the same drugs and electroshock combo the NKVD developed.”

Clint stares at her. “And Pierce still… sent… the guy… after… Rogers? Knowingly?”

“Probably thought it was poetic,” Natasha says. “Elegant, even.”

“Wow,” Clint says. He sits back. “He knowingly sent a compromised asset after the one guy guaranteed to compromise him further. That’s - wow.”

“Ego,” Natasha says. “Gets men every time.”

“Honestly.” Clint shakes his head. “You have the best sniper in the world at your disposal and you send him to do backflips on a freeway? They could’ve had Rogers’ brains shot out across some DC sidewalk any time they wanted and they chose this instead?”

“I think they wanted a distraction,” Natasha says. “A Captain America manhunt takes the heat off a helicarrier launch pretty well.”

Clint snorts. “So they didn’t do their research. At all.”

Natasha smiles a little. It’s what drew her to Steve in the first place, recognizing he walks the same path she does, if in a different way. “You’d think by now people would learn not to underestimate Rogers.”

“Yes. I only ran like six missions with the guy but that was enough, y’know? I mean. You kind of only have to talk to him for ten seconds to understand Rogers will literally not be stopped by anything short of a headshot.” Clint thinks about this for a second. “Okay, yeah, if him and Terminator weren’t fucking they definitely should be. They’re the only ones who would survive each other.”

Natasha raises an eyebrow; Clint flaps a hand. “You don’t count. Also, wouldn’t super soldier fucking be some kind of hazard? I mean. I’ve seen the guy leave fingerprints in a solid lead pipe. Like, you know, heat of the moment, he gets a-thrustin’, gives you a friendly squeeze... then all of a sudden you’re getting wheeled to the ER with a bad case of dislocated asscheek.” Clint shrugs. “I’d absolutely try to fuck Rogers if I didn’t think that’d leave me with a broken pelvis, is all I’m saying.”

Natasha stares, because the solution to this problem is obvious. “Just tie him up, Clint.”

“Well, yeah, but what if he’s not into that?”

“Oh.” Natasha considers this. All of her sexual partners outside of work tend to agree to whatever
she suggests and not ask any questions, which, to be fair, are the two major traits that her partner selection algorithm is based on. Not like she doesn’t know how to handle this scenario, though. “Easy. Convince him.”

Clint gives her that half-scrunched look he gets when he kind of wants to tell her That’s Not How We Play Nicely With Others but is simultaneously realizing the payoff will not be worth the effort. “Remind me to sign us up for a gender studies class later. Like, with a concentration on consent theory.”

Natasha rolls her eyes. “I know what feminism is, Clint.”

“Can’t ever hurt to know more,” Clint says cheerily. “And you like college classes. It’ll be great. We’ll pretend to be fresh young co-eds opening our eyes together to the big adult world for the very first time.”

“You’re forty-one, Clint,” Natasha points out dryly. “And I think I lost the potential to be an innocent co-ed somewhere around the age of four.”

“Aw, come on. You don’t think with the right skirt and sock combo I couldn’t pass for a perky sophomore?”

“If you’re bored enough to try impersonating perky sophomores I think we need to change something,” Natasha says, nodding at the living room, where the six massive monitors on Clint’s desk are displaying a variety of readouts and camera feeds. “Is life as a nerve center treating you that badly?”

Clint groans and rubs his face. “Hill keeps me occupied.”

Natasha narrows her eyes at his fresh black eye and extends one foot to poke a toe at his crutch. “Not too occupied, I hope.”

Clint rolls his eyes. “I know, I know. The more you rest up the faster you heal -”

“- the faster you can get back to doing stupid shit,” Natasha recites. Natasha and Clint, as agents who warranted a personal visit from the Director every time they ended up in SHIELD Medical, have heard this spiel from Fury approximately nine thousand times. They’ve Sharpied it on each others’ casts enough times that at one point Clint spent a mandatory three days of leave making a highly elaborate stencil.

Natasha pokes his crutch again. “Seriously. Heal faster. I need my sniper back.”

Clint’s face creases up in a hideously embarrassing expression of joy that Natasha has to look away from in pure self-defense. “Yes ma’am,” Clint says. “Oh, hey, speaking of doing stupid shit on your six - did you wanna have sex?”

Natasha considers it. It’s not what she came for, but sometimes when she thinks about it near Clint that can make the desire form. “You want to? I can probably swing an apathetic handjob.”

“Oh boy my favorite.” Clint grins. “Nah. Just figured I’d offer.”

“Okay. “Natasha considers him. “If you want to go to college with me, there’s a coding workshop at NYU.”

“That advanced cybersecurity one?”

“Yes. We can sign up when we’re done with - all this. You can wear all the thigh high socks you
want and watch me smoke Silicon Valley tryhards in four different programming languages.”

“Hell, I’m down.” Clint scratches at his head. “You know what you’re gonna do next?”

Natasha thinks about it. “I have to see Fury,” she decides. “And use your bathroom.”

-o-

The next day caloric necessity chases Barnes-thing out of the Motherfucker, but only after he makes it take them a couple countries over, irrationally afraid of returning to the scene of his crime. Intellectually he knows there is no chance of that guy finding him, let alone getting his ipod back, but Barnes-thing has already learned that he’s not very rational when it comes to dubstep.

He sits down with it inside the ship, once he’s acquired enough fried plantains to make the stomach stop complaining; the street lady selling them out of her cart hadn’t gave a damn that he was still barefoot and dressed like a colorblind civilian. The ipod shows him genres, and albums, and recently played. He starts there, selecting the first item, and fumbles the headphones into his ears in breathless anticipation.

The headphones begin to play some rhythmic booping noises. Barnes-thing frowns.

He listens to the entirety of the 3-minute 42-second booping song. He selects the next one. This one is more booping, with added clicking and shushing noises. Barnes-thing frowns harder. Had Greasy lied? Had one of them somehow been mistaken? This song is just piano keys. Had he somehow broken it? Next, next -

The headphones emit a tortured mechanical growl, a thin electrical whine and then proceed with an audio track of a combine harvester trying to turn itself inside out. Barnes-thing relaxes. There it is. He shuts his eyes and wriggles his shoulderblades more comfortably against the Motherfucker’s cold metal wall.

He permits himself fourteen replays of the dubstep song before forcing his eyes open and his body to its feet. He decides it will be allowable to listen to it again after he goes out and successfully acquires, at the very least, a pair of boots.

Luckily, this time when he asks the USS Motherfucker for a city, it takes him to a massive port town with vast expanses of beach. He leaves Motherfucker in the jungle this time, and from there it’s easy to hike down, roll up the sweatpants and concoct some story about getting his shoes stolen right off the sand.

The biggest loss of the cave fiasco is that he no longer has a mask, and won’t until he finds another HYDRA cache specific to the Asset. Luckily, he does not have any immediate need to spend excessive amounts of time in public. His brain is still not giving him any newly remembered HYDRA targets, but that’s fine, because becoming the sudden sole owner of an alien spaceship is enough to keep him occupied.

The first thing he realizes is that the USS Motherfucker has a huge downside, and that is that it does not have wifi. Barnes-thing considers parking it invisibly above a Starbucks or something, but after a couple of minutes of experimenting with his latest phone he realizes no signals are getting through the ship’s hull. The doors have to be open and the ramp down for any kind of radio or wireless signal to enter the cabin, and none of the cloaking works unless the hatch is closed.

The second thing he realizes is that he needs to reorder his priorities. Barnes-thing pushes them further into the Andes and makes sure he hasn’t seen a single manmade structure for a solid thirty
minutes of flying before bringing them to a halt and pointing the Motherfucker at a particularly bare patch of ground. *Weapons*, he thinks at it, focusing hard, mentally scrolling through his (vast, encyclopedic) mental database of aircraft-mounted guns. *Lasers. Rockets. Torpedoes. Boom?*

Motherfucker just !!!!! s at him in ecstatic incomprehension. Barnes-thing sighs and pats the console. He wasn’t really expecting much; there’s no visible gun mounts on the outside of the ship, and if it’s got hidden or recessed weapons they’re nowhere Barnes has been able to see. He’s already mostly resigned himself to the likely fact that Motherfucker is the alien version of an inflatable lifeboat: bouncy, difficult to steer and absolutely useless in most combat situations.

Well. It did slam through the cave wall that first time without taking any visible damage, so in a pinch Motherfucker could very well be used as a flying wrecking ball. And it’s made for a damn good getaway car so far, if Barnes-thing ignores that whole part where they almost went to space. That’s probably not likely to happen again, but Barnes is not taking chances with any situation that might leave him with his metaphorical pants down in a vacuum where average temperatures top out at a balmy negative 270 degrees. That means he and the USS Motherfucker are going to put in some quality time together. Barnes-thing is going to learn how to drive. Again.

And this proves - shockingly easy, for something that was so counterintuitive before. After some initial difficulties where he accidentally sends himself ten thousand miles north in two minutes, mows down some pine trees and nearly beheads a very surprised herd of elk, things kind of level out. Also, parts of the Canadian taiga look astonishingly similar to the Argentinean Andes and he can’t be blamed for any navigational errors when his flight computer has the cognitive capacity of a concussed duckling and his copilot is his own left goddamn arm.

But actually flying it becomes disturbingly easy, disturbingly quickly. He can’t tell if he’s getting better at handling it or if the ship is - *learning* from him, accommodating his abilities, adapting its user interface for a smoother ride. Or worse: maybe it’s adapting *him*. It’s wired directly into his brain, after all. If his arm can force new neural pathways to form just so he can control it, what can an entire spaceship do?

And he - it’s just a feeling, a little feeling, but it feels like there’s - more. In his head. It doesn’t feel foreign, exactly, or invasive, just… there. In his head.

It might just be another phase of his body healing. It might be just be the new neural pathways created by a human-ish brain trying to pilot a decidedly inhuman technology. Or it might be that something - connected, when he first interfaced with the ship. It might be that something - came online.

And he can’t tell. There is absolutely no way for him to tell.

It’s entirely possible some absentee aliens might yet still fuck him up worse than HYDRA ever managed, which, hey, there’s a thought. And be that as it fucking may, like fucking hell is he going to give up this kind of tactical advantage.

So he keeps at it. Three days into careening around uninhabited Canada, he learns that the navigation system remembers where he’s been, which is - not that helpful. If he focuses on thinking about where he is, it gives him a sort of glowy… trail… thing that shows him his path through space in a three-dimensional “map” that’s - still pretty fucking indescribable. He can only judge his position relative to the positions he was in before, which is goddamn fucking useless when he’s trying to find, say, where the fuck he is now . He does a lot of steering by sticking his phone out the hatch and then flying in the general direction of his goal until it’s time let his LG connect to the 4G and give him his goddamn course-correct.
On the other hand: he can’t just hole up in his UFO and leave only for lo mein and bathroom breaks, but he can set up a sleeping bag and MRE stash in there, because the gravity stabilization and lack of any kind of pilot chair in the cabin means he basically has a studio apartment that can fly.

It occurs to him that he now has a space to keep his shit, so he spends a couple of days collecting his notebooks from all the places he’d stashed them; this turns out to double pretty well as a crash-course in international navigation. He picks up a few other things on the way, too: he starts putting together a decent medical kit and installs a nice little shelf for his growing armory in the corner, and after some consideration he acquires a car battery, a waist-high pallet of bottled water and a tiny hot plate.

Amazingly, the USS Motherfucker’s inside smells nothing like sea slime. There’s a faint tinge of ozone, but that’s the same smell as Barnes-thing’s arm. He starts forgetting he has his mask off until he opens the cabin hatch, where whatever the dominant outside smell is tends to hit him in the nose like a lead pipe and leads to an episode more often than not. That is a problem. He’s got no mask anymore, and he’s got to figure out a way to deal with it. Desensitization or - something. He’ll figure it out. He really can’t stay holed up in the Motherfucker, no matter how useful it’s proving to be.

Still: no running water. That means no baths, and he is increasingly invested in baths. He starts country-hopping, staying in some kind of hostel or motel nightly, partly to try and acclimate himself to the goddamn scent problem but mostly to have access to running water: focusing very hard on cleaning every part of the body turns out to be just as effective as romance novels and dubstep on redirecting the brain.

This is a very fortunate discovery. His brain has still not graced him with any new targets despite giving him a minimum of one flashback literally every single day since the Cave Incident. He’s not sure if that’s the fault of Rumbo, Captain America or the cave itself, so to be safe he blames all three. At least Widow and the wings guy have almost certainly killed Rumbo; it’s probably too much to hope that they’ve ganged up on Rogers and strangled him too.

No, he doesn’t want that. No, he doesn’t want - that.

He - why doesn’t he want that. Rogers kills Nazis but that’s not enough and besides, Rogers - makes him - angry. Rogers makes him crazy. Barnes doesn’t know enough, he can’t know enough, like all public figures the commonly-known information about him is riddled with inaccuracies and hearsay and so the best source available to Barnes is his own goddamn mind, which, as irony goes, is fucking crippling. So he used to be Sergeant Howling Commando Bucky Barnes: okay! That means a whole lot of sweet merry fuckall when your brain goes into a tailspin every time you try to think about it.

But the Rogers situation is becoming more and more of a problem, not least because of a dim but persistent certainty in Barnes-thing’s head that Rogers is going to chase him come hell or high water. In fact that certainty is a little confused that it hasn’t happened already, that Rogers hasn’t peeled apart the countries between them layer by layer so he can set his teeth in Barnes’ nape and shake.

Barnes-thing tells that certainty to go fuck itself with a tree branch. Hey Captain America! Here’s a war crime wearing your dead buddy’s face! C’mon, give it a hug.

The certainty retaliates with an image of Rogers’ fractured face, undefending as his dead buddy punched his skull halfway to oatmeal. He loves you. He’d die for you. He doesn’t care it’s something else wearing Bucky’s skin now.
Barnes cares. Rogers wants things from him. Rogers wants everything from him, and what the fuck is he supposed to do with that, huh? What the fuck is he supposed to do with that?

The usual Rogers-related rage flares up inside him, but this time Barnes can feel it pointing inward. He grabs his flesh wrist and pinches, viciously, hoping it goes deep, all the way to the bone, all the way to wherever Bucky is hiding, fucking with him from the inside. It’s his fault Barnes can’t think, it’s his fault he has all this fractured history lying around. It’s Bucky’s fucking fault he can’t just go out into the world and start anew.

But thinking in-depth about anything related to the star-spangled dumbass is always a race to keep ahead of the consequent migraine, and it’s a race Barnes-thing always loses. This time his train of thought lasts nearly three whole minutes before he has to curl up on the floor and think very hard about nothing but the plot of The MAIDEN and the BILLIONAIRE Scottish Wolfe Lorde.

Memories come to Barnes in one of two ways: full-body immersive flashback or fragmented knowledge that feels both instinctual and like it happened to someone else. He can build a flamethrower out of rubber bands and hairspray, but he has no memory of learning. If he gets one whiff of motherfucking strawberry shortcake it sends him into a panic attack and he has no idea why. It’s like he’s walking around with half a mind, always running smack into these, these things that screw with him and sabotage him at every turn. He is so goddamn tired of not being able to think.

He subsides, panting, unlocking his metal hand from where it’s left a perfect purple imprint around his other, weaker wrist. It starts to throb immediately, the white skin around it flushing red with returning blood. The place he pinched earlier is already a dark patchy stain of a bruise.

Alright. Alright. He has to deal with this logically. As calmly as he can. Getting worked up about it makes the headache worse and incites auxiliary damage. What does he know, for sure, for sure: no guessing, no conjecture, no memory-digging, what does he know.

Thing one: he is, for better or worse, the thing that was once James Barnes.

Thing two: HYDRA fucked his memories.

Thing three: HYDRA worked real hard to keep him from getting them back, because it turns out the thing that was once James Barnes reverts to its original programming at the drop of a hat and its original programming is all about killing Nazis.

Thing four: HYDRA wanted him to kill Captain America.

Thing five: no matter what kind of soup-state his brain might be in, he is not fucking here to give any fucking Nazis any fucking thing they fucking want.

That’s what tips the scales, in the end. If HYDRA doesn’t want him to remember, then it’s in his best interests to show them a shiny metal middle finger before ramming it down their throats. And - it’s all - still in there. They cut his head off but it didn’t take. They tried to erase his original protocols but they wouldn’t go, they just got buried. They’re not gone. He can get them back. And he can do it. He knows how. He gets pushed facedown into a migraine every time but that’s nothing, comparatively. Nothing he hasn’t done before. After all, he knows very well how to survive that kind of blinding, brain-melting pain: bite down on something and power through.

If he can get through it that’s - worth it, surely. Right?

He should probably be writing this down.
Rolling upright and wiping his nose, Barnes-thing goes to his stack of notebooks - now hidden in an ammo box - and rifles through them until he finds a clean page. Writing things down is much more useful now that he has a whole month of episodic memory that isn’t straight nightmare roulette, and he has a feeling this situation is going to necessitate a fact table. Possibly even a flow chart.

He uncaps a Sharpie.

OPERATION REVERSE SKULLFUCK, he writes carefully, pausing to shake out his throbbing wrist, then adds, after some consideration and a consult with his phone, *november 23 2014.*

**OBJECTIVE:** *remember everything & regain access to episodic memory.*

**PROS:**

1. Higher likelihood of recalling tactically relevant intel. More enemy targets
2. Current operant conditioning results in suboptimal cognitive performance
3. What hydra wants hydra shouldn’t fucking get

**CONS:**

1. FUCK bucky barnes.
2. Torture memories
3. Headaches
4. Bad for brain maybe. Ask Google??

He considers this list.

As per the only actionable item, he asks Google. Google does not give him any new intel on brain damage that he did not already know. Surprise surprise, turns out there just aren’t that many fellow idiots out there with a combination of electroshock trauma, superserum healing and extremely violent conditioning knocking around in their heads. So. As the only existing expert on his particular flavor of bullshit, the only authority qualified to give him medical advice is, well. Him.

Barnes-thing is less than 100% confident about this.

Is he still going to do it? Yes. Yes. Yes, he fucking well is.

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Clint’s got a full kit in his bathroom, as befits a long-term safehouse. There are wigs, false noses, a medical kit fit to stock a field hospital and enough makeup to open a boutique; Natasha opens up all the cupboards and gets rummaging.

She doesn’t really look at her unmade face much, because what’s the point? It doesn’t tell her anything. Layering on a new face has always been such a basic survival necessity that there was no room left over for feeling any kind of way about it, and really, she’s never *not* wearing somebody, even if that somebody is Natasha Romanova, Off-Duty Superspy.

More recently, she just doesn’t care. Whatever lives under the layers of mask doesn’t show in her face anyway. The Real Natasha Romanova™, if there is such a thing, has nothing to do with what she looks like at all.

But what you look like still matters, and it’s always a message. It still affects what you do. It can, in the right circumstances, change who you are. Natasha digs out a massive packet of makeup remover pads and starts wiping.
Her face comes off in pieces. She hasn’t dyed her eyebrows or eyelashes in months so with her makeup off they don’t exist, the ginger hair fading out into her brow, her eyelids, her scalp where the roots have begun to grow. Her skin is pale and slightly patchy without foundation, patterned faintly with little fading scars, the last relics of teenage acne. She looks ghostly, unfocused, unfinished. Un-there.

Spies have to be careful. Spies have to hide. The Black Widow takes great pains to look like a real girl, a normal girl who won’t get a second look on a crowded street.

Superheroes don’t have to look like jack shit, except maybe, in certain circumstances, scary as fuck.

Well. Natasha can do that.

She rummages under the cupboard until she finds Clint’s electric shears, plugging them into the socket above the sink. Here’s the thing: she’d known she wasn’t baring it all when she dropped the INSIGHT files, because who she is isn’t in any files. She wasn’t risking anything, not really: risk means something a little different to people like Natasha, and the consequences of her choices weren’t going to be anything more than she could handle.

She’d expected some internal fallout, but not much. She had already said her goodbyes to anonymity when she first signed up to go Avengering, and she’d already dealt with it, too. For a month after the Battle of Manhattan she’d felt the loss of it so keenly her skin crawled every time she went outside, so she made a point of going outside every day, walking through crowds, pulling her hair away from her face. Signed a few autographs, even, stopped for a few selfies, and when she checked the #blackwidow hashtag on Twitter later she saw she was even smiling.

It was all one hundred percent survivable. It’s not in her not to seek out the next challenge, and she had imagined it as tempering herself, like ceramic, like steel: the soft parts of herself exposed to fire, either to anneal or burn away.

So she dropped everything on Insight Day, poured the entire SHIELD database into the slavering black hole of the internet. Whatever came of it, she would deal. The cost of this, like everything else before it, would not kill her.

And she can’t deny there was some - relief, there. There’s no going back to undercover work after this. No more hiding. There is no way out but forwards.

But then she kept acting just the same, for the most part. She can make all the excuses she likes - she was distracted, she was busy, she was working off a winning formula - but it doesn’t change the fact that she hasn’t been walking the walk, not every day, not where it counts. Withholding information, lying to Steve - for what? Treating her allies like marks. Telling herself it was necessary, keeping her backups, keeping all her little secrets and safeguards like it would somehow save her. She had thought she was baring it all but she wasn’t, she was barely scratching the surface, it’s not one-and-done, it never is, and it’s so unlike her, not to commit: what the hell is she doing? Half-assing things?

You can’t say you’re a superhero and still act like a spy.

She can play a different game now.

Natasha flips the clippers on and brings them to her head, taking off her hair one careful row at a time. The thick platinum strands land around her feet in fluffy coils, the hair starchy and stiff with the bleach job she put in two months ago; god, she’d pretty much walked out of the Congressional hearing and straight into a corner store, flat out desperate to lose every defining characteristic of
the Widow. She can admit to herself, now, that she had been running.

She makes sure to get rid of every trace of blonde.

It leaves her with about a centimeter of gingery roots: hedgehog bristles. Puppy fuzz. It’s cute, almost, if you ignore the hungry, crazy look in her eyes.

And now the ghostliness is a beacon, without the hair softening her face. No eyelashes, no eyebrows, just a bruised-looking mouth and whatever it is that looks out from Natasha’s eyes. The cords of her neck stand out starker, like this; if you look close you can see the knife scars on her collarbones, her chin. This face would never pass for a girl next door, unless maybe the building next door was some kind of prison.

She is not all things to all people at all times, but maybe it’s time to be at least one thing, all the time, to the whole world. Avenger. Hurt me, hurt mine, and the only guarantee is you will pay.

The thing that is not quite the Black Widow looks into a reflection that, if not honest, is at least much more accurate than before, and the rightness of it settles over her like an armored second skin. She is doing it right this time around. She is doing the right thing.

-o-

Barnes-thing considers leaving the USS Motherfucker for this, because the frequency with which his memories make him hurl means he wants to do this with a toilet no further than ten feet away - within arm’s reach, ideally - but in the end he decides against it. The idea of having to navigate and secure an unfamiliar space when he’s about to pull the rug out from under his entire brain is just a little too much to deal with, right now. He’s going to have to settle for a damp washcloth, a bowl of water and a gigantic bucket.

He makes sure the Motherfucker’s hatch is open - they’re somewhere in Mongolia, he’s pretty sure, and they’re high enough that the faint breeze blows in nothing but the smell of cold; he’s not happy about sacrificing invisibility, but they’re remote enough to compensate and Barnes-thing needs the air. He settles down in the corner, curls around his bucket and casts around for a suitable topic to go spelunking through his own memories for.

The first immediate thought is Rogers, which brings with it a warning twinge and a lurch in his stomach. Not Rogers. Maybe something - his family, he thinks. He had one. The internet said so. That should be pretty deep in there, right? Plenty to choose from. And he knows there’s some - sense memories, left over. He clamps down on the body’s cold tremor, its anticipation of pain, and focuses on the objective.

His family. His - mother, yes, alright. Alright. As good a place to start as any.

He squeezes his eyes shut and breathes through some counting exercises, making his heart rate as steady as he can make it. When he can’t justify a stall anymore he grips the bucket hard and pushes, pushes, chasing the memory of lavender, dough, gin, hands in his hair, his hair he got from his mother, Da taught him to shave but Mama showed him how to do his hair back, comb it down, make it behave. Here, this is how you braid - hold still, Becca, your brother needs to learn this, heaven knows I won’t have time with twins on the way. Jamie, darling, that’s now how you hold a baby, come here. Are you going with that Rogers boy again? Jamie, darling, I know he doesn’t go to church either but it’s different. Jamie, darling, you can’t let those boys get to you like that, you keep your head high - What did they call you?
There’s the face. High forehead, wild hair, brown eyes, she’s furious, wadding up her apron and throwing it down on the kitchen table. Tell me their names, she says, tell me their family’s names - we’re not having this again - GEORGE, she bellows, and when Da comes stumbling into the kitchen she takes Bucky’s arm and drags him over, take your son and teach him to box, she’s white-faced, she’s hurting him, teach him to hit so it hurts, she’s fixing her hairpins, picking up her handbag, rage like a forcefield burning around her. Winnie what’s the matter, Da says, Winnie where are you going, and later Winnie what did you do?

and he remembers his ma sitting at the kitchen table late at night with the candles burning, the light reflected in her eyes, and Bucky’s in what’s left of her pregnant lap and holding on, holding tight to the sarcophagal figure his ma has become. She says I told Connie Miller I’d tell her husband exactly what she does with the baker while he’s at work. She says I told Alice Brownright I’d tell her boss exactly how much she takes from the till each week. She says I told Mary Stockman I’d tell her husband and her daddy and her priest all about how she got rid of her last baby, and if they or any of their sons even think about that word and my family in the same thought ever again I’ll -

Her hands are tight in Bucky’s hair. We aren’t having this again. Jamie, darling, if any of those boys even look at you you damn well knock their teeth out.

Winnie, Da says, Winnie, you can’t just -

Go to bed, Jamie, but Bucky can hear them through the walls, my family didn’t come to this country for my son to be called a - just a word? JUST A WORD? that’s how it starts! You teach him to box, George Barnes, and when the babies come you’ll teach them too - I didn’t come here for my child to live like a dog -

and that time - picture - memory - is inextricably tied to another, seamless transition, and oh, god, of course Steve is here too. Steve short skinny redfaced Steve, picking up a brick and chucking it overarm at another boy, a boy Bucky saw a lot at the other end of a fist, and Steve made him fall down and cry and bleed because Rogers is crazy, he’s a nutcase, he shouldn’t be allowed near people and you two freaks can just -

And that’s where the boy runs away, because three-foot-high Steve has picked up another brick and is hefting it with a biblical sort of look his face. And Bucky’s getting up, he’s taking Steve’s hand, he’s taking Steve home he blurts Steve threw a halfbrick at John Brownright ‘cause he pushed me down the grocery cellar stairs and he knows that’s it, that was it, that was when his ma forgave Steve Rogers any faults real or perceived and adopted him and Aunt Sarah on the spot, because Winifred Barnes loved her family like a dragon and didn’t care how poor or Irish or bloody-minded a body was so long as they treated her people right.

That was why his mother never said nothing when he moved in with Steve. She - knew, he thinks, that they - they -

He loses time, there, a little. When he blinks back into himself he can vaguely register that it feels like something detonated inside his skull, but it’s passed the threshold where pain has any impact and it’s just noise, now, just one more thing the body is trained to ignore.

He googles james buchNaan banres again with shaky fingers, lying on his side and holding the phone up close to his face. It autocorrects for him and pulls up the results, and he taps through until it shows him the images. Visual confirmation. There she is. High forehead, wild hair, dark eyes.

There are two Barnes family portraits, old grainy browned photos scanned into the web, and in both she’s staring at the camera like she’s daring it to fucking try something. Her mouth is set, her
back is straight; her husband looks like a Santa Claus body double out of costume next to her, large and blurred and soft-looking. In one photo she’s got two swaddled babies in her arms and in the other she’s got both hands on a dark-haired little boy’s shoulders.

Barnes-thing ignores that smug-faced little twerp and taps back to the Wikipedia page, blinking away the watering in his eyes. Winifred Freyde Barnes, 1899-1963. What was he doing in the sixties? Bad - things. Bad things. Oh, god.

He can feel the tears sliding down his cheeks. He’s biting the fleshy base of his thumb so hard he’s split skin, an unspeakable noise pushing out from somewhere deep under his ribs. His mama. His head’s splitting open, his brain’s on fire, he - he remembers.

He doesn’t know why he’s surprised. This is always what mission success feels like.

When the tears finally stop he rolls his body over and presses his cheek to the cool metal of the floor. gasping. His whole face feels twice its size and his sinuses are on fire; there’s a dull pounding in his skull, like ocean surf, which is pretty believable given there’s enough snot coming out of his face to fill the damn South China Sea. He’s full of more past-past memories than he can ever remember having at a time but he feels - empty. Corpsed.

He got what he wanted, didn’t he. He got what he fucking asked for, didn’t he - he should have known, shouldn’t he, what he’d get if he tried to squeeze the fractured mess in his head and demand it produce results. He shudders. Mission success; objective completed. He can push past the conditioning. He can have the whole goddamn tragedy of his existence laid out for him like a buffet if he likes.

But hey, at least he didn’t throw up.

Barnes crawls to the edge of the hatch and sticks his hot, swollen face out, closing his eyes to feel the cold mist spread over his face. They’ve been drifting again: they’re up even higher now, the air thin and chill, the ground below obscured in rolling grey fog.

Barnes-thing awkwardly clambers out of the entry hatch, head pounding, eyes squinted and watering even in this dim grey light, and heaves himself onto the roof of the Motherfucker. He crawls over until he’s sat in the center, smooth metal on all sides; visibility is null after ten feet in any direction. Maybe they’re inside a cloud.

If Barnes tries to read right now he’s pretty sure his eyeballs will pop right out of his head in protest, but luckily he has a secondary coping mechanism. The ipod lives in an inner pocket of his jacket at all times now and it’s always blood-hot when he takes it out, the metal warm like flesh in his palm. He fumbles the little white headphones into his ears and clicks the button on the cord to make the music start.

It’s not the dubstep song this time, but he lets it play. Almost all the other tracks are slow meandering piano or just weird noises, and the booping and shushing doesn’t do much for him but it’s - something. It’s enough. He’s not sure he can handle the quasi-religious experience dubstep induces anyway, not right now, not when he’s already gone at his poor stupid brain with a meat tenderizer.

He lies back. He closes his eyes.

The ship drifts.

After a while a drizzle forms, thickening into a light rain. The water spatters down and makes tiny impact vibrations that Barnes can feel through his fingertips on the hull. It slides down his face and
soaks his clothes and makes his hair run in rivulets across the metal; he blinks through wet eyelashes and stares up into grey blankness and lets himself be nothing but an empty conduit for the faint tuneless plinking of piano keys.

It’s the ipod that leads him back inside eventually, the worry that the water will interfere with its little electronics and take away his music. He slumps back inside and stumbles over to the console, pants dripping, bones creaking like his body’s decided to act its age just this once. The seam where the metal joins his meat at the shoulder is so cold it burns.

He should probably… go somewhere else, he thinks fuzzily. He’s been floating around uncloaked for a damn long while. Who knows what’s caught sight of him while he flopped around bawling and feeling sorry for himself.

As if on command the fog parts below him, revealing a large multistory building in the middle of the steppe.

He’d cloak the ship but he can tell the whole thing’s abandoned at a glance, the dilapidated structure sagging at one end, the road leading to it cracked and riddled with green growth. Its roof is stained with water damage and windblown dirt; some exposed support beams have been rusted black and red. There’s nothing else for miles around, just this half-built complex in stone and steel, given up in the middle of nowhere.

Barnes feels cold, staring out at it through the windshield. Both his palms are pressed to the consoles and he’s very aware, suddenly, of the arc of that connection, an endless circuit loop that slides up through his arms, passes through his heart, cycles through his brain. The ship uses his body as hardware, as cognitive infrastructure: his brain is an essential component of its onboard computer. He is the ignition switch, the piece that makes the whole thing function and go.

He thinks of the first flight, of spinning up into space, of discovering the most fundamental human rules of steering just didn’t apply. You can’t just think of the action you want it to do. You have to imagine the end result of what you want.

Barnes-thing looks at the building below and imagines it detonating, exploding, the roof blossoming up and out in a chrysanthemum fireball of red and black and grey. He imagines glass shattering, pipes bursting, the very stones melting into the charred earth below. He imagines being satisfied.

Below him, the sound of the engines changes.

-o-

So. The Soldier has most likely broken with his former masters. There were reasonable hypotheses on either side of that equation, but Rumlow’s conviction tipped the scales. There is increasingly strong evidence that the Soldier is currently off on a vengeance bender that makes the last twenty minutes of Carrie look like a hippie handholding and forgiveness seminar.

The most skilled assassin in the world is rogue and operating on his own agenda, and Natasha’s honestly not sure if this is something that should give her the screaming meemies or not. On the one hand: yay, another survivor of brainwashing! On the other hand: people who survive that sort of thing typically don’t go on to a lifetime of sunshine and kitten hugging in a big happy meadow somewhere. What doesn’t kill you makes you a homicidal ghost story, and Natasha, who has been there done that, wants to say that she’s hopeful, but she remembers her first few years of freedom too well. You don’t come out of hell without dragging huge chunks of it with you, and damn near all the red in her ledger she incurred in the time when she answered to no one but her next mercenary paycheck. Just because she’s getting reports that say the Soldier is only killing
HYDRA agents might just mean nobody’s found the other bodies yet.

They’ll all just have to wait and see, won’t they, Natasha decides, knocking on the front door of an adorable English garden cottage in the abominably named town of Chorleywood.

Nick opens the door barely three seconds later, which means he saw her coming from far enough away that he had time to disengage all his frontal security precautions. “Hallo, guvnor,” Natasha says, cocking a hip and tipping an imaginary hat.

Nick makes a face of pure disgust at her accent and opens the door further to wave her inside. “Jesus. Quick, get in here before somebody hears you and calls the fucking police.”

Natasha follows him down the hall, inwardly marveling at his cream cable-knit sweater and grandfatherly corduroys. It’s not like she’s never seen him undercover, it’s just that Nick Fury is one of those people who was probably born in a black leather trenchcoat and will definitely be buried in it. Seeing him in comfortable brown loafers instead of combat boots makes one feel as if something has gone fundamentally wrong with the universe.

“What’s with the look?” Nick says over his shoulder, leading them into the kitchen, and oh, right, she’s not the only one looking a little different.

“Oh, you know. The stylist did my bangs wrong and I decided the whole mess had to go.”

“You look like a fifteen year old cancer patient,” Nick grunts, but he’s looking her over now, head to toe, and it’s only through familiarity and repeated application that Natasha no longer finds it neither threatening nor inscrutable.

She does resist the urge to do a sarcastic little twirl.

“Seriously,” Nick says. “What’s with the look?”

“Oh, I decided it was time for a change,” Natasha says blithely. “And then I went to therapy.”

“You mean you killed some assholes and then used Barton’s dumb blond act as a sounding board.”

“Well, you know my policy. Only talk about your feelings with people who are about to die.”

“Since Barton continues to be alive, and well, and a pain in my ass, I am going to have to call that bullshit,” Nick grunts, but now he’s pulling a teacup and a mug down and putting the kettle on boil, which means he’s established her haircut is not going to detonate and he can now be delighted to see her and give her lots of tea.

“Clint doesn’t count. Telling him anything is like telling my left elbow,” Natasha says, climbing up onto the kitchen counter to open the cupboard and reach the very top shelves. She grins when she sees the unlabeled metal tins up there. Nick always puts the tea on the top shelf and he always stocks his safehouses with tea.

“Your left elbow’s been running our entire HUMINT division that side of the Atlantic for the past six months,” Nick says, pulling out lemons and honey and jam. “Doing it well, too.”

“I know, I’m shocked as you are,” Natasha says, even though she’s nothing of the sort. She sorts through the tins - sugar, green tea, arsenic, cyanide - and selects the black tea to scoop over to Nick and picks up a lemon to slice. “Hill hasn’t texted me one single terrifying caricature of Clint being eaten by paperwork. Did you know she minored in art?”
“Yes,” Nick says, pouring the boiling water into the teapot to let the leaves steep. “And that’s because she’s been texting *me* horrifying caricatures of Stark being eaten by paperwork instead.”

Natasha gasps. “And she hasn’t been sharing them with *me*?”

“You birthday’s coming up, she’s compiling them into a scrapbook. And it’s a *surprise* so when you get it you’re going to be very surprised, understand?”

Natasha stares at him. “She knows when my birthday is? *I* don’t know when my birthday is.”

“She’s using the birthday of that arms dealer persona you liked.”

“Oh.” Being Naïa Rucinski the Polish arms dealer had been a fun six months of bossing people around and casually sabotaging a variety of human trafficking operations; Maria had been her primary handler on that op and they’d managed to bond despite the fact that Maria loves dogs and worships at the altar of coffee. “Huh. Maybe I’ll keep that one. What was she, a sagittarius?”

“December fifth,” Nick confirms, taking the teapot of zavarka and bringing the teacup and the mug to the table. “Although personally I’ve always seen you as more of a scorpio.”

“Vengeful and full of secrets, that’s me.” Natasha gets the big mug, topping it promptly with zavarka and plumping in two slices of lemon. God, it’s been ages since she’s had some proper tea.

“That’s still fucking disgusting,” Nick says, watching her dig a spoon into the jam and dump a generous portion right on top of the lemon. “You don’t even - for God’s sake, Romanova, at least take out the spoon.”

“Why would I take out the spoon?” Natasha says, taking a big boiling gulp, squinting at him from over the mug.

“Because it’s - never mind,” Nick sighs. “If you wanna get hit in the face with your cutlery every time you drink I am not the man who can stop you.”

“No man can stop me,” Natasha mutters, chugging some more and resolutely ignoring the spoon bumping into her cheekbone.

“Yeah, I heard.” Nick carefully places his teacup down and levels his best deadeye look at her. “Natasha,” he says. “What are you doing?”

“Why did I join the Avengers, Nick?” Natasha says. “Tactically, I mean. We all know it never would’ve been offered to me if there was any chance I could have stayed in covert ops.”

It’s a long, resentful minute before he answers. “Because you became too famous as a spy.”

“That’s right. And I was a little mad at first, I won’t lie, but when I really thought about it I understood it was a good thing. After all, who wants a career that ends because you get *too good* at it?” Natasha shrugs. “So now I’m just on to the next thing. This week that happens to be terrorist hunting. HYDRA’s much more organized than it should be, given the wringer everybody’s been putting them through, but they’ve splintered and I need to draw myself a faction map. Oh, and Rumlow’s dead, by the way.”

“I heard that too,” Nick says. “So did everybody else. Quite the message you sent.”

“And I’m going to send it again,” she says firmly. “A little louder this time.”

“Natasha,” Nick repeats. “What are you doing?”
“Why, I’ve decided to take the next step on my career path,” Natasha says sweetly. “Saving the world a couple times doesn’t make you a superhero, you know? Once is an accident, twice is coincidence… No, you have to be consistent. You have to mean it.” She stirs a slow clockwise circle in her tea. “You have to let people know that you’re not going to fuck around.”

“You want to, what, walk softly and carry the big stick?” Nick stares at her. “Natasha, far be it for me to tell you what to do, but that ain’t your fuckin’ style.”

“Exactly,” Natasha says. “I’ve done the walking softly bit. Now it’s time to stomp around and make people remember the stick. HYDRA thrives on secrets, Nick, and at this point I’m not inclined to give them so much as a pair of pants when it comes to some coverup.”

“Some secrets are necessary, Widow, you know that more than anyone,” Nick growls.

“Not secrets for the sake of secrecy,” Natasha says. “Not secrets if it means they hide - this.”

“Jesus,” Nick mutters. “Is this what happens when you spend too much time around Rogers? Is it communicable? Is no one immune?”

“When our biggest problem is Nazis, Nick, Rogers is kind of a leader in the field.”

“Natasha,” Nick says. “Just because the whole world has labeled Rogers ‘good’ and ‘best’ doesn’t mean he actually is. Or that bullheaded, balls-out, catastrophic righteousness is the ultimate victory condition path for him, let alone you. You gonna be a superhero? Good. You already are. And you did it your way. Remember that.”

Natasha looks at him. “Yeah,” she says. “But doing things like a Widow just because I’ve always done them like a Widow isn’t the ultimate victory condition, either. And the Widow didn’t see the Nazis, Nick. Rogers did.”

“I’m gonna say it again, Natasha: we noticed.”

“He noticed faster,” Natasha says implacably. “The second he saw the helicarriers he knew something was wrong. It’s twenty fourteen, Nick, not fast enough is not good enough anymore.”

She softens her face in peace offering. “If you’re worried about me turning into mini Cap, don’t. The KGB warned me very thoroughly of the dangers of Western capitalist propaganda.”

Nick glowers at her, but it’s the glower Natasha always chooses to interpret as fun-loving, forgiving and friendly. “We never shoulda took that bastard out of the ice.”

“Oh, but Nick,” Natasha chirps. “I’m meeting boys, I’m making friends. Don’t you want me to be well-adjusted?”

“Fuck your well-adjusted,” Nick says. “I want you to be happy. And the day you want well-adjusted more than you want winning is the day I get some salt, some pepper, some hot sauce and eat my entire eyepatch.”

Natasha smiles. “Does that mean Rogers can’t take me to prom?”

“Woman, Rogers should not take anyone anywhere, except maybe his own ass to therapy.”

“Oh, now you want him to go to therapy?”

“Now that I’m not his commanding officer and no longer responsible for a damn big chunk of the United States’ national security, yes, as a matter of fact, I do.”
“Fair,” Natasha concedes; it’s true that Steve is the high-functioning kind of fucked up, and Nick wouldn’t be a very effective leader if he didn’t put his agents’ optimal performance before their personal happiness. Personally Natasha thinks Rogers would do well with some de-escalation counseling and oh, you know, something to live for, but that entire situation has long gone out of her hands.

And into the Soldier’s, which is frankly a scenario that she straight up cannot think about at this point in time. “So,” Natasha says. “About those Nazis.”

Nick narrows his eye at her. “You got something planned. Don’t you.”

“I have some ideas,” Natasha says demurely. “Clint’s running a few things for me. We’re going to figure out who’s giving the orders now in the octopus knockoff association. And I want to call in a tech specialist. I’ve got reason to believe we may be looking at some weapons research that got loose and is currently in the wind.”

Nick nods. “I got a few guys who owe me favors. Ever met Tronenko? He does good work with the weird shit. Very discreet.”


Nick stares at her. “Oh no.”

“I just think it’s time to be a little more direct about things.”

“Oh no. Oh hell no. You want to call in Stark.”

“I want to call in Rhodes,” Natasha corrects innocently. “The fact that Stark comes as collateral is one hundred percent genuine coincidence.”

Nick puts his face in his hands for a long minute. “Deploying War Machine on this kind of op is going to take some serious doing,” he mutters finally, then sighs. “I’ll start calling in favors.”

“Call in mine, too,” Natasha says. “I’ll make some of my own calls, but for some it’s just so much more effective when someone else does it for you, right? The Black Widow remembers, Senator Jeff,” she intones in her best Deep Throat voice. “You scratch her back she’ll scratch yours. Ha! Spooky.”

Nick stares at her like he’s just realized she’s a couple Legos short of a full play set. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, I’ll say exactly that. Nevermind what I said about Rogers, you two deserve each other.”

“Don’t act like my sparkling personality wasn’t eighty percent of the reason SHIELD wanted me so bad,” Natasha says breezily.

“Yeah, and the other twenty was your fashion sense and interior decorating ability. What are you going to do, Natasha?”

Natasha smiles. “Verify a ghost story.”

Nick gives her a long, slow look. “Well. If anybody could catch him, it’d be you.”

“Nobody’s getting caught. I just want to talk.”

“Uh-huh,” Nick says skeptically.
Natasha shrugs. “If you find somebody else with better insight into the Winter Soldier’s plans and motives, hey, you let me know.”

“And you’re just going to… ask him.”

“Well, if nothing else he might answer me just for the novelty value. I doubt anybody’s asked him about his opinion on anything in - a while.”

“So your plan for handling the Winter Soldier is to be nice to him?”

Natasha raises her eyebrows. “Historically, being mean to him has not worked out.”


“And I’ll pull Rogers and Wilson back in,” Natasha says, satisfied. “We’ll have fun. It’ll be a party.”

“Oh Jesus.” Nick rubs his whole face again with both hands. “Where the hell are those two idiots, anyway?”

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“I thought you said you were good at boats!”

“No, I said I went kayaking once at summer camp and broke my arm going over a waterfall, and this is not a boat, Steve, it’s a little fiberglass slice of hell.”

“It’s a canoe. Or whatever’s Croatian for canoe. I heard the guy say it.”

“I don’t care if it’s Poseidon’s favorite left toenail,” Sam growls, dogpaddling in place. “How the fuck do we get back in it.”

“Weren’t you in pararescue? Didn’t you do this shit three times before breakfast and twice after lunch?”

“Aren’t you a supersoldier? Can’t your ass turn into a fish or a squid or a person who doesn’t flip us out of boats?”

“We both flipped. Out of this canoe.”

“Yeah, and now both of us are in the water, where we will stay unless we can figure out how to get back in this goddamn unspecified aquatic vehicle.”

“Point,” Steve says, also dogpaddling, his oar clenched under his arm. “Alright. We can do this. It’s all about leverage, right?”

They consider the aquatic vehicle. It’s bright yellow, sturdy plastic, and very clearly mocking them. “If I jump up on this side,” Steve says, staring it down, “and you jump up on that side, at the same time, it should balance out. Right?”

“Right,” Sam growls, “On three,” and they both leap up, misjudge the distance and go sailing over opposite sides of the canoe. This time it flips upside down with them.

“Again,” Sam growls, resurfacing like the world’s handsomest snapping turtle.

This time they smack their heads together before ending up in the water, where Sam’s escaped oar
very nearly gives Steve a second asshole. The canoe bobs merrily beside them.

“Alright, that thing’s definitely possessed,” Sam decides, spitting up some river. “And now you made it angry. You shouldn’t’ve called it a canoe.”

“It’s a fucking canoe and it will not win,” Steve growls, grabbing at its evil plastic hull. They had gone to the beach; they saw the tourists, the screaming children, the hundreds of Coke cans and cigarette butts, and lasted all of fifteen minutes before hightailing it back to the town square. “No, c’mon, we can’t give up,” Sam had said staunchly, and Steve, desperate, had pointed at a touristy shop window that boasted **AMAZING RIVER TOURS WHITewater KAYAK!**

So now here they are, repenting for sins past, present and future by way of divine punishment, inflicted via unspecified aquatic vehicle.

“Alright,” Steve says. “We’re gonna swim to that rock. And I’m gonna brace myself on that rock. And we are going to get into this fucking canoe or die trying.”

They do not die trying. They do, however, need three more attempts and have to climb onto the bank and leave the water entirely just to get back into its traitorous banana-yellow embrace.

When they’re both seated and just sort of drifting, emotionally cored by their ordeal, Sam looks up, looks at the river, then looks at Steve. “Shit. What direction did we come from?”

They both look around. The river banks on both sides are remarkably identical in either direction.

“Where was the sun? Were we facing the sun?”

“I don’t know! It was right overhead!”

“Wait,” Sam says. “Wait, we were going downstream. There’s only… one way to go. Downstream.”

They look at each other.

“Are we getting stupider?” Sam demands. “Is that it? Are we getting dumber? Is this what vacation does to you? Tell me the truth, white man, can you feel your brain cells dying?”

“I should have just let the Chitauri win,” Steve says bleakly, leaning back as far as he can in his plastic seat to stare up at the heavens. “It would’ve been best, really.”

“We can never tell anyone about this,” Sam decides. “Any of this. We’re badasses. We got an image to protect.”

“Natasha will know,” Steve says, still staring blankly at the searing blue sky. “She’ll just look at us and she’ll know.”

“Oh, Jesus. Is it possible to die of stupidity?”

“Yours or someone else’s?”

“Nevermind. That was a stupid question.”

“But not the stupidest one we’ve asked today,” Steve points out. “So on average, things are looking up.”

“On average, we’re supposed to be the smartest things in this river,” Sam says. “By a magnitude of like nine million. Instead we’ve established that we’re about on par with this - seaweed? Is this...
seaweed?”

“I’ve stopped asking those kinds of questions.”

“Christ. That’s it. Let’s go. We good to go? We good to free ourselves from this fucking nature prison?”

“I do have to eat again soon,” Steve admits, because he’s learned the hard way it’s better to seem the glutton than stay quiet and turn into a carb-hunting zombie.

“Well get paddling, white man. I forgot to bring the sunscreen tube with us and I gotta reapply every three hours.”

Steve squints at Sam’s back. “I thought you … y’know… couldn’t get sunburn.”

Sam rolls his eyes so hard Steve can pretty much see it through the back of Sam’s head. “Oh my god, white man.”

Chapter End Notes

Natasha @Rumlow: You don’t win against the Russians, Brock. Unless you’re ten thousand Mongols on very small horses. Are you ten thousand Mongols on very small horses, Brock? No? I didn’t think so.

If you want an idea of what Bucky’s little musical revelation might sound like, imagine this, but, like, bass-boosted and run a couple times through a greasy white guy’s remixing preferences.
human

Chapter Summary

please see chapter end notes for content warnings!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Well, Barnes thinks blankly, staring at the billowing crater below him. The USS Motherfucker is definitely… definitely not a lifeboat.

He has no clue what the hell the ship just did, what kind of… missile or laser or what it just dropped into poor unsuspecting Mongolia, and it’s still - singing all around him, an eerie high-pitched hum just on the edge of aural discomfort. It’s a noise that seems to resonate not just from the ship but from his own goddamn bones.

Slowly, carefully, moving like a man with a jar of acid balanced on his head, Barnes takes his hands off the console. The unearthly whine dies back until it’s just the usual low engine hum. The clouds of smoke and steam below are dissipating, revealing a hole that could comfortably fit an eighteen wheeler; parts of the crater are still bubbling.

Barnes should probably get the fuck out of here.

Once again he flees the scene of the crime, except this time it’s a little less stolen MP3 player and a little more stolen WMD. The Motherfucker’s engine sounds completely normal again, but Barnes is careful to steer them away from inhabited territory. If he accidentally looks wrong at a goddamn children’s hospital or something he doesn’t want Motherfucker to cheerfully liquefy it off the face of the earth.

He has no idea where he ends up, only that it’s in deep forest somewhere, hints of frost on the carpet of pine needles and moss. A fox scrambles away into the trees as Barnes uncloaks the Motherfucker and more or less drops it unceremoniously into the dirt.

Then he pops the hatch and jumps out, because he needs to look at its ass.

Barnes stomps around it in a circle, and, seeing nothing, puts his hands on his hips and glares. “Go on!” he snaps. “Float. Get up there. Don’t fucking look at me like that, you do it any second my back’s turned, I know you know how - ”

Motherfucker bobs up off the ground, hovering at head height. Barnes ignores its air of wounded uncertainty and ducks under to see if anything’s changed.

The outside of the ship looks exactly the same as it always has, which, fucking great, not only does he have no clue what kind of weapons Motherfucker has, he has no idea where the goddamn mystery lasers are even coming from. He’s sure as shit not going to do any target practice, because bombing things is the fastest way to draw serious international attention, even if it is in the middle of nowhere. All his cloaking technology isn’t worth jack when he’s blown a goddamn hole in the ground. Shit. He’s probably just implicated Mongolia in some kind of weapons proliferation program.
Motherfucker bobs a little in the air before slowly drifting down to earth again. If it was a dog it’d be giving him the definitely-wasn’t- me- who-ate-the-ham look. “I’m not mad at you,” Barnes snaps at it. He’s - not. It gave him exactly what he wanted. Exactly what he wanted. He had to have imagined the faint, foreign sense of bewilderment that echoed up through his palms just before he’d taken his hands off the console, because the alternative is putting another point in the Possibly Sentient column and he is not equipped to deal with this shit.

Maybe Motherfucker doesn’t have weapons. Not actual weapons. Maybe it just - felt him, the flat dead rage inside of him, and maybe all it did was pull it out and give it form. For all he knows that’s exactly how it works, and all he needs to do to turn the nearest structure into boiling slag is emote at it. Thanks, aliens.

Barnes-thing shudders and turns away from the ship. At least blowing up bits of Mongolia is an apparently foolproof way to get over an Olympic-class crying jag. He’s not exactly calm, but things have been - put into perspective. Enough feeling sorry for himself. It’s not like crying will undo anything.

Neither will murdering fascists, but hey, it does feel better.

Winifred Barnes, 1899-1963. She was Bucky’s but it’s the Barnes-thing that has the memories now. Bucky’s dead and he’s not coming back but he sure left a lot of shit lying around, and it’s all landed squarely in Barnes-thing’s lap. It’s not going anywhere.

He squares his shoulders. If retrieving his episodic memory means digging up all of Bucky’s crap, well, fine. If getting everything else back means choking down Bucky’s sloppy fucking seconds then so be it. He’ll take it. He’s been through worse. If this is the only prize at the end of this fucking rainbow, then by god, at least it will be his. At least he’s fucking earned it.

It’s not like he’s got a choice, anyway.

Barnes kicks a tree root, swears, and stomps back to the ship. “I’m not mad at you,” he mutters at Motherfucker, climbing back in and going to the console. He sighs. “I’m just. Mad.”

Feeling like a sodden dishrag and having just nuked Mongolia, Barnes decides to do the smart thing for once and lay low for a little while. He chooses to do this in Australia, on the basis that no matter what state he shows himself in, he will almost certainly always be the least insane thing any Australian has seen on any given day. There are some vague recollections of running some joint mission with an SAS squad that make Barnes very sure of this.

Also, there’s pretty much nothing for Motherfucker to destroy if Barnes accidentally has a feeling in the Outback. The photos of it on Google are reassuringly barren.

As such, Australia proves… restful. Selecting his most harmless civilian disguise, Barnes goes out in the lavender cardigan, combat boots and Pink Mistake pants in order to acquire more supplies. This is a success: the cashier at the gas station compliments him on his attire. (He assumes it’s a compliment. The tone is very friendly despite the content being mostly unintelligible and containing words like “you’re a right sick cunt, mate.”) Having preemptively googled the local wildlife - because llama spit is something that stays with a man no matter how much soap or brain damage is involved - Barnes comes prepared and appropriately cautious and only has to run away from an enraged kangaroo once. (And thereafter starts checking whether shrubbery has any local wildlife lurking inside before he takes a piss in it.)

It’s a relatively harmless few days, parking Motherfucker somewhere in the bush before dawn and trekking back after dark, exhausting himself by executing an unprecedented number of human interactions during the daylight hours. On one day he has to do four in a row, when he
inadvertently reveals to the owner of a tiny hole-in-the-wall soup joint that he speaks Vietnamese and she keeps sending her son and then her daughter over to ask him if he wants any more to eat. His words accept and then refuse in nice, polite, normal tones; his knuckles whiten on the bench seat under the table and it’s like he’s watching, outside, while his face smiles and talks like a particularly sophisticated puppet.

(He has yet to complete a single interaction without the Bucky-programming taking over. The instance with Greasy seems, depressingly, to have been an anomaly.)

Still, it’s socialization, technically, which the internet says is good for him. It’s an acceptable expenditure of resources and energy and does a good job tiring him out. And of course there’s his nightly bath. Everything becomes just a little bit more tolerable when he knows there’s a solid chunk of time that will be the same every day, and locating a viable building, securing the room for the night, taking his bath and then sneaking out the window to go sleep in the Motherfucker is its own kind of routine.

The internet says routine is important. Barnes-thing’s decades of goddamn experience say routine is the fastest way to get killed. He compromises by never staying in the same city/town/two-shack cattle station twice and only moving Motherfucker at night, which forces him to adjust his circadian rhythms accordingly. This is harder than it sounds; between all the travel between timezones and his body’s complete lack of self-regulation, he’s been sleeping irregularly at best and usually not at night. He had no idea he was so out of sync with normal human 24-hour days until he actually had to live in them.

He very carefully does not poke any more at his brain. The knowledge that sooner or later he’ll have to go digging for memory again is sitting inside him like a cheery little landmine, but he convinces himself that he’s not ignoring it, he’s just… letting things percolate. Taking a necessary period of leave to fortify his position for the next sally. The cramped, rabid little part of him that’s got a deathgrip on his survival instincts just barely accepts this, but he manages to push through.

Overall, though, Australia is fairly painless. He buys a charger cord from another gas station with minimal difficulty when the ipod’s little battery bar turns from green to red; watching it charge makes small muscles relax around his mouth and eyes. He sees people walking around with those same headphones in, the cords disappearing into their pockets, but Barnes is too paranoid to even take his ipod out of his most secure inner pocket unless he’s either inside or within ten feet of the Motherfucker. The Motherfucker, though: cautious testing in the middle of the nighttime desert confirms that no, he can’t just fire some death lasers by feeling angry feelings and looking at something. Visualizing a future in which that something violently explodes, now, that’s probably the trigger.

Barnes very carefully does not pull it. He’s pretty happy with not violently disintegrating anything for a while.

So, Australia is - good. The scratches from the kangaroo heal quickly, especially on his face, and the scars they leave are pretty small; his beard mostly covers them, even if he does have to admit he’ll need to trim it soon. When adjusting to a strict diurnal schedule produces pockets of insomnia, Barnes lies on the floor of the ship and listens to the dubstep and exhausts himself by thinking very strictly about nothing at all.

It’s his hair that drives him out of there, after barely two weeks of blazing ninety degree heat. His hair’s mostly grown out, growing quickly and kind of haphazardly, but these days he operates at a higher level of hygiene and knows what a fucking hair tie is. He goes through them at a rate of two a day, trying to keep it all off his sweaty neck, but they’re cheap - free, when he pockets them and strolls out of the store. He even considers cutting it again, but an unfortunate experiment with a motel blowdryer sends him into a full-blown episode and produces a dim, fractured memory of
shaving his own head, somewhere early on in his de-nazification process. How the fuck did he swing that. If the blowdryer has him cowering in the chipped motel bathtub for most of the night then how on earth did he manage to use electric shears.

Another goddamn learning experience. Surprise surprise, his brain does not like loud mechanical noises very close to his skull.

But poking at his hair leads to poking at the body, and it’s not the worst thing ever to discover that he looks - better. More passable in public. Another side effect of improved nutrition and routine hygiene procedures, most likely. His skin isn’t grey or red with rashes anymore, his nails aren’t cracked or flaking, and his freshly regrown hair is a far cry from the limp, frayed mess he had before.

He’s glad to lose the rashes, since leather and canvas and Kevlar aren’t exactly the gentlest of fabrics and now he’s actually starting to notice that, but he’s not sure how he feels about the hair. It itches on his chest and groin and turns into a tangled nightmare on his head. Using one of the little motel shampoos only makes it triple in volume, curliness and frizz; he ends up jamming another fucking hat over it after it snaps three of his hair ties and tries to eat his comb. The real Bucky used to slather the whole mess with smelly liquid to make it behave, but Barnes-thing doesn’t know if that stuff is even made anymore. The real Bucky had a lot less hair to deal with, too. Maybe the future has something else.

It better have something. He does not like hats.

Barnes, faced with the dual understanding that he A) needs a wider variety of hair products and B) should probably stop brutally rejecting all things Original Bucky if he wants Operation Reverse Skullfuck to be a success, realizes he should do a very stupid thing.

Well. Given the month he’s had, going to New York probably can’t make it any worse.

-o-

Nobody looks twice at him. Most make the effort to avoid looking even once. Why did he think he’d disappear most effectively in the Outback? He should have come here right away. A man in a neon pink ballgown and a series of balloon animals taped to his shopping cart of belongings shuffles past down Broadway and people do their damnedest to make sure they barely notice him, let alone remember his face. Hiding here is as simple as making sure he looks outrageous.

Outrageously homeless, anyway. Nothing turns you invisible faster than asking people for money.

So: exactly like every other major city in the world.

It’s not - familiar. He can’t call it that. There’s nothing he can point to and say this thing, this memory, this pile of garbage, this greasy hot dog stand: ah yes, here I am, my childhood. Which is - good, considering his last jaunt down memory lane ended in tears, dry heaving and a literal smoking hole in the ground. He came here to try and shake something loose without having to go spelunking in the mire of his own brain, and if he hasn’t really remembered anything, well, he hasn’t puked, destroyed property or killed anyone either.

Probably best that New York just feels like - a city. Both for him and for New York.

But he is at home in cities. More than he should be, even with practical considerations taken into
account. Crowds should bother him - and they do strain his threat estimate capabilities somewhat - but with his head down in a throng is where he feels really, truly invisible. Not comfortable, really, but Barnes suspects that’s more because in this day and age he wouldn’t recognize comfortable if it slapped his ass and called him sweetheart. But being in a crowd feels strangely like - homeostasis, equilibrium. Like the pressure inside is being matched perfectly by the pressure outside.

He’s glad this isn’t territory he has to cede to Bucky, at least.

He’s got no real objective - nothing beyond ‘poke the brain and see what shakes loose’, anyway - so he wanders like a tourist, in his backpack and ballcap and hardwearing clothes. He landed Motherfucker on a roof somewhere in the Bronx, so he crossed into Manhattan on the Third Ave Bridge just as the sun began to rise; it takes him most of the morning to walk all the way downtown and it’s late afternoon when he crosses the bridge into Brooklyn.

That is when the tell-tale pressure of estranged familiarity starts to build in his head, he doesn’t even know at what, maybe just the fucking - name of the borough, christ - and that’s usually his cue to find somewhere quiet and defensible to throw up in. Luckily, another thing the city is good for is giving him plenty of distractions.

Now that music is something his brain notices, it notices it all the time. It’s everywhere. It jumps out of open storefronts, out of passing cars, comes doppler-ing by from bicyclists with speakers duct-taped to their handlebars. He follows one particularly beguiling strain across two streets and down another until he’s suddenly surrounded by trees, and realizes he’s walked right into Prospect Park.

But the music won’t let his brain start twitching about that, and the song is still leading him, pulling him on, so he goes. He crosses a mowed lawn and edges around a playground full of screaming children and ends up stepping onto one of the blacktops, a square of paved asphalt tucked off the bike path, not really secluded but not one of the high-traffic public areas either.

The music is coming from a big radio-looking thing placed on the ground. There’s five kids around it, in sweatpants and ball caps, some with elbow pads, all ranged around a couple of pieces of cardboard laid on the ground. A few of the kids are doing some kind of footwork shuffle. Occasionally they’ll shout things at a sixth kid, who is currently monopolizing the cardboard by spinning around upside down on it on his head.

Barnes steps onto the asphalt just as the spinning kid does something that makes his whole body leap like a salmon. Then the song’s bass kicks in, and then -

Barnes-thing, after a while, becomes aware that he’s staring. He doesn’t care. The kid is - how is the kid doing that. It’s like - somersaulting, but...sideways? And on his shoulder blades? And now he’s spinning on his hands, what the fuck. It’s like the kid learned gymnastics from a squirrel. It’s like the music got into the kid somehow and made him fly.

Barnes wants it.

“Hey,” one of the kids calls sharply; he’s glaring at Barnes, his skinny chest puffed out in teenaged belligerence. “Lookin’ ain’t free, man, you want a show you pay for it.” A ballcap gets whipped off and brandished in Barnes’ direction.

Barnes fumbles his latest roll of stolen HYDRA cash out of his pocket and tosses the whole thing into the hat.

“Holy shit,” the kid says, eyes wide.
“Teach me that,” Barnes says. He points at the cardboard. “That. Teach me.”

“Heh,” the kid says, looking highly unprepared to follow through on the premise of the transactional relationship he has presented here.

“Shit, man, he just threw bank at us, we gon teach him whatever he likes,” a kid in an orange ballcap announces, stepping forward. “You wan’ breakdance, man?”

“We don’t want him to, like, hurt himself,” a kid in a blue ballcap hisses, grabbing Orange Ballcap’s arm. “What if he fuckin’ breaks his arm and sues or something? White people sue, man, they’ll sue for anything.”

“I won’t break my arm,” Barnes promises. “Or sue.” Christ. Suing people. Kid, there are much more efficient ways to resolve interpersonal conflict, and he’s wearing the top five in an assortment of holsters and sheathes all over his body.

Not that the kid needs to know that. “Teach me,” Barnes repeats, then, another long-rusted chord twanging inside him, he tries, “Please?”

“Shit, man,” Orange Ballcap says, and then “Aight, so - ”

What follows is a kind of lecture by committee, since nobody here appears to be capable of speaking without pawing at at least one other person or interrupting someone else first. It’s mostly just milling and yelling until Orange Ballcap announces, “No, okay - no, not like - okay, look, man, you just kinda do this,” and proceeds to throw himself down at the cardboard to start spinning.

That’s exactly what Barnes assumed the teaching would be in the first place, so he just takes a step back and pays attention.

Things get somewhat… involved. Orange Ballcap, whose name turns out to be Jarrell, is a talented and highly skilled individual. He has a very high level of muscle control and bodily awareness and would likely do very well with some combat training. His comrades Marcus, Kevin, DeShawn, Tyler and Tyler - differentiated by codenames Big T and Lil T - are all equally skilled and dexterous, despite none of them possibly being older than fourteen and one of them having a mouth full of serious dental wiring and a pair of thick goggle-like glasses held on by a brightly colored elastic strap. All of them insist on taking a turn and showing him some moves. Barnes would offer to teach them how to break someone’s neck with minimum effort and maximum efficiency in return, if it weren’t against protocol to unnecessarily reveal his combat skills to civilians.

Barnes fights hard against his protocols these days, but when they occasionally line up with common sense, he’s learned to just live with it.

And then the cardboard is empty and it’s his turn, after DeShawn finishes demonstrating some particularly complicated spinning that ends in a kip-up. Barnes does a quick check to make sure nothing will slip free or fall and his jacket won’t fly up and accidentally reveal his arsenal and throws himself onto the cardboard.

At first it’s just a matter of swinging himself around on his forearms, building up speed until he doesn’t need his arms anymore. He feels the knife between his shoulderblades dig in as he lands on it, but he doesn’t care because then momentum kicks in and suddenly he’s flying.

It is exactly as excellent as it looked.
Jarrell is also very encouraging. “Look at you go, man!” he shouts. “Look at you! Look at you go, you breakdancing.”

It is very pleasant. The fundamental mechanics of the dance are not that difficult, or at least not to someone who has trained under conditions that have made Spetznaz veterans cry. Performing before an audience does not bother him, even if he keeps expecting to be surrounded by stiff men in brown uniforms instead of loud, restless teenagers that can apparently only communicate via overexcitement and burgeoning testosterone. The teenagers themselves are welcome company; they are being very kind. They change the songs on their radio to try different tempos and do not hesitate to shoulder him out of the way to show him another move the second it occurs to them that there’s more they haven’t tried.

Barnes understands that his movements, while technically flawless, lack the fluidity of motion that came so naturally to the kids. That is fine. He is not graded on grace, only technical execution.

Still, it is very satisfying to learn something new. He already knew how to do the splits, but now he can do them while spinning around upside down on one elbow.

Finally, when all of the kids have stripped off a layer of jacket or sweatshirt and even Barnes is feeling sweat slide down the backs of his knees, he straightens up off the cardboard and breathes deep. Big T and Kevin have retired to the curb with their phones; DeShawn is determinedly doing pushups a few feet away, occasionally pausing to shove his glasses back up. Barnes looks around for Jarrell and then points at their big radio. “Got any more songs like that?”

“Bruh,” Jarrell says, and suddenly every single kid has bounced up, produced a phone and is yelling all at once. Barnes takes a hasty step back and waits for their collective screaming lemur impression to resolve into something coherent.

“Do we got more songs,” Jarrell finally wins out, by dint of repeating himself and yelling louder than everybody else. “Do we got songs. Do we. Bruh. Fam.”

“Play him some Kendrick,” someone hollers, and it all dissolves into yelling again.

He gets told something about tides, or maybe tidal waves, or possibly it might have been titles? and someone wants Barnes to look at someone’s cousin’s sound cloud, which sounds complicated and kind of alarming. Everyone’s cracking pubescent voices are blurring into one; Barnes can tell when DeShawn is speaking, due to his serious dental hardware, but he also can’t tell what the fuck DeShawn is saying, also due to his serious dental hardware. Jarrell once again wins out by sheer volume.

“- Just - shutup shutup - look, man, you got spotify? Get spotify. There’s a free version, it’s got all kinds of tunes.”

“I,” Barnes says, and after a split-second of hesitation he digs inside his jacket for his ipod. “I have this. Can I put more music in this?”

“What, you run out of space?”

“No. Don’t think so.”

“Then yeah, you can. You got a cord for it?”

“Yes.”

“Plug it in the computer,” Jarrell says; he seems to have caught on that Barnes is not exactly operating on the same wavelength as the average man on the street and is interacting accordingly.
“Itunes will pop up, or you can download it online if you don’t have it, the instructions are all on there. But forreal, man, get spotify, it’s lit.”

“Thanks,” Barnes says, then pauses. “One more question. What’s twerk?”

Jarrell’s eyes go round. “Bruh,” he says, actually reaching for the kids on either side of him as if to steady himself. A chorus of oooohs goes up. “Bruh.”

“What is it?” Barnes repeats warily, his hands drifting out to his sides. It’s a word he heard repeated several times in the songs just now and he knows he’s come across it somewhere before; it seems like it’s considered to be something important but he didn’t except to elicit this kind of reaction.

“Today is the first day of the rest of your life, bruh,” Jarrell says earnestly, now tapping at his phone.

“Not again,” Barnes says.

“Check it,” Jarrell says reverently, showing him the phone. Everybody clusters around them immediately; Barnes recognizes the YouTube logo and reads the title bar proclaiming Twerk Team International 2K14 Twerk Pro!! Tinny music starts coming out of the phone. “Check this shit out.”

Barnes checks it. After a moment he tilts his head. “That’s… twerking?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.”

Barnes tilts his head some more. “And people just… do that?”

“Sometimes on live TV.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, man. Yeah.”

-o-

Barnes slips back to where he parked Motherfucker, on an auto repair garage roof in the middle of the night. His New York Experiment went far better than he expected, but he’s still itchy enough inside that he won’t let them spend the night. Really, it’s best if he leaves now, before he inevitably gets kneecapped by a flashback and tries to punch out the Statue of Liberty.

Besides. Barnes has something of a preoccupation now. They don’t go far, just a few states over into Iowa, where Barnes spends the entire time it takes to locate a motel and start his bathing procedure practically vibrating with the need to pull out the ipod and hear some music.

He spends seven hours on the motel floor that night, latest laptop on his still-damp knees, meandering through the internet. He starts out googling that twerking business again, to corroborate Jarrell’s claims, and somehow it’s abruptly six hours later and he’s watched a movie
called *Step Up*, a documentary about the history of dance and fourteen clips of something called *Dancing With The Stars*. He isn’t sure how many music videos came after that, but it’s probably in the low hundreds.

There are *so many different types of dancing*. Fast dancing, slow dancing, dancing that looks like fighting, dancing that looks like sex, dancing that essentially *is* sex. Dancing where people inexplicably whack each other with crutches and wear nylons on their heads. And the *music*. The stuff from the ipod is good, but the Internet has *so much more*, and it’s making Barnes *feel things*.

He sleeps even less than usual that night and wakes up at dawn from a very confused nightmare which featured Pierce telling the asset about his poker face while wearing highly impractical footwear and a sequined blue leotard. Barnes bolts upright in cold sweat and holding two handguns - as usual - but this time he can identify there is more bewilderment churning in his gut than terror.

Which he supposes is progress. Of a sort.

Still. Maybe no more of that Gaga Lady for a while.

-o-


“What?”

“Steeeeeeve. You know what we should do?”

“Get home without getting arrested?”

“Wow. First time I’ve heard you say that. No, no, listen: we should get *married.*”

“Oh, this again. Tell me, Barnes, where could we even do that?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Bucky says, riding high on the feeling of Steve’s arm around his waist and the uplifting influence of four Dirty Shirleys in his stomach. What a night. Even the bartender had a flower in his hair and lipstick the same shade as his tie, and he’d blown Bucky a kiss every time Bucky swung by for another drink.

Bucky fucking *loves* queer bars, he’s decided just now. *But*: there are more pressing things that demand his attention. “There’s gotta be places we can do it,” he says, slurring only a little bit. “France. Timbuktu. The moon! Yeah!” He punches the air, delighted by his own genius. “‘S’settled. We’re getting married on the moon. We jus’ get an alien to play priest and rub our giant space helmets together ‘stead of kissing!”

“Yeah, and instead of exchanging rings I’ll just chuck a moon rock at your head,” Steve says, but he’s laughing, tugging at Bucky when he says it, his hand hot and hard on the curve of Bucky’s waist, his hip. “Sure. Why not. We’ll eat space dust for cake and honeymoon on Mars.”

“Just a coupla queers in space,” Bucky declares happily, stumbling along at Steve’s side, happy to be led.
“We’ll be a coupla queers in jail if you keep up that volume,” Steve says, quieter, like he’s not the one who spends every fucking moment of his life doing everything he can to get arrested. Then, “You had a good time?”

“Yes,” Bucky enthuses, delighted to be asked. “Steve, I love your friends. I love your bar. I love -”

“Jesus, keep it down,” Steve says, kind of strangled, clapping his hand over Bucky’s mouth. “People are sleeping.”

“I love you,” Bucky says against his palm, not caring that it comes out as mush. Steve knows. He loves him. He loves him. He’ll say it again.

The Barnes-thing wakes up.

He knows that’s a memory, because dreams never make that much sense. They’ve never come back in sleep before and never so painlessly but he knows. That - happened. Bucky had been drunk and disorderly that night but he remembered and the, the - feeling of it, the shape of the memory, the whole thing was like a well-worn groove. Something well-traveled, kept close and examined often.

Well.

It’s not like this is a shock. Barnes is well aware that Rogers isn’t going after this like a dachshund with a rogue chewtoy just because he’s got nothing better to do. Not ‘cause they were just friends, either. Normal people don’t do that, not even for a war buddy who’s taken a bullet or two for you. Not when there’s this kind of collateral involved.

Then again, it’s not like Rogers is a paragon of normal. Beacon of idiocy, sure. Common sense, not so much. And if Rogers just wanted to regain control over an incredibly valuable weapon, you’d think he’d at least be smarter about it. So far the closest Rogers has gotten to that is physically chasing Barnes through a cave with all the grace and tactical insight of a headless chicken.

But Rogers makes Barnes’ brain try to turn inside out, and the one thing every intel source agrees on is that Rogers was definitely his commanding officer, if not his very first then certainly the one that made the most lasting impression. And Barnes is not sure he wants anyone to have any kind of command over him ever again.

He’s going to have to dig into this Rogers thing, isn’t he.

Fine. Fine. He’s proven he can push through the brain-block conditioning without catastrophic costs to functionality, and no, the whole lasers in Mongolia part of it doesn’t count. If this most recent memory was an anomaly, if it all doesn’t start to come dripping back in dreams he’ll still do it. If a couple hours of crying and a mule kick of a migraine is the worst of the price then fine. He can pay.

As for nonphysical costs. Can’t be worse than remembering he forgot his own mother. Barnes is well aware his baseline of, well, normalcy is screwed to high heaven, but even he can tell that’s Bad. Not everything that makes him feel like hammered shit is Bad, but he’s pretty goddamn certain that this would make the list.

He’s not always so certain about other things.

Rogers - fucking - scares him. He can admit it, he can, jesus, he will stop shying away from this inside his own damn brain. He can feel it shivering inside him like a damn neurosis maraca. That
dream doesn’t change the tactical landscape: Rogers was - is - a threat. Rogers was his commanding officer.

But it - it wasn’t, it can’t have been all bad. It can’t have been all bad. Anything that makes him sick and shaky is almost always that way because HYDRA made it so, he knows. And that dream was -

Not everything that makes him feel bad is Bad. His body just has distorted and disproportionate responses to certain stimuli. This is a proven and provable aftereffect of trauma. And HYDRA had a vested interest in poisoning all of Bucky Barnes’ original allegiances. It would be in their best interests to distort Barnes’ regard for Captain America and leave only the confusion, the fear, the body’s afterimages of war.

The body hid the rest of it. The body slipped him a note, under a door, in a dream.

Barnes knows what he has to do.

He directs Motherfucker to South Dakota, which google tells him has four times as many cows as people. That seems like that’ll be enough to give them plenty of deserted places to systematically lose their shit in. He flies low and close to the landscape, mostly, for the obvious reasons, so he drifts them until they’re under tree cover and have been for miles. He’s got enough protein bars and MREs and water in the cabin to last him a while; he’s willing to sacrifice access to a flushing toilet if it means he can have complete privacy to storm the castle of his own stupid fucking head.

He gets to work.

The first and second times he only throws up. The third time he actually manages to make himself black out, which is, quite frankly, the highlight of his day. Blessed unconsciousness is a step up from experiencing the kind of headache that makes him wish he could unscrew the top of his head and remove his brains with a melon baller. It also makes him spend the rest of the day sitting outside on Motherfucker’s roof, because coming to in the sealed windowless dark room of Motherfucker’s cabin sparks hard against several dozen panic buttons and sends him skittering outside to hug a tree very hard until his breathing, heart rate and perception of reality return to normal.

On his shaky way back to Motherfucker he trips and falls face-first into the creek. “Refreshing,” he snarls at it, on the basis that he is the world’s most feared assassin and he will not let Nature win.

This more or less sets the tone for all consecutive attempts. He spends so much time throwing up that he institutes a moratorium on eating for a minimum of eight hours before and after each cranial assault, which fucks up that diurnal schedule he put so much time into and further increases his resemblance to the twitchy, suspicious squirrels that he sees eyeing him from the trees. He starts lashing out at things again, punching out, breaking things like he hasn’t done for nearly two months, and in the interest of not wrecking all his own shit he starts leaving Motherfucker and starts executing his little pain parties elsewhere.

It’s fucking terrible. Un-fucking-fortunately, having a place that his brain designates as Safe - even if he does sometimes have to take a break from Motherfucker’s cabin - means that it starts designating everywhere else as extra Unsafe and will not shut up about it. South Dakota motels ain’t the fucking Ritz, either. He recognizes that his security checks have become obsessive even by his standards, which start with the opinion that Fort Knox is as secure as a plastic toddler playpen and intensify from there.

Still, he’s tired of puking onto Nature, no matter how much it deserves it. Puking into his bucket is
no picnic either. Puking in a functioning toilet is, sadly, a big step up.

Christ. He needs better fucking life choices.

But. Each time he starts shoving at his memories it gets a little easier. It’s hard to tell how hard the migraine sucks while he’s face down in the middle of it, but when he compares the earliest attempts, which left him barely able to see, with the latest ones, which even allow him to stagger up from the floor to the bathroom sink sometimes, he can identify improvement. He’s not getting more memories, per se - just the usual glitchy flashes of uniforms, deep voice, war smells, red white blue blond - but that’s fine. He’s wearing away at the wall around them. He has a mission. He will not be stopped.

On his thirty-first attempt he has something of a breakthrough. Well: technically it’s not an attempt at all. He’s sliding into fitful sleep this time instead of coming up out of it, but it’s just as real as the first memory-dream had been, and it’s the same thing, too. He can feel skinny phantom hands on his belly. He can feel breath on his ear.

Steve’s in the bed with him. It’s been so goddamn long. Steve’s talking to him, saying something, but Bucky can’t make out anything beyond the laugh in Steve’s voice, the bright thing just under his words. Steve rolls him onto his stomach, managing it with only one spiky knee digging into Bucky’s kidney, and Bucky goes. He’s got nowhere to be. Steve’s sitting on his back like a barnacle on a beached whale, or maybe a potted cactus perched on a rapidly melting slab of butter. Bucky certainly feels like he could run at the edges any minute now. It’s so good. It’s so good. He’s got nothing he needs to do, because Steve has a plan and his hands are on Bucky’s shoulders now and they have all Sunday morning.

He snaps awake. He’s on the floor. He has his guns. And - and for once, the feeling lingers, the buttered sunlight feeling, and the memory doesn’t fragment or dead end. His thought process doesn’t splinter. It’s just there.

It’s like a fucking mudslide: a little slip, a little dirt, and suddenly the entire goddamn hill is hurtling towards the freeway at ninety miles an hour, but this time Barnes is right on top of it. He spends another seven whole hours sitting on the motel floor by the bed, this time just remembering Steve. More specifically, the things he and Steve used to do. Even more specifically, the things they got up to back in the forties that are probably still illegal in Texas. Even the gradually mounting migraine isn’t enough to stop him from occasionally mouthing wow to himself.

Because wow is right. If the memories are true - and Barnes honestly doesn’t think he could cook this stuff up on his own - then Bucky Barnes has done things with, to, on, beside, under and behind Captain America that would make a nun burst into flames. Jesus. What hasn’t he done with Steve’s dick.

There’s a woman there too sometimes. Her name is gone, blank static in his head, no rank on her uniform, but he remembers her accent and calluses and lipstick just fine. Oh, wow, Bucky is also in lipstick this one time. Oh wow , then Steve is in lipstick and he really did keep those blue Cap uniform tights -

The former Winter Soldier spends some time blushing so hard he can feel his ears glowing. Their Wikipedia articles didn’t say anything about this.

He considers the possibility that these are false recollections, implanted on purpose, but he has no idea why HYDRA would give him memories of being enthusiastically, happily, lovingly fucked by Captain America. Or noogied by Captain America. Or dodging cops in raid on a queer bar with Captain America. He might’ve suspected them of implanting all the memories of yelling at Captain America, except he’s usually yelling something like “If you don’t wait for me the next
time some kid tells you there’s some socialist riot going on two streets down and around the corner I won’t suck you off for a month.”

Then Barnes spends some time making rusty hacking noises that might be laughter, because how is it the sodomy is coming through when his own mother barely made it. Maybe whatever HYDRA techs assigned to deep frying his cortex somehow completely overlooked the tidy little corner of his brain marked EXPLICIT HOMOSEXUAL BEHAVIOR.

The thought is amusing, but it’s also a reminder that actually, no, they probably didn’t. Barnes keeps trying to brace for each next sex-memory to be something awful, something - wrong, but there just seems to be no end to the bedroom antics Original Bucky got up to. Well, great. It’s not like he particularly wants to remember rape, he really doesn’t, but there’s dread telling him it’s in there, and a part of him wants to just get it over with.

He’s gotten a couple of flashbacks of being strapped to a table, getting neat rectangular patches of skin peeled off by some doctors. He has seen his own raw muscle tissue glisten under stark fluorescent lighting. It’s very clear, in his head. He’s got a lot of images like that, in his head. After that, how bad can a little non-consensual dicking be?

Still, even if the memories he’s recovered so far almost exclusively revolve around semen, this is still progress. He can think about Rogers now, even if right now it’s only when he’s naked.

Despite the pounding headaches, soaring nausea and puddles of sweat, Barnes actually feels a lot better. There’s no looming, fractured monolith in his mind anymore. Captain America isn’t so scary when you’re suddenly real familiar with the stupid faces Stevie pulls when he comes.

When dawn finally breaks and seeps grey light around the moldy blackout curtains, Barnes decides he’s done exploring his own sexual depravity for now and scraps himself off the motel carpet to go to the bathroom. He skirts the mirror and cautiously examines the tiny shower stall; when it produces scaldingly hot water, he steels himself, strips and steps inside. The sound of water drumming against tile is vaguely nauseating, but after ten deep, controlled breaths he confirms a hot motel shower is tolerable.

As long as he keeps the stall door open. And a knife in his hand.

He soaps up the body, which is easier said than done when juggling six inches of steel with only one hand capable of traction. Rogers and Barnes never did anything while bathing together - he thinks - but probably only from lack of opportunity. He’s amazed at what they did manage get up to, considering the general environmental hostility at the time. Original Barnes got fucked behind enemy lines, more than once. Was Rogers’ deathwish contagious? Did one or both of them have some kind of medical condition? He can’t imagine that the sex was just that good.

Seriously, there had to be chafing.

Barnes-thing looks skeptically down at his genitals for a moment before deciding against it. The shower stall is enough new thing for one day. Besides, improving his nutrition has fixed a lot of things, but it has yet to give him a hard-on.

Thinking about his genitals sobers him up somewhat. Bucky Barnes might’ve been gay as a country maypole, but that was before everybody and their grandma stuck a salad fork in his brains and gave a big ol’ electrically assisted stir. HYDRA fucked with everything else; who’s to say they didn’t fuck with that too. Jesus. If he’s now programmed to only have sexual responses to fucking... trees or, or whatever, the fuckin’ light of the full moon, he’d rather have no erections at all, thanks. If they programmed him for something wrong he wants it burned out.
When he dries off with the ratty towel he makes sure he touches his dick even less than usual. He is not taking any chances with that, just in case he accidentally finds out what’ll get him off.

Then he catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror, and jesus god. He really needs some kind of hair stuff. The situation is becoming dire.

After grimly munching down his necessary caloric intake via protein bar, he determines that the nearest city big enough to disappear in is Seattle. He pulls his clothes on, packs up his security measures, wipes down the motel room and sets off, striding directly into the woods behind the parking lot. Motherfucker’s not that far off.

Seattle smells like salt and feels kind of like half its population must have just died, given the emptiness of the streets and compared to Barnes’ most recent urban experience, aka New fuckin’ York. He wanders past the several points of interest that google gives him and his search of “hair stuff”, but every one he visits turns out to be a salon. Nope. He doesn’t even want to be in the same building as electric clippers.

Then he hits jackpot. RITUALS, says the store sign in nice, rigid letters. Home and Body Cosmetics is written in a softer script across the glass door. One of the windows has a giant photo of a skinny lady with a lot of improbably cascading hair going on: a shampoo ad. The giant windows make it immediately obvious that absolutely no hair cutting is going on inside.

Rituals. Rituals are good. Healthy. Barnes heads on in.

The store is small and well-lit inside, but Barnes still has to stop and blink and calibrate for a second because, christ, he should have anticipated this. Cosmetics, soaps. Lots of smells. He takes in air in shallow sips through his mouth - which only helps some - and assesses the situation.

There are two shop girls in there grinning at him like he just made their day. He replays some sensory feedback and recognizes that they have greeted him with superb retail cheerfulness. He waves at them so as not to be rude and makes himself turn to the shelves of... stuff.

One of the girls in pink aprons sidles up to him. She’s got glossy dark hair in two long braids, the ends tied off with pink plastic bobbles; her nametag says HiLLaRY in big rounded marker letters. There’s a sparkly pink skull sticker covering the dot in the i. Barnes watches her approach out of the corner of his eye, knowing there is absolutely no force in the universe capable of stopping her advance and resigning himself to being fully steamrollered by it.

“Hi!” she chirps, coming to a stop so close he can see the flecks of mascara darkening her eyelashes. “Anything I can help with? Do you know what you’re looking for?”

Barnes-thing braces himself. She might be alarmingly close, well within striking range, but she’s also obviously about as combat-trained as a chocolate chip pancake. “I want my hair to stop doing this,” he says, taking his hat off.

The girl’s eyebrows go up a quite a lot as she takes it all in, but she nods very seriously. “Conditioner,” she says firmly. “So much conditioner. Detangler too. And have you considered blowdrying?”

“Don’t like the noise.”

“Me neither,” she says conspiratorially, beckoning him towards a shelf of brightly printed bottles, completely indistinguishable from the other rainbow shelves. “Here, let’s take a look at this. You like mangoes?”

“I like mangoes,” Barnes parrots dutifully, even though he has no fucking idea. He already knows
he’ll buy whatever this girl shoves at him; he only just barely started using soap on himself, it’s not like he came in here with a goddamn list. If Bucky wants to start talking out through his mouth right about now he’s fucking welcome to it, for once.

An idea strikes. Barnes might as well use this opportunity to gather some data about himself in a controlled context. His paranoia, hypervigilance and combat readiness in public situations override almost every other internal stimulus his body tries to throw at him, so there is a very low likelihood of actually getting aroused even if he does encounter something that his body considers a trigger for arousal. And he should know these things, even if only for safety reasons. This might be as good a chance as he’ll get to figure some of this out without it descending into a fucking hell spiral.

He tries to assess whether he finds the girl sexually appealing or not, but he keeps getting distracted by the smells. It’s...citrusy, but also somehow heavy, cloying, and there’s a chemical undercurrent that’s dangerously close to reminding him of that cleaning fluid that makes him do his best puking firehose impression. He tries to focus on the girl. Hillary. Her hair is so shiny. She’s done something with the makeup around her eyes to make them shimmery and silver, making them look bigger than they already are.

He tries to imagine going to her, putting his arm around her waist. Tipping her head back, pressing his body against her, the knives under his clothes would - no, he - she - the girls would laugh, usually. He’d do something to make them laugh. What was it. He’d make them laugh and then they lean into him. They lean into him and don’t feel the cold arm, somehow, somehow there are no knives and only little ordinary human scars, and he puts his hand under her shirt. That’s what’s next. Under her shirt. Under her skirt. Is she still laughing? Yes, it’s always better when they laugh, when the laughing turns to gasping, nails going down his back, grabbing his arms. She’s gasping and grabbing his arms and he won’t let go of her, she’s gasping and he’s not letting go, she doesn’t have enough breath left to beg her tears her mouth shaping no but he has his orders he - he can’t -

The heavy fake citrus-pomegranate scent is thick enough to cut with a knife. Sir? the girl is saying. Her plastic hair things gleam sharp in the hard fluorescent store lights. There’s no blood on her face. Sir? Sir? She takes a step closer. She’s not afraid. “Sir? Are you alright?”

He jerks away before she can get within grabbing range and darts out of the store, where the hell is he, city - a city? What the fuck? Where the hell is he. Why can he smell the ocean.

A car veers around him. There’s a scream of a horn, too loud. Too loud. He bolts.

Somewhere between vaulting over a dumpster and skidding to a stop under a massive, briny, barnacle-encrusted pier his brain gets enough of its shit together to remind him of where he is and what he was doing and who it was doing the asking. He slams his back against one of the massive wooden posts and gulps for air, burning. He wanted to get it over with, hadn’t he. Well he got what he fucking asked for, didn’t he. So much for not taking the fast lane down the hell spiral, either, jesus parcheesi-playing christ. Why does he do this.

His punch leaves a neat fist-shaped dent in the ancient, sea-soaked post, about an inch deep. His brain looks at that and likes it and says do it again so he does. He keeps going and splinters the dent into an unrecognizable mass of pulped wood, a blemish on the side of the post. The thing is thicker around than his whole body. It can take it.

His last punch reverberates all up his left arm and into his shoulder, an exhausted, hopeless shiver. He slumps against the post, the wet pulpy wood smushing against his cheek. This close up he can see the little individual spindly moss formations growing on the wood. Their bright, almost neon green is almost a shock after the dreary grey colors of the city, bleached by rain and sea.
He can’t leave it like that. The Hillary girl just wanted to help him.

He huddles up under the pier, knees to his chest, pulling out his phone. He googles *saying sorry*. He googles *making up for rudeness*. He googles *correcting problematic behavior*.

He does a lot of very informative reading that day.

Finally, when something wet splashes his boots and he looks up and realizes it’s the damn tide coming in, Barnes scrambles up. It was morning when he entered the store and now it’s dusk, fog rolling in over the water in a slow, inexorable slide; he tucks his phone back in his jacket and rolls his shoulders to clear the stiffness, cracks his neck.

A lone seal watches him reproachfully from a little further down the beach, under another one of the massive piers. Barnes narrows his eyes at it but doesn’t say anything hurtful aloud about how it looks like an overstuffed fur trashbag with a face. Just in case it attacks. Christ. *Nature*.

Anyway. Fuck all that, he’s got work to do. Barnes-thing girds everything but his loins and sets out to make his first amends of the century.

The RITUALS store is just as he left it: bright, colorful, big welcoming windows. He catches sight of sleek black hair and a pink apron: good, the Hillary girl is still here. A quick stop at the CVS across the street arms him with what he needs, and it’s not as hard as he thought it would be to make himself march across the road and open the door of the store.

This time, Barnes has come prepared: he has a big, freshly bought scarf around his neck that he can tuck his face into, if he needs a few breaths smelling of nothing but wool and his own sweat. The fingers of his metal hand are tight but carefully not too tight around the little bag of Hershey Kisses in his pocket. The Hillary girl is the only one in the shop this time; she raises her head from the till with a smile already on her face.

“Hi, welcome to - Oh!” she says, her eyes widening. “It’s you! You left so fast, we didn’t know what happened! Are you alright?”

Barnes braces himself and fakes eye contact by staring at the midpoint just between her eyebrows. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to,” he recites. “I have PTSD. The smells got overwhelming.” Technically true. “I had to leave. But. I still want to buy hair things from you.”

“Oh, uh, yeah,” Hillary says, sounding a little stunned for a second before her saleswoman training visibly kicks in. “Like, *don’t* even worry about it, that is *totally* okay. Smells! Right. If smells - bother you, that’s fine, we totally have hypoallergenic stuff, and, like, unscented stuff too. Right this way!”

It’s easy, too, to sleepwalk after her and collect all the items she cheerfully loads into his hands. Barnes very carefully focuses on nothing but the colors of the labels, the bright beautiful words and pictures decorating the jars and plastic bottles. Everything seems to be labeled, so it’s okay that he can’t really hear much of what Hillary’s saying. It’s fine. They make it all the way to the cash register without any screaming or violence or running away, so everything is going according to plan.

“Your total is… One-seventy-eight-ninety-nine… which means you get free hair ties! Here, you can pick the color.” Hillary whips out a basket of brightly colored strap things and presents it to him over the counter.

Barnes looks at the basket, then at his hand holding out money, then back at the basket. Hillary takes pity on him and takes his money first. “Take your time picking them out while I get you all
squared away!”

Barnes does take his time, but more because he’s regulating his breathing than because the choice between pink candy-stripe, blue candy-stripe or yellow polka-dot is so agonizing. He finally manages to select one of the hair tie sets at random. Hillary kindly plucks it out of his hand and puts it in his bag, which is very large and looks quite heavy. Hillary heaves it over the counter to him with her brightest smile yet.

“Your receipt is in the bag! Have a wonderful day, sir. Thank you for stopping by!”

“Yes,” Barnes agrees, dazed, and manages a wave before walking out of the store, moving only slightly like a wind-up toy with a couple of screws loose. He even manages to stay on street level for nearly ten minutes afterward, before absolutely everything inside him decides it’s time to duck into an alley and scramble up the nearest building.

He crouches for a while in the lee of an HVAC unit with his bag of hair stuff between his feet and does the breathing by numbers exercise for a while. He can do this. He can successfully interact with normal human civilians without any blood, gunfire or Buckyghosts involved. His little mission is a success. He needs to reward the body to create positive associations and reinforce appropriate behavioral conditioning.

Hands shaking, he unwraps the silver foil off a Hershey kiss and sticks it in his mouth. It’s kind of mushy and warm from being in his pocket, but it tastes like victory anyway.

Chapter End Notes

CONTENT WARNING: Bucky reacts pretty callously to the idea that he’s likely been sexually abused under HYDRA; he later has a panic attack when he recovers non-graphic memories that imply he was used to sexually assault a woman while under their control.

END NOTES:
1. The Rituals in Seattle is not an independent boutique but rather a counter stuck inside a Barneys, but since that is far from the first or biggest thing i’ve fudged in this story, we’re gonna let that one just...slide.

2. Breakdancing: fucking magic, y’all. The audio for this clip isn’t great but the moves, just, wow.

3. People have been asking about the songs for the chapter titles so i’ve decided to start linking them in the end notes! This one is Human by Aquilo (Faint x Armon remix)
Natasha did tell Nick that she would bring Steve and Sam back in, but she didn’t say when. He knows, anyway: it’ll take time to get Rhodes into a position to move freely, and during that time she has other priorities that need to be sorted before she brings the Spangles McThunder coalition into play.

Natasha looks away from the news, where some talking head is monologuing about whether it’s Russia or China doing unsanctioned weapons testing on Mongolian soil, and down to her notebook, which is two scoops of ice cream and some sugar sprinkles away from being a dessert. The pages are pink, the cover is pink, there’s acres of sparkles and she’s writing in it today with a fuschia pen with some kind of plastic candy charm and a pastel pink pom-pom stuck on the other end. It’s hideous. She kind of loves it.

It’s also the last thing anyone would consider a burn notebook, which lets her sit in this abominably trendy brunch bistro in LA and write about militarized neofascist factions next to her half-eaten eggs benedict. She’s got a white fur vest on over a beige silk jumpsuit and spiky black heels, her burgundy lipstick just slightly overdrawn; it makes her look enough like a skinny white Amber Rose wannabe for people to write off her shaved head.

The pink notebook is all Natasha, though. She saw it in a CVS checkout rack and was filled with such horrified glee that she had to have it immediately.

Now it’s hosting her most recent analysis of the latest relevant tactical landscape, written out in her cramped, coded shorthand. Hill gave her another datadump and Clint’s been sending a series of coded messages at various drop points; Natasha has managed to tease the gossip and satellite imagery and bank records into what might very generously be called a map.

Doing her own intel processing is a skill Natasha perfected in her mercenary days, and while she’s not exactly happy to have a need for it again, she can’t deny that she feels more settled when she knows exactly where her information is coming from. Clint’s info is always pertinent and mostly reliable, and Hill is very thorough. She’s also worked with Natasha long enough to know that supplying her with the raw data gets better results than trying to give her a prepackaged conclusion.

So Natasha’s working from the bottom up, building herself an informational landscape. The big picture is pretty simple: now that most politicians and military personnel are either under suspicion or tied up in witch hunts - as well as being systematically slaughtered by Soldier - the leadership of most HYDRA cells fell to the next in command: the scientists. She, Steve and Sam had broken up a few labs, early on after Insight Day, but many of the high-value personnel had been quick to scatter and go to ground. Now, though, it seems like they’re reforming.

As for the not-so-big picture. More or less all of Natasha’s sources have passed on similar if sparse information: the scientists are very interested in whatever mystery tech Rumlow didn’t find in that cave, and they’re willing to pay mercenary fireteams to find it.

It only became mercenaries recently: right about when they burned Rumlow. Burned several other combat personnel on the HYDRA rosters too, a little before and after; Natasha makes note of names and faces, just in case Soldier doesn’t get to them first, and moves on. It seems like they’re trying to distance themselves from the HYDRA ideology - well, no: they’re trying to make it look
like they’re distancing themselves. Natasha doesn’t care if they call themselves the Sunshine Love Equality Foundation or the Worldwide Hugging Happiness Club: if it walks like a fascist and quacks like a fascist, it’s a goddamn motherfucking fascist.

Natasha twirls her pen, making the little bells inside the pink pom-poms jingle. A lot of these precious PhDs have run straight from HYDRA and into the open arms of a little old thing called AIM - aka the “think tank” that exacted biowarfare against the United States, Tony Stark, and most critically Pepper Potts a month before the helicarriers went down.

Natasha has no doubt HYDRA and AIM were at the very least in communication, if not in an outright sponsor relationship. Eliminate Iron Man, chop off the head of Stark Industries, kill the US President - HYDRA lite, with an extra mad science twist. That sounds very much like HYDRA funding and encouraging a plot to weaken its most powerful opponents while its INSIGHT engines were still under construction.

And even if Aldrich Killian failed - which he did - HYDRA would still benefit from the resulting chaos, uncertainty, and calls for greater “security measures.” Natasha, over the past ten months, has spent a lot of time quietly reconstructing Alexander Pierce’s thought processes, goals, strategies, and machinations, reconstructing his web to see where it led, and now she can sense his influence like a shark smells blood in the water. She can feel his handprint on this like a stain.

Pierce had none of Killian’s crazed arrogance, nor was his vision clouded by vengeance or anything so minor as a personal grudge. Killian was a once-disadvantaged genius upstart lashing out; Pierce was always the apex predator. Natasha knows very well you think more clearly when you have nothing to prove, if nothing else, and what that boils down to, in this situation, is that Pierce ran an exponentially tighter ship than Killian.

AIM and their mad science ideology is probably much more closely aligned to most scientists’ personal agendas than HYDRA was: it makes sense that’s where they’d go after HYDRA and its quite literally lethal noncompete clauses collapsed. Scientists wishing to continue their work - or finding no other employer that would take someone tarred with the nazi brush - would find funding and infrastructure at AIM, with the added bonus of a company culture that didn’t worship military discipline quite so much.

She’s got most of this shit written out in her dessert notebook. Natasha maneuvers one last forkful of egg into her mouth and flips it shut, dropping a couple of twenties on the table to pay for her meal and adjusting her cleavage as she stands up. The notebook gets tossed into her massive white handbag; she doesn’t bother to zip it up.

Natasha’s not worried about infosec protocol. She knows for a fact the Mossad spent over a year trying to crack one of her missives, without success, because the information in question - Clint’s lunch order - was written in Natasha’s natural handwriting, which is fucking unreadable. Paired with her shorthand, it’s pretty much a write-only code. Which is just as well: Natasha doesn’t write things down to read them later, she writes things down to structure her thought process.

That doesn’t mean she’s not going to incinerate the notebook eventually, but it does mean that while it’s still intact she’s not very worried about anyone snooping in it. Seriously, she wrote in fuschia ink on pink paper. Good fucking luck to anybody trying to read that.

Natasha pulls on a pair of massive Prada sunglasses and doesn’t wrinkle her nose at the way they pinch. Technically, she is in disguise. Technically, she is pretending to be someone else. Technically. Declaring herself a superhero is all well and good, but that doesn’t mean she ought to go charging out into the world with nothing but a pair of Avengers-themed underpants in her arsenal. Natasha examined this logic for cracks, just in case she was trying to lie to herself and justify sticking to old habits again, but it held up. She’s not changing her goals in the slightest,
she’s just executing counterintelligence tactics to maximize her mission’s chances of success.

She’s feeling a little saner, now that she has a plan, and as a result her hindsight is doing that 20-20 thing again. Natasha, on the whole, isn’t exactly capable of “regret,” but she is very capable of evaluating her actions and learning from her mistakes. She should have interrogated Rumlow more efficiently, for one - not that she expected him to know much more about the weapons technology than she could learn from surveilling him, but just because it’s never good to get sloppy. Give yourself an inch and you’ll take a mile; the human body is lazy like that. Inertia is a fuck of a thing.

But god, it just felt so goddamn good to lay into him with that ladle.

Maybe she’s got to watch herself on the supervillain front a little more than she thought.

Natasha walks until she passes into the wifi radius of a Starbucks whose modem is seeing sufficiently high traffic, then steps inside and orders the closest thing on the menu to a slushee. She waits in line, ignoring the burn of her heels and keeping her eyes on her phone, connecting to the wifi through the backdoor program that keeps her IP from being logged.

She keeps her sunglasses on and her face looking murderously bored as she layers encryption onto the data packet she’s spent the past month collating. The digital age has been very kind to Natasha; it’s always nice when you enjoy something as well as excel at it. With Stark backing them, their digital operations are largely secure, and Natasha’s had lots of fun with some of the very shiny toys Stark has provided. He has an arsenal of coding tools that would make Natasha drool if she had a little less control over herself, and JARVIS is essentially Skynet with a better personality module. Stark’s been focusing his considerable resources on cybersecurity these past few months, recovering from heart surgery with no suit access and a desperate need to pour his energy somewhere, and as a result the Avengers currently have more or less the most sophisticated infosec protocols on the planet.

It’s honestly such a fucking shame she has to use them.

Natasha does not care if this particular data packet - this hit list - is intercepted and decoded by her enemies. Let them see. Let them know. Let the world know that the Black Widow is hunting these people, and let the world know that it is not in its best interests to hide them.

The oil fire inside Natasha wants to just start taking out billboards, splashing names and faces and crimes all over for everybody to see, fire up a @BlackWidow twitter and start fucking televising her vengeance. Her whole life has been an absence, a blackout file, a nonexistence: she operates in shadows, in secrecy. Like she has something to hide; like she is something to be hidden. Like she doesn’t belong in the light.

That may have been true once upon a time, but the Natasha now is not the Natasha of before, and this time there is no moral uncertainty. Some of these people she will capture; some she will execute. Natasha is not of the camp that believes death without trial is too harsh for those who actively worked to wreak that on others. And she wants everyone to see it. She wants every last goddamn idiot on this planet to know that there are consequences for pulling this kind of shit, and one of those consequences is her.

But god or the universe or whatever damned her to practicality, so practical she will be. Giving your enemy advance notice gives them time to fortify. Giving your enemy anything is stupid. Natasha might not be a spy anymore, but she will not be stupid.

Her mouth pulls wryly as she finishes the last encryption on the data packet and opens up the message content window. Maybe Steve is contagious, at least a little bit. She can see why: feeling
that certain, that righteous, is a hell of a drug. Thank god she doesn’t have an ocean of testosterone sloshing around in her system to confuse her enough to start jumping out of planes without parachutes, literally or otherwise.

Natasha enters Clint into the address line of the message, adding Stark, Potts, Hill. Her thumb hovers over the screen, considering over whether to copy Nick.

She doesn’t report to him anymore, but she does want him to have heavy evidence to bring to Rhodes to convince him to help, and a Black Widow report is nothing to sneeze at. They are allies; this would be a professional courtesy as well as a sensible move. It does no good to keep your team in the dark, long-term.

Nick took a chance on her when more or less every other intelligence agency director would have executed her outright. To be fair, she knew that: it was why she’d chosen to come in to SHIELD instead of any other agency, instead of eating a bullet when Clint finally ran her down. But still. It was one of the core reasons she had tried to cultivate something more personal with Nick - not just because it was good sense to make sure you were the boss’s favorite, but also because Natasha was genuinely interested in the man that saw the potential for good in a creature that had barely understood what that was.

Turns out that didn’t extend to trusting her. Ah, well. He had his reasons, and as long as they’re both still alive the game is on. Natasha will not sacrifice a professional relationship for some momentary pettiness, and in the meantime, the ball is in Nick’s court. Maybe the next time Nazis roll around he’ll remember she doesn’t just play for the highest bidding team anymore.

Natasha selects Nick’s contact - currently saved under JUSTIN BIEBER, the email address a string of randomly generated gibberish - and adds it to the chain, just as the barista calls out “Nataleigh!”

Natasha swans over to collect her iced strawberry-acao refresher, pressing send with one thumb as she goes. It only takes a few taps more to confirm her transmission authorization, and to make sure that digitally speaking, Natasha had never set foot in that Starbucks.

Natasha pushes out the door and back onto the sidewalk, slurping loudly and leaving lipstick all over her straw. Regimes fall, uniforms change, but people stay the same. The USSR breaks, the Red Room falls, SHIELD disintegrates. All she has is people. All she has is Clint and Hill and Nick and Sam and Steve.

She had the Soldier, too, once.

She can find him. She’s probably the only one who can. She’s going to see if he remembers, and if he doesn’t, she’s going to find out what she can do to help. Instead of taking trust she’s going to spread it around in big fat handfuls, because if there’s a chance she can win the Soldier over to their side - well. That’ll be a coup for Team Spangles the likes of which the Black Widow was for SHIELD. Even if Soldier’s not all there, when it comes to Nazi hunting, Natasha will take all the help she can get.

And - Natasha might get one of her people back. So could Steve.

She can hunt AIM and the Soldier at the same time. The two objectives can even serve to mask each other, if she plays this right. She’s going to start with the largest geographical clusters of scientists, figure out what they’re working on and then give everybody involved a short, sharp lesson on why they should stop. If the Soldier has managed to advance to the level of intelligence work that Natasha operates at, he’ll be looking for those clusters too.
Natasha stays on her phone as she walks down the street back to her parking lot, this time booking a one-way flight to the Philippines.

-o-

Barnes knows his little sojourn is almost over. He apologized to the Hillary girl and successfully completed a human interaction sub-mission, but the whole thing awakens an itch at the base of his spine and soon he can’t justify staying inactive any longer. His purpose has not changed. His targets are out in the world, walking free and alive.

Six handlers. Three are dead. Two are entrenched in their private security measures and haven’t been seen in months.

And one has recently been found dead of a rare toxin poisoning. Jonathan Reade, American, officially a CEO of a prominent oil extraction company, chairman and board member of several others, died age 57 in a hotel room in the Maldives. Coroners ruled it a homicide; unsurprising, given that no particular efforts had been made to disguise it as anything else.

Considering the shit his handlers had done, Barnes-thing is not surprised that they had more enemies than just one pissed-off metal-armed miracle of brain damage. He doesn’t waste time trying to figure out who did it. He’s a little annoyed he didn’t get the satisfaction of doing it himself, but dead is dead. An objective completed.

And regrettably, the handlers are not the priority. They are currently no threat to Barnes, secluded and running as they are, and in the overall objective of destroying HYDRA they are just the tip of the iceberg. Barnes will get to them, but it’s more important to scatter and burn HYDRA’s current active operations. He can kill the string-pullers after he’s destroyed their work.

Cut off the head and two more will grow in its place, after all. That’s fine. That’s why Barnes is aiming a flechette cannon at the body.

Now if only his fucking brain would fucking cooperate. It still hasn’t given him any new memories that he could turn into targets, and while that just means he’ll do shit the hard way, the hard way is hard. The Soldier exists for the hunt, but this kind of international military-political shitshow is, shockingly, not a problem best solved by one guy who’s really good at guns. This is the kind of hunt that gets assigned to entire departments of intelligence analysts.

Then again, there’s more than one way to skin a Nazi. No point chasing them down if he can draw them out: if the Soldier can’t find the HYDRA cell, he will make the HYDRA cell find him.

With a certain amount of resignation and a nagging sense of waste, Barnes-thing cuts the left sleeve off a black tac jacket, removing it at the shoulder. There aren’t any horrifying memories attached to it or anything - well. No more than the usual - but Barnes knows what his HYDRA open combat getup looked like and it was just stupid. There is literally never a good enough reason to unnecessarily broadcast your advantages to an enemy, especially when that advantage is a metal fucking arm that is most useful in close quarters and is too goddamn shiny to be effectively intimidating.

Christ. The Winter Soldier’s quartermaster probably just had a leather fetish.

Barnes eyes the Stalking Goat Coat in distaste. It’s wasteful. It’s asymmetrical. He can already feel the phantom chafing at his metal shoulder seam. But it’ll do its job: he’s worth more to
HYDRA alive than dead, but they’ll want him even if he’s a corpse. There’s enough biochemical and cybernetic enhancement packed into his meatsuit to keep the world’s scientists busy for decades. When HYDRA sees his shiny arm, they’ll come running.

He touches down in Colorado, near Denver, where he visits several outdoor gear stores and finally a paintball equipment shop to find a decent replacement for his mask. The closest match he finds doesn’t have the Asset’s air filtration system, but it’ll do for short-term performances.

Barnes hopes he finds an Asset stash he hasn’t yet raided soon. His sensitivity to smells is a problem, but more than that he misses the comforting pressure of the muzzle over his face. It means he’s out on a mission. It means he’s out in the field, where anything that hurts him can die screaming.

As a reward for putting up with the Stalking Goat Coat and the sad knockoff mask, he feeds himself 8 Hershey kisses, 4 for the coat and 4 for the mask. Taking charge of his own behavioral controls leaves him emboldened enough to push a little further, and he decides to try something from the bag of Things For His Hair. He selects a bright orange tube of something called NOURISH BEAUTY SMOOTH SHINE DETANGLING CONDITIONER, picks up his shower knife and heads for the latest motel bathroom.

This time his hair dries very shiny. It still curls, but the frizz is gone and it’s no longer trying to levitate off his head. “I accept this compromise,” he tells it, after the comb goes through without snarling and the hair tie holds for more than fifteen seconds.

This is good, because he can’t have his hair impeding operational efficiency when he goes to deal out extensive property damage tomorrow morning. He knows where many HYDRA outposts and supply caches are; if he can’t find their deep bases, he figures, he can kick up enough noise to at least get their attention.

This is not the most effective method of drawing out enemies, especially not an enemy like HYDRA: huge, splintered, internationally organized. Hunting on this scale is done via paper trail, but Barnes-thing doesn’t have the access to those kinds of records and if he did, he wouldn’t have the resources to make sense of them. If this doesn’t work he’ll hire an army of forensic accountants - and he might end up having to do that anyway, motherfuck - but until then, he’ll defang HYDRA the best he can by murdering the shit out of all their active fireteams.

At least this way he gets to have some fun.

-o-

The outpost he hits first is in South Africa, just north of Johannesburg. It’s vastly understaffed; seems like HYDRA is having a little difficulty keeping combat personnel on retainer. Barnes-thing happily exacerbates the problem.

He dearly wants to do something rude within view of the security cameras, but he’s pretending to be the Asset so he settles for kicking every door in with extreme prejudice. To compensate for his supposedly “forgetting” to wipe the security system, he pretends to stagger around and stare blankly at some walls for a while after he kills everybody. Would hitting himself in the head a couple times be overkill? Yeah, that’d be too much. He settles for swaying a little and bumping into some walls as he walks past.
Then on his way out he makes sure to grab onto one of the aluminum poles of the chain-link fence surrounding the outpost, “falling” onto it and crushing part of it with his very visibly human hand. Now nobody can say it’s just some idiot in a knockoff mask and copycat jacket wrapping his arm in tinfoil and playing at being the Winter Soldier.

Barnes-thing might be wearing a knockoff mask and a copycat jacket, but he’s definitely not playing. (Jury’s out on the idiot part.) He drags his hand off the pole to smear any potential fingerprints and stomps off into the night, weaving a little bit until he’s well out of the range on the cameras.

Step One: success. Now all he has to do is rinse, repeat, act increasingly erratic and incompetent and keep an eye on global intelligence chatter to see who kicks up the most fuss.

Step Two: track down what the hell is going on with Rogers.

He should have been doing this from the beginning, because it’s very stupid not to keep an eye on something - someone - who has made it obvious they can jerk you around without even trying. Fucking - HYDRA always blabbed on about how everything they did made him more efficient, more effective, but this alone makes it all horseshit. They made it hurt to even think about Rogers. They made it so Barnes would recoil from the very thought, and all it’s done is make him irrational as well as unstable. Rogers is a threat to the Barnes-thing even if he doesn’t want to be, and Barnes has only just barely gotten to the point of being able to think about him in complete sentences.

It’s equal parts annoying and hilarious that every single Captain America thought now comes couched in blurred associations of sweaty pink muscles and jizz. One time Barnes wakes up automatically reaching for his groin, convinced there was just a tousled blond head moving in his lap, and ends up accidentally jamming one of his pistols against his crotch. That makes him choke out something like a laugh and a growl at the same time, because if Captain McHardon makes him accidentally shoot his own dick off, Barnes will make sure to return the favor.

There are no Bad sex memories involving Steve Rogers. None that have come up, anyway. Seems like all of that happened - after. The only woman that shows up in the Steve sex memories is the one in uniform, British, and she’s always laughing, composed even in her underpants. Clearly the operational command, whenever she was involved. Barnes can’t always tell, but he’s fairly certain Bucky was pretty happy about that.

It is incredibly strange to experience memories of arousal without experiencing any of the arousal itself. Some of that is probably physical - lots of trauma websites list impotence as a common side effect - but Barnes is a-okay with that. He doesn’t particularly want to be aroused. Even if HYDRA didn’t fuck with that and make him only capable of humping under very specific, probably intensely awful circumstances, he’s still not dying to get his rocks off at the earliest opportunity. All that… stuff… seems messy at best and horrifying at worst. Thank god this is an aspect of his PTSD that he can just leave the hell alone without compromising functionality.

A working libido would only complicate things. He’s perfectly happy to leave it all in the realm of the theoretical.

Barnes does have some concerns about how actively tracking Rogers might impact that state of affairs, but he can’t let a potentially traumatizing erection get in the way of his mission. If it happens, fine. He dealt with the Hillary incident, after all. What’s a little more trauma to add to the pile.

Barnes opens up his latest stolen laptop and gets onto the dark web, where it takes a little bit of maneuvering and a lot of HYDRA funds to buy access to the newest backdoors into the standard
intelligence channels. A lot of organizations have stepped up their information security after the fascists played more or less all of them, so now it’s exponentially more expensive to buy information about their information, and the intel you get isn’t the top secretest. Luckily, Barnes knows all the access codes to Alexander Pierce’s private slush funds, and Captain America’s typical movements could only be called subtle when compared to a rabid hippopotamus.

Searching digitally for Rogers and his little team, however, yields much sparser information than he expected. Someone has been running cleanup for them and counterintelligence too, making sure their operations are reported as “international strike force” and not “holy fucking shit it’s Captain America.” Barnes can see significant funding behind their operation as well as an experienced hand guiding their opsec strategy: he suspects Iron Man Tony Stark is the financial backer, while the former SHIELD Deputy Director Hill is the most likely candidate for operations control.

Barnes rubs his face. Black Widow is probably handling the spangled star squad’s immediate intelligence and security needs on the ground. On the one hand, that means finding and tracking Rogers is going to be hard, but on the other, it makes Barnes feel a lot better about not realizing sooner that Rogers was the one chasing HYDRA parallel to him, way back before the Cave Incident. The Widow’s reputation as an intelligence officer is well-earned, as is Maria Hill’s. There’s been barely a peep in the news and Rogers’ activities are about as subtle and restrained as a thrown brick.

Things have died down significantly over the past month, however. Looks like Barnes isn’t the only one who took a break after the Cave Incident. He finds the most recent Rogers sightings on social media, of all places. Nearly three dozen elderly South Korean women have uploaded photos of themselves with a man they believe to be Channing Tatum; the internet quickly corrected - and consequently delighted - them with the news that no, that’s Captain America.

That was a few weeks ago, which makes Barnes frown a little. Seriously, he’s finding next to no chatter on any intel networks about Rogers or his team. Is everybody just happy with the occasional social media sighting? Did everyone forget Rogers is one of the most dangerous men in the world? Is nobody else tracking Captain America?

Because all the attention has gone to the Widow instead, Barnes realizes, as he starts sorting through cribbed, two-week-old intel reports from MI6, Mossad, the CIA.

He had been right: Widow did kill Rumbo. Or Rumlow, actually, not that it’s important: the asshole’s dead as a doornail no matter what his mommy called him. Widow didn’t kill him in the cave outright but gave him two weeks to hang himself, informationally speaking, and then she used his guts to paint a very messy picture all over the floor of a former CIA-owned building in Tajikistan.

That sent the CIA into conniptions, naturally, and the local Dushanbe police into ecstasies, giving them a prime opportunity to apply the full force of their post-Soviet bureaucracy to screw with the intruding Americans. Apparently Rumlow’s been on Interpol’s most wanted list ever since he disappeared out of an American military hospital a couple months after the helicarriers, but nobody saw hide nor hair of him until his corpse was found in the - disavowed, of course - American property.

Speculation abounds. Captain America and the Black Widow are known associates: they were partners in taking down HYDRA on Insight Day, and now there are tentative confirmations that yes, it’s him and her running around again, cleaning up the leftovers. But Rumlow’s execution is brutal, messy in a way the Black Widow’s known kills never are - and certainly never Captain America’s. Was he there with her? Does he still answer to the Pentagon? Who ordered this? Was it him? Is he operating under a different MO now? What even happened there? Did the Widow
just get chased off before she could get dispose of the body? By whom?

Barnes’ eyes narrow more the further he reads. He reads it all again; he examines several photos of Rumlow’s corpse and the scene it was found in. The idiots doing all this speculation better start paying attention. Rumlow’s death is the Widow’s work and has the look of a crime of passion, sure, but the lack of cleanup is no goddamn accident. Barnes can see the professionalism, the cold detachment in the way she left the body slumped, the head dropped like a stack of dishes in the sink: the kill itself might have been personal, but everything else about the situation wasn’t.

The only thing that confirms this as a Widow job is circumstantial evidence - but in this kind of game, that’s enough. Widow left no prints, no physical evidence at the scene, but she turned her face towards a camera at a police station two blocks away from the safehouse. Even with her hair dyed blonde, a loose scarf around her head and shoulders, there’s no way she didn’t know the camera would pick up enough to match her through facial recog. Or that the CIA would immediately pull all the security tapes of every camera in a mile radius, and from there her status as an Avenger would blow that information outward like dandelion seeds in the breeze. She knew exactly what she was doing.

And as for Rogers - it’s not that shocking, to Barnes, to imagine that Rogers would look at Rumlow’s face, then at Widow’s, and step back and let her carve him like a pumpkin.

But Rogers was in Croatia, being extensively documented by no less than thirty Korean grandmothers at the time of Rumlow’s death. And Rogers wouldn’t do it like that - speak kill orders into a burner phone before tossing it away into ocean surf, turning back to his steak and cocktail. When Rogers orders death it’s up close and personal. When Rogers wants you to kill for him he’s right there in it with you.

Barnes shudders all over, visceral, before shaking himself hard like a dog and dragging his attention back to the op. So. Widow did this on her own. And now she’s… dropped off the grid again, but Barnes can tell it won’t be for long. You don’t leave a message like Rumlow and then not follow up on it.

Rumlow’s body is a warning, written in a language Barnes knows very well how to read. Widow is changing her strategy, winding up for something. She very loudly and publicly threw a wrench in the works of American intelligence and foreign influence, ostensibly her current closest allies. That isn’t done lightly. Something big is coming down the pike.

He doesn’t think the golden boys know about it. Then again, that’s probably how the Widow likes it. Rogers tends to be at the forefront of anything big, but his presence immediately invites a public circus; Widow would avoid that if at all possible, until the last possible moment. Until she was ready. Either way, Rogers and his wings-friend don’t look like they’re currently active on any ops: two days ago they were flagged at some scenic waterfall in Slovakia via some tourists posting celebrity-sighting selfies to Instagram. There is no reason for Barnes to take any action on that front, not now.

But Widow has been killing Nazis. Barnes still doesn’t know how he knows her, if it was from HYDRA infodump briefings, or if she was a target, or even if she had been hired by HYDRA during her mercenary days to work on his field teams. It could be all three. All he knows is he has an - understanding, of sorts, of her as an operative. Right now that means he would not presume to guess at her latest motives.

Widow never does anything for only one reason, and he doesn’t have enough data to draw any useful conjectures. All he can see is what she does, and what she’s doing is, actually, very similar to Barnes.
So he’ll just keep repeating Step One. His and the Widow’s goals align for now. He sees no reason to get in her way.

-o-

Natasha spends most of her flight to Manila abusing the onboard wifi and spreading out in her two first-class seats like some kind of multiplying paperwork monster. “Lawyer,” she grimaces apologetically at the flight attendant, when she comes over to get her drink order and smile bemusedly at Natasha’s laptop, two smartphones, tablet and acres of paper files. “Cherry Coke, thanks. Keep ‘em coming.”

She gets her Cherry Coke - it’s a luxury airline; Natasha splurges when she can - and keeps plowing through her data sets. She’s using the plane’s wifi as well as her own encrypted Stark satellite signal receiver, giving her not-quite-real-time access to JARVIS’s algorithms and processing power as well as normie internet for plausible deniability. The paper files are all her aggregated hardcopy data, obscured and abstracted with enough random bullshit legalese phrases that anybody just flipping through wouldn’t get much more than gibberish.

She keeps reaching up automatically to brush her hair back and finding nothing. Each time she quickly turns it into a casual head-rub, and each time she loses ten to thirty seconds to just petting her hand over her scalp, feeling the bristles. She’s buzzed her hair before, years ago after her DIY hair dye incident, but she’s forgotten how damn awesome it feels. It’s so fuzzy.

Still, it’s nice that it gives her a little bit of a regular break. She’s compiling specifics, building data landscapes around each one of her HYDRA scientist escapees. She’s headed to Manila because that’s where the largest cluster of biochemists is currently accrued, and since the Philippines house a significant portion of the world’s pharmaceutical manufacturing industry, Natasha felt she should probably pay them a visit first. Mad scientists playing around with globally distributed medicine should not be left to their own devices.

Of course, that only makes up about half of the intel currently covering Natasha’s legs and seat and taking up all of her tablet’s memory. The rest of it is dedicated to figuring out just what the hell is going on with the Winter Soldier, because hoo boy, there definitely seems to be something.

Soldier’s work was never ostentatious by nature, but now he doesn’t have the guarantee of all of HYDRA working to keep him in nonexistence. He hadn’t particularly been trying to erase himself after Insight Day - he was doing what it took to avoid capture or tracking, of course, but he was making no effort to conceal the fact that he was killing HYDRA agents and that it was him, Masked DC Hostile, Winter Fuckoff Metal Arm Soldier, doing the killing.

But it was never this obvious. This is basically the covert ops equivalent of painting yourself neon pink and sprinting naked across the field during the Super Bowl.

Over the past two weeks Soldier has been sighted in no fewer than twenty-six locations, starting with his sloppy elimination of a HYDRA outpost in South Africa and ending with his most recent sighting - sixteen hours ago - at a border control automated checkpoint camera, which clocked a guy with a metal arm just walking across the damn US-Canadian border. The report, written by the patrol officers, states that when they pulled up, responding to the alert from the camera and motion detectors, they found no trace of anybody for a sixteen mile radius.

This little ghost story, combined with the fact that Soldier’s presence is bouncing alarmingly
quickly, means he’s either being moved by an organization with serious resources or he’s somehow acquired a private jet. Then Natasha reads the reports that show him in Yangon and Quebec in the same day, which makes her twitch in disgust and discard all her data to the reevaluation pile due to it being riddled with false positives.

But they are convincing false positives, very convincing, so - somebody’s trying to manufacture Soldier sightings. Probably to trap Steve. Too bad Steve’s ass is parked firmly on a gorgeous Mediterranean coastline and is scheduled to stay there, no matter how bitter he is about it. Natasha trusts Sam has enough crocodile tears in him to do the job.

This Soldier bullshit is a problem, though, because a) it makes it twice as hard to actually find him, and b) it means there’s another player out there who is organized, resourceful and motivated enough to fake this kind of intel this convincingly. Natasha frowns hard, rubbing a little at the back of her scalp, and sets it aside for now. Looks like that project will require more resources than she can allocate at this moment, and she really does have to handle the mad scientist drugs situation first. Finding Soldier will have to wait.

That means it’s a complete fucking accident that she runs into him the very next day, when she’s hidden in the exposed metal ceiling beams of a pharmaceutical manufacturing facility in downtown Manila.

She has no idea what alerts her. She’s just lying there waiting for the night guards to finish their patrol of this wing; all her senses are spread out in a half-awake web of awareness, her mind absorbed entirely in its favorite op downtime activity, aka obsessively re-examining the mission briefing and any and all relevant intel. There’s no real change in the situational environment, no trigger she can pinpoint, just all of a sudden every single cell in her body hitting the panic button as hard as it can.

Below her, the Winter Soldier drifts into view.

Natasha freezes every single part of her body down to her fucking hair follicles. He’s got his mask on, his arm uncovered, advancing down the hallway in the easy, frictionless lope of a stalking predator; he’s traded speed for silence and his rifle is up. He’s doing a soft entry, prioritizing stealth - well, the heavy hitter version of stealth - to minimize the enemy’s defensive responses until it no longer becomes feasible.

Option one: yes, the Soldier is operating on Natasha’s level of intel and he’s on the scientists’ trail. He is following the hit-hard-and-fast pattern of his past two weeks of raids, which does not allow for thorough casing of his targets and seems indifferent to who catches sight of him, which accounts for his entry and fits in with his recent slash-and-burn tactics. All the HYDRA personnel are at home right now, not here, but Soldier might consider destroying their work his primary objective. The fact that it would serve as advance warning to the scientists might be an acceptable collateral consideration.

Option two: he is here for her.

Natasha discards that option. If Soldier wanted her dead, this would be the most troublesome and inefficient way to do it. The best way to kill a Black Widow is with long-distance sniper fire, and if he’s not the one setting the agenda, anybody who is smart enough to catch and control the Winter Soldier would know that.

Still. No reason not to be cautious.

It’s the middle of the night. Security is tight but predictable, with regular patrols and an upcoming shift change. Soldier won’t stay in one place for long. Natasha holds still and thinks corpse
thoughts.

Right below her, Soldier drifts to a stop. Slowly, inexorably, he looks up.

Natasha doesn’t blink, even as it feels like the wave of adrenaline that ripples through her body sets every nerve alight. She’s invisible up here and she knows it, and the steel girder covers ninety-five percent of her body. If he fires up into the dark, crowded rafter space he’d have to hit her directly in the couple of square inches she’d left exposed for her eyes.

Problem is, Soldier is exactly the kind of operative who can make that shot. The only thing staying his hand right now is he’s not a hundred percent certain there’s anybody up here at all, and he won’t risk revealing his own position to the rest of the base by wasting a bullet on a hunch.

Then Natasha frowns. She can’t quite see, it’s almost entirely tucked down under his high jacket collar, but is that...is Soldier wearing a hair tie?

Is Soldier wearing a pink and white candy-stripe hair tie?

Footsteps sound around the corner: the guard patrol coming through. Soldier doesn’t make a single move to hide or disguise himself, just raises his rifle and lets off two unsilenced shots that drop the two guards the second they turn onto the main hallway.

Natasha springs up and runs along the girder the second the Soldier fires, and Soldier is turning and aiming up even before the guards hits the ground. Bullets ping and spark off the ceiling steel, but it’s short lived; the next thing Natasha hears is a soft huff of exertion and the light thump of the Soldier’s boots landing on her beam.

Natasha dives out of the rafters and onto the back of the guard who just came running around the corner, yanking her garrotte tight and dropping her weight so he topples over backward and Soldier’s bullet goes into his chest instead of hers. Not great: Natasha’s on the ground now along with the other incoming guards, and with the Soldier now in the ceiling, the technical term for his advantage status is “shooting fish in a barrel”.

Natasha banks hard on a sliver of hope and stays under the dead guard’s body, drawing his pistol from his hip holster and firing from the ground at the incoming guards. And hallelujah, Soldier does too, dropping out of the ceiling to engage in close quarters, ignoring Natasha to take on the other hostiles.

It only takes them nine seconds to kill them all, but that’s enough time for her to dart in close and jam a pistol right against the base of Soldier’s spine.

Not quite fast enough to avoid Soldier’s pistol pressed back against the top of her thigh, right over the femoral artery, but by now Natasha is reasonably certain he won’t shoot. Not immediately.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” she says breathlessly. The adrenaline is so potent it feels like it’s oozing out of her pores. “Not that I’m not having fun, but -”

Another set of guards come pounding down the hall, radios squawking, drawn by the gunfire. Natasha and Soldier uncoil in tandem, smooth as a dance step, and launch themselves back up into the rafters.

Natasha has to bounce up via the corridor wall while Soldier just straight-up jumps, and she feels a flare of the old familiar jealousy come back, a warm live thing in her chest. She makes sure she darts around him, sprinting ahead along the rafters to take the lead, the guards now shouting at each other in confusion below.
It’s a showy gesture of trust, putting her back to him, but if Soldier was going to kill her he’d have already done it. She’s not worried about him changing his mind: even on his worst brain days Soldier had never been erratic in combat. He’d get confused and attack doctors and technicians on base, but during missions he was steady as a rock.

She also has to take charge right the fuck now, because the guards are all contracted locals whose greatest sin is working for a security company that doesn’t look too closely at its clients’ business objectives. Her initial plan was to slip in and out without a single casualty, but hey, the Winter Soldier’s involved now, and what’s done is done. She can prevent further collateral, at least.

“We need to get to the inner labs,” Natasha hisses over her shoulder, when they reach the corner where the ceiling beams stop and they have to either drop down into the hallway or go back. She turns directly to him, not bothering to risk incomprehension by trying hand signals right now.

“The labs get locked down at night, we can probably get in but the guards can’t. It’ll buy us time to look around, if we can lose them. What are you here for?”

Soldier’s stopped just out of arm’s reach, his rifle not quite pointed at her. “HYDRA,” he grunts. No shit, Natasha doesn’t say. “What’s the objective? The scientists, the data, what?”

“Everything,” Soldier says, now looking a little bit bewildered and getting belligerent about it. “Burn it all.”

“We’re not burning it down, this building is surrounded by apartments.”

“These labs. HYDRA owned.” He gestures sharply at the walls around them. “Connected to arms cache and outpost down the street. Underground.”

That she didn’t know, but that doesn’t change the fact that they’re not fucking burning anything down. “Did you clear it?” He jerks a nod. “Any personnel?” Soldier shakes his head.

“No more fatalities,” Natasha says. “Not if we can help it. These are contract guards, nobody guilty is actually in the building. We’ll destroy their work. That’ll be damage enough.”

Soldier stares at her. He’s looking at her pale, puffy face, her shaved head, and she realizes all of a sudden it’s great that she looks like a fucked-up fifteen year old because last time the Soldier saw her in a friendly light she was a fucked-up fifteen year old. All her plastic surgery adjustments have been minor enough or expensive enough to pass as natural fluctuations of age - well, to most people - but she did go through her first round not long after she met Soldier, so hopefully he knows exactly what he’s looking at. Who he’s looking at.

Well. If he even remembers. He might not even know what plastic surgery is anymore.

“C’mon,” Natasha says, because they don’t have time for this. They are here and this is now; what they were before can wait. “You know I’m right. Let’s crash their party.”

She jumps out of the ceiling, not waiting for his reply. Either he’ll follow or he won’t, and Natasha will deal accordingly. But she’s betting he’ll come.

Soldier follows.

Natasha permits herself a little thrill of triumph. Just like old times, her brain supplies, even though eighty percent of their missions had been spent no less than 800 yards apart, usually with a couple of buildings between Natasha’s persona of the day and Soldier’s sniper blind. In these kinds of open combat missions - the other twenty percent - Soldier would have run point, taking command of the op and rightfully so. But he’s ceded that to her, here, and Natasha ain’t a fifteen year old
with an incredibly narrow skillset anymore either.

If this AIM front had been any less legitimate, Natasha would have made the guards think she’d escaped the building, then doubled back to complete her objective. As it is, the guards have already most likely called emergency services, their own company backup and their contracted corporate overlords and gotten the ball rolling on a full-blown investigation. AIM won’t have the response time to send their own fireteams - if they even have any on call at all, let alone here in Manila - but if they don’t know about this break-in already they will within the hour. Natasha figures they have a maximum of forty minutes to complete the objective and get the hell out before everything gets really, really messy.

That’s why they’re sprinting out here in the open like a couple of incredibly lost gazelle instead of finding some HVAC vents to sneak through. They round another corner and run straight into another guard; Soldier slams him in the forehead with the butt of his rifle and the guy drops like a stone.

Maybe gazelle isn’t the right metaphor. “Nonlethal,” Natasha hisses, just as a friendly reminder.

“Concussion,” Soldier hisses back, as they skid up against the wall taking another corner and run out of the back storage area halls and onto the main manufacturing floor.

The manufacturing floor takes up most of the building, accommodating the long conveyor belts and huge machines that produce and package drugs in batches of hundred thousands. Where the drugs are really made, however, is in the labs upstairs: that’s where all the research will be.

The lab doors are vacuum-sealed with electronic locks, but that’s not a problem to a girl with a Glock and a guy with a metal arm. Natasha shoots the lock out and Soldier shoulders the door open, stepping into the first lab with his rifle up and scanning the room.

“Well,” Natasha says, surveying what looks pretty much exactly like a high school chemistry lab except with better funding. There’s a lot of complicated-looking equipment around. “This is certainly… science. Any evil plots we can catch on sight?”

Soldier gives her a look that says he doesn’t appreciate her sense of humor. “Well, I didn’t want to assume,” Natasha says archly, heading for the nearest computer terminal. “Feel free to start smashing things while I steal their data.”

Soldier grunts and stomps off, beelining for the line of humming, blue-lit industrial refrigerators against the back wall. Natasha pulls a couple of flashdrives out of her bra and plugs them into the CPU to the sounds of test tubes and petri dishes coming to extremely violent ends.

Thank god the first terminal she tries has internal network access, and the first USB - one of Tony’s encryption-eaters - plows through the security system while the second USB hoovers up every file it can find. She barely has to do anything, really, which means she can watch Soldier go at the room like a hippopotamus on acid. He smashes equipment, tears apart cabinets and sterile cupboards of chemicals, shreds cables and wiring; he’s very efficient. He’s not exactly enjoying himself, but Natasha can definitely tell he’s not exactly reluctant to do this work, either.

Soldier finishes it all off by spraying the whole lab with the fire extinguisher, irretrievably contaminating any biological or chemical samples that might have remained whole enough for someone to pick through and pick up where AIM left off. Smart. Natasha’s USBs flash their lights seconds later, and she yanks them out to tuck them back into her bra. “Let’s go,” she says, and they head to the next lab to repeat the whole thing over.

Natasha does consider the fact that it’s very possible they’ve ruined priceless lifesaving research
and unknowingly delayed the cure to cancer by ten years or something, but frankly they don’t have the time to not leap around smashing things like a couple of coked-up chimpanzees. She reminds herself that Soldier crashing her op is a stroke of good luck as she finishes harvesting files from the last terminal and beckons to Soldier. They’ve got about five minutes, probably, before every emergency services vehicle comes screaming down on them, responding to a break-in at a facility that houses biological agents.

Soldier stays put, tossing his fire extinguisher down and jerking his chin towards the computers. “Destroy the security system,” Soldier says. “I need - I can’t be seen - talking.”

Natasha frowns at him over her shoulder, already moving away; she can’t imagine why he’d be worried about footage of him talking when footage of him killing seven technically-innocent guards is on the table, but whatever. “All camera feeds have been looped since I entered the building,” she says. Yet another perk of sugar assassining for Tony Stark: the little jammer that does it is the size of her index finger and also clips handily to her bra. “You won’t be seen doing anything.”

Soldier just grunts at her, but he falls in step, so it must have been good enough for him. They run straight for the back of the building, where Natasha knows the whole street backs up onto one of Manila’s canals; thank god they’re on the second floor, where the windows are big enough for Soldier to fit through. It’s short work for them to climb out - the heat outside is like getting blasted in the face with a wet flamethrower, especially after the frigid labs, and Natasha feels sweat break out on her scalp instantly. She hustles quick to move out of the way so Soldier can join her, closing the window behind them and clambering down, moving from window sill to air conditioner cage to casement edge until they’re clinging to the side of the canal itself.

They creep along the wall like particularly athletic barnacles, the trash-strewn waters below them lapping gently at the stained cement. The sky above is a sickly peach color, the glow of light pollution segmented by a thicket of crisscrossing electric cables; all around them is scrub greenery, vast bushes flourishing out of soil-filled cracks no wider than a few fingers. Natasha ducks under branches and catches herself when her toes slip and keeps putting one grimy hand in front of the other until the shouts of the police officers dissolve into the normal nighttime riot of a healthy functioning city.

They drop down onto a quay under the third bridge they pass, landing silently on the concrete; there’s a couple of homeless people sleeping a few feet away, but they don’t stir as Soldier and Natasha stay in their crouches, watching. They straighten slowly, wiping canal slime off their hands and eyeing each other like a couple of uncertain cats.

“I just want to talk,” Natasha tries, quietly, resisting the urge to scrub her palms on her thighs until the sticky feeling goes away. Somehow the slime is managing to feel clammy despite the oppressive tropical heat. “Just talking. Debrief.”

Soldier watches her, and for a long moment she’s honestly not sure which way he’ll jump on this. “I choose where,” he finally says.

“Of course,” Natasha demurs, victory warm in her belly. “Lead the way.”

They end up in a park across the river, padding through the dark over soft, springy turf. Natasha hears cars in the distance but here it’s quieter, the noise muffled a little by the lush tropical greenery. Also, they hopped over a fence with DO NOT ENTER signs plastered all over it. Natasha finds excluding the general public usually tends to cut down on noise.

Soldier finally stops under a grove of what might have been banana trees, a decent distance away from any footpaths, and they both do a smooth 360 rotation, swiveling in place to assess their
environment. Natasha stops her breath to listen hard; Soldier slips his mask down to sniff the air. When their pivot brings them back to face each other, it’s so familiar that Natasha, on automatic, signs *clear.*

Soldier stops and stares at her. His face is hard, blank, even with his mask still down, and it wouldn’t read as a questioning look to anybody who hasn’t catalogued that face and all its microexpressions with ferocious intensity.

Well, that more or less answers the question of if he remembers her. He’s clearly remembering *something.* “Romanova,” Natasha says, reminding him, offering answers; if you want to get you have to give, after all. “Widow. Avenger.” She hesitates, then looks him in the eye and signs *partner.*

He looks at her hands wonderingly, then slowly shoulders his rifle. He copies the sign like a man in a trance. It’s a quick one, brief, uncomplicated: both fists low in front of the chest, swung up to tap the knuckles together. Partner. Together.

A hot, tight feeling blossoms in Natasha’s throat, and she lets it happen. Their language was a mix of military hand signals, adapted common gestures and signs they’d just made up, as necessary; if it’s got anything in common with any official sign language, it’s only by coincidence. It was only for the two of them. There was no reason to make a Soldier sign, just as there was no reason to make a Widow sign, but when Clint told her, “Right, we’ve gotta make you a name,” she told him she already had one.

In truth, there was no reason for her and the Soldier to refer to each other as anything but *you*, a simple finger point, either. But they made a sign anyway. Two fists swung up, knuckles tapped together. Partner. For two years they’d shared a name.

Soldier is still looking at her hands, his eyes wide, so she signs *ally, wait, non-hostile,* then *wait* again. Moving slowly, she drifts her hands over her body, giving a little tap here and there. She reveals the location of all her sharp-edged little surprises without taking her eyes off his face.

Soldier looks at her, then at the place where she keeps her garrotes like he doesn’t quite know what to do. “I,” he says uncertainly, in Russian, his voice like a rusty door. “You. Were smaller?”

Natasha nods, not trusting her voice. Soldier looks confused and wary but not quite hostile; his body language keeps shifting, relaxing and tensing up again, like his body recognizes her as an ally but his mind doesn’t trust that information and closes off the second he notices it happening. The effect is that of a mongoose that can’t tell whether it’s looking at a garden hose or a live cobra.

Natasha opens her shoulders and relaxes her core and makes like a garden hose. “We were partners for two years,” she tells him. Her voice is naturally higher in Russian, the syllables forming closer to the front of her mouth; also good, also useful. “I was fourteen when we started. I worked undercover and contact ops. You were my sniper, my - backup.”


“You’re remembering,” Natasha guesses, and correctly, judging by the minute easement of his face.

“You know I…” Soldier trails off, waving a hand by his temple in the universal sign for *got fucked in the head with a chainsaw.*
Natasha nods. “I know.”

“You too?”

“No. Yes. No, not - nothing on your level.” Soldier tilts his head and Natasha shrugs. “They had me since birth. They never needed to.”

Soldier nods, slowly. “Some things got fucked worse,” he says, frank, hoarse, gesturing to his head again. “They targeted - good things. I think. Reversed - association. A long time, I thought you were - hostile. I can’t barely - think about - him.” He bares his teeth. “Only clear memories I have of my ma are ones where I was scared.”

“That’s pretty standard procedure,” Natasha agrees. The rhythm of his speech fluctuates; Natasha can’t tell if that’s physical trauma or if he’s just really rusty at the whole talking thing. This is already more words than she’s ever heard him speak before. “Separating you from your allies, your past, your own judgment. Abuser SOP.”

His lips curl back farther, showing more teeth. “But I’m remembering,” he says. “I know things now.”

“The HYDRA outpost down the street,” Natasha says.

“And others.” Soldier frowns. “Your mission.”

“The destruction of the lab,” Natasha says. “And neutralizing the four scientists that worked there, but that’ll come later. Destroying their work comes first. And when I ran into you - well, I got lucky.”

“Hunting me,” Soldier observes.

“Looking for you,” Natasha corrects. “I kept getting reports about you cropping up all over the world, too many places in too little time, but they were solid intel, very convincing. I believed it until I saw you got pinged in Burma and Canada on the same day -” She stops, because Soldier’s face twitches. “You were in Burma and Canada on the same day?” He nods, guilty. “India, Australia, India again in four hours?” Another nod. “How?”

Soldier shifts a little from side to side before signing, I have transportation.

So fast?

He nods again, now looking the slightest bit smug. Faster.

Affiliation?

That makes him squint, so Natasha repeats the sign, then taps the space on her shoulder where there would have been a uniform patch. Allegiance?

Nothing, he signs, sharp, a fast jerky motion. Only mine. Only mine.

She frowns at him. “Transport takes upkeep. How do you resupply?”

He half-lids his eyes. “I don’t.”

How.

And that look, too, wouldn’t be called a smile by anybody who didn’t know him. He taps his
hand to his mouth and mimes closing a fist. Secret.

Several things click into place. “You have it,” Natasha breathes. “The technology from the cave Rumlow was looking for - ”

She’s spun around faster than she can react, a cold metal hand over her mouth, but this, too, is familiar. Natasha’s eyes widen but her body stays in easy equilibrium: how many times had they stood pressed together like this, her back to his front, the metal arm at her throat? Once they really got to know each other Soldier spent every spare moment of mission downtime drilling her on how to incapacitate a larger, stronger, superhuman attacker.

He seems to realize it too, because he lets go of her and slides away quick, out of arm’s reach. He must remember just how good she’d gotten at it.

Natasha pivots smoothly as he moves, as if nothing happened, even though her guts are starting to churn. She signs mistake and points at herself, because they don’t have a word for sorry.

Soldier watches her warily. Natasha mimes covering her own mouth: she shouldn’t have said that out loud, no matter how cleared their surroundings. Maybe it’s just that she’s staring right at her favorite instructor, her only mentor, but this brings home harder than anything else just how sloppy she’s gotten.

She’s not a spy anymore, but that doesn’t mean she gets to be stupid. Especially not with information. Whatever he has, a new hypersonic solar-charging fighter jet or whatever, it’s in everybody’s best interests that they all keep it a fucking secret.

*What are you doing?* she signs, to move past that fucking moment of immaturity. *Why break cover?*

Soldier eyes her for a little longer before replying. His hand draws a little crosshairs over his heart. *Hunting.*

Natasha thinks about this for a bit. “Luring them in?” He nods. “Good,” Natasha says. “Although I’d consider reducing the frequency of your appearances a bit. I threw out most of the reports on your sightings as bullshit just because nobody can move around that fast.”

Soldier inclines his head, which is as good as agreement. “The… package,” Natasha continues. She doesn’t want to push him into clamming up, but this is important. “I don’t need specifics right now, but I do need to know: can it be weaponized?”

Soldier’s face is grim, which answers it for her even before he nods. “I’m… careful,” he says, his metal hand passing unconsciously over his rifle.

“Good,” Natasha repeats. “This is - hah, never thought I’d be saying this, but with you is probably the best place for the package.” Both in terms of world security and as a potential bargaining chip, for later. Soldier has shown no indication of attacking anybody outside of the HYDRA kill list; there’s collateral, yes, but no actual malign intent, and it’s highly unlikely he’d sell the jet, even if somebody managed to somehow offer him a price. “Don’t give it up, alright?”


“And you,” he says, then makes the *partner* sign again, this time purposeful, deliberate; Natasha’s so surprised he’s capable of emotional manipulation, clumsy and blatant as it is, that she very nearly loses control of her eyebrows. “Don’t tell.”

Natasha places her palm on her chest, amused despite herself. “Cross my heart.”
“Don’t tell - Rogers,” he continues, grim. “Don’t tell him.”

Natasha literally has to roll her eyes skyward to stare at the heavens in mute supplication. Literally the *minute* she makes this whole resolution to stop keeping secrets from her allies, the entire universe conspires against her.

“Why not?” she says, instead of throwing her arms up and quoting some memes. “I’m not telling anybody anything about the package, but the next time I see Steve, he’s going to ask about you, point blank. I’ve already had to yell at him to quit calling me every thirty seconds. And the fact that you’re free and acting of your own will - that’s *incredible* news, especially to him. Even if you do want to keep that a secret it’s not like Steve would go around shouting it from the rooftops.” Repeating it to himself like poetry every night before he goes to sleep, sure, but not shouting about it. Natasha will make sure of that. “He understands operational security.”

Soldier looks at her for a long minute, chewing the inside of his cheek. “What would you tell him. If you told.”

“That you are definitively no longer under HYDRA’s control,” Natasha says promptly.

“And he asks, how do you know.”

Natasha shrugs, easy. “Lots of things started adding up. Nobody’s found any kills of yours that aren’t HYDRA. Stark and his machines haven’t found any evidence of anybody giving you any kind of orders, and if you were still being controlled by somebody, on an op this long and complicated there would have to be *some*, past programming would not work alone. Oh, and I persuaded Brock Rumlow to tell me a few things.” She hesitates, then says, “It’s really not Rogers you have to worry about. He already thinks the sun shines out of your sainted asshole and he’ll treat you as a friendly no matter what you’re doing, especially now. If I tell anybody I had direct contact with you,” she says carefully, “I would only tell Rogers and Wilson, and the information would stop there. They don’t trust anyone else on the gameboard right now either.”

“What about.” He makes the very subtle jerkoff motion that means *handlers*.

Natasha doesn’t even pretend not to know what he’s talking about, though she does have to suppress a little bit of a smile. “Nick Fury knows I’m looking for you, but I don’t report to him anymore.”

Soldier frowns with his eyebrows. “Fury?”

“Oh. Right. He’s not dead.” When Soldier blinks at her in open astonishment Natasha feels she should elaborate. “He was critical for a while, but that helped him fake the ‘actually dead’ part. Now he’s only ‘officially’ dead.” She only hesitates for a second before continuing; she’s watching her words now, after her little fuckup, but she wants to build trust here and it’s not like this information is classified. “Now Philip Coulson is the Director of SHIELD, not that it really means anything anymore. Agency in name only. Stark Industries and the alphabet circus snapped up everybody who didn’t die or quit.”

“Rumlow,” Soldier says. “You fucked off the Americans good with that one.”

Natasha shrugs. “I don’t answer to the Pentagon now either.”

Soldier makes the little finger-cocking-trigger motion for *unsafe*. Natasha grins. “I’m an Avenger. I live dangerously.”

“What’s your mission?”
Natasha sobers a little, her smile fading. “Doing what needs to be done,” she says. “HYDRA leadership is dead or tied up covering their own asses, but the scientists have jumped ship to other places and continued their work. The majority of them are now funded by a group called AIM.”

Soldier’s eyes glitter. He jerks his chin out at the dark, towards the streets they came from. “Should have burned.”

“Not so fast,” Natasha says. “AIM likes to contract out a lot more than HYDRA did. They’re not bothering with the fascist military cult loyalty, they’re perfectly willing to bring in outsiders to work on their projects. It’s insidious,” Natasha says, her lip curling. “Burrowing into other, larger organizations like this - AIM funds and connects the scientists and then sets them up in other companies as consultants, special contractors. They’re billed as a think tank, officially. All their personnel are highly scattered - attacking their headquarters outright won’t get us much. And if we carry on like we just did in there, attacking the host organizations will mean massive collateral damage and kick up a PR storm that even we won’t be able to hide from.”

Frankly, AIM is playing it like Natasha would have. The irony is incredible, really. AIM has become more of a “beautiful parasite” in the past ten months than HYDRA managed in the past ten years, thank you Dr. Creepy McNazi Zola.

Soldier briefly closes his eyes in unspeakable frustration. “Who the fuck am I hunting.”

Natasha shrugs. “A logo change and a new paint job doesn’t mean it’s not the same exact sons of bitches in the driver’s seat. We just have to be a little less slash and burn about things.”

Soldier’s jaw works for a bit before he settles. “I have. Some names.”

“Me too,” Natasha says. “I don’t have the data on me. Do you have a contact point? An email, a number, a drop account?”

Soldier’s lip curls just the slightest amount. “No.”

Natasha’s mouth tightens in response; she knows they’re not gonna walk out of here as bosom buddies, skipping hand in hand, and if it was pure dumb luck she ran into him today it’s not likely to happen again. “If I give you my email will you take it?”

Soldier shrugs, back to watching her like she’s got a pipe bomb in her underwear. Natasha holds in a sigh and rattles off one of her drop point emails, an account she’s never used before with only seven numbers in the address handle. The easier it is to remember the better, especially for Soldier; he’s walking and talking alright but she knows brain damage isn’t always so obvious. “If you send a smiley face to that account I’ll send you a way we can set up secure communications. Then I can get you the intel.”

Soldier cocks his head slightly. “Stark.”

“Yes. Convenient.” Natasha weighs whether or not to say the next thing, but decides she might as well. “I’m bringing him in on this. Soon. As a heavy hitter, I mean - him and War Machine, where possible. Stark can plausibly operate outside US military scope, but Rhodes has a cooler head and I want a display of force. Whatever HYDRA - AIM, whatever - has left of their militarized forces, we’re taking them down hard.”

Soldier listens to all this, considering. “What’s - Rogers doing?” he says after a moment. There’s that little bit of a pause before he can say Steve’s name, like it takes an effort. “He’s in - Europe. What’s he…”

Soldier stares. “You what.”

“He was getting irrational - well. More irrational than usual. I benched him. As of yesterday he was crossing the border into the Czech Republic with Samuel Wilson.”

“Wilson,” Soldier repeats, triumphantly, like a man who’s found a word that’s been eluding him for weeks. “He has wings.”

Natasha takes a moment to be grateful he said that aloud instead of demonstrating by gesture. If Soldier starts flapping she’d lose it and never recover. “He did. Right now what he’s mostly got is a depressed supersoldier.”

Soldier’s eyes sharpen. “You want him out?”

“No,” Natasha admits. “I needed him to cool it before he brought international attention down on our backs. He was starting to make dangerous decisions and he’s Captain America. I won’t let him burn that if I can help it. He’ll need it later.” We’ll need it later, she doesn’t add. It all depends on how things shake out, anyway. Still, it’s always nice to have some leverage over public opinion on your side.

Soldier looks, if not guilty, then at least a little bit like he’d rather staple his nose shut than ask the next question. “Is he…”

“Still obsessed with you?” Natasha says dryly. “Yes. So much yes that we really ought to add that one to the universal constants list along with death and taxes.”

Something rustles in the trees, too close. They both freeze for a long second, honing in on the noise. When a cat slinks out of the shadows they both relax, but not by much; Soldier watches the cat watch them, its eyes reflecting green in the dim faraway light of the streetlights, and when he turns back to her Natasha knows he’s about to leave.

He lifts his hand to his mask, then pauses, coming to a decision. He takes a deep breath. “You can. Tell him. Rogers. If you want. But I’m not coming in. Ever.”

“I won’t give him details,” Natasha promises. “But I’m trying not to lie to my friends anymore.”

Soldier meets her eyes for the first time that night. “Your friend.”

Natasha’s chin lifts infinitesimally. “Yes.”

Soldier’s mouth works, jaw clenching and unclenching. He looks like he’s trying to pass the psychological equivalent of a kidney stone. “Fine,” he snarls finally, his flesh hand opening and closing in a fist. “I’m going to. Do it myself.”

“I know,” he snaps, but the anger isn’t directed at her. “I’m. Working. On it.”

“No pressure,” Natasha says evenly. “I know these things take time.”

Soldier makes the gesture that could mean we are surrounded or everything is fucked. In this case Natasha can tell he means fuck everything. “I know,” she commiserates. “But it does get better. I mean it.”
Soldier glares at her like he wishes he could strangle her with the nearest palm leaf, but Natasha knows he means it in a loving and affectionate way. “Hey,” she says, because this is her chance to find out. “Before you go. How could you tell?” she asks. “That I was in the ceiling. What gave me away?”

Soldier frowns some more with his eyebrows. “Not sure,” he finally admits. “Just a feeling.”

“Just a feeling,” Natasha echoes. Well then. Supersoldier sensory input, most likely, and there’s not much she can do about that. At least it probably wasn’t due to more sloppiness on her part. She nods at him, already mentally mapping out potential exit routes; Soldier lifts his mask back onto his face and unshoulders his rifle.

Good luck, Natasha can’t help but sign, even as she’s stepping back into the foliage. She can’t help her smile, either, when he signs it back, looking extremely put-upon, and she’s still grinning as the two of them melt into the dark.

Chapter End Notes

1. Technically there is no such thing as a flechette cannon, unless you’re reading the Star Wars novelizations.

2. If you’re trying to make any kind of timeline add up, don’t, because my approach here can only be called “fucking winging it.”

3. The Swiss Pharma Research Laboratory is real. It’s a pharma development facility, it backs up onto a canal, and it’s in Manila. However, as far as I know nothing nefarious is happening there. Probably.

4. The song is No Wow by The Kills.
It’s not far to where Motherfucker hangs, right across the park: Barnes-thing led them close as he dared, just in case Widow turned on him and he had to make a run for it. He scrambles inside and takes them up, up, until he feels he’s far enough away that he can take a minute to lie down on Motherfucker’s floor and do breathing exercises until his heart rate restabilizes.

Widow had been his partner. That explains - quite a bit. It wasn’t fun, trying to reconcile the feelings of familiarity with the virulent paranoia that’s so near and dear to his heart, but they got the job done. Barnes got away more or less unscathed.

He stares longingly at the little bag of Hershey kisses next to his bedroll, but he’s not sure he actually did anything worth rewarding. His Bucky ghost didn’t try to take over even once during that little - conversation, but it’s not like his choices had anything to do with that. Barnes doesn’t know if that’s because he was in full mission mode, or if the ghost is gone for good, or if good ol’ Bucky just has no script for handling Widow.

On that, at least, Barnes feels they are in accord. He’s not sure a script like that exists. He felt stupider than usual and not quite all there, as they spoke, like he was trying to think with a brain made of cotton batting, but at least it was him talking. And it’s the Widow, anyway. Probably every man feels like that talking to her.

It was… strange, the way the familiarity came rushing back with her, even if it didn’t bring back all the memories. It never hurt to think of Widow the way it did for Rogers, but two years isn’t that much time to get close to someone, comparatively. And if they’d started when she was fourteen then that must have been at the very tail end of the Soldier’s Soviet custody. He’s pretty sure there weren’t many positive associations formed there.

The sign language. It had felt automatic in an entirely different way from the Bucky-programming and only slightly less unsettling. It had felt easier, sort of, than forcing words out through his mouth, and hadn’t even occurred to him as an alternative to speaking, before. Maybe that’s why Bucky couldn’t step in - Barnes is fairly sure the sign language never belonged to him. Barnes would even classify the whole deal as a good thing if he wasn’t sick to death of his body constantly handing him these motherfucking surprises.

Barnes can feel his heart rate picking up again, so he rolls over and pokes through his newest stack of romance pulps, selecting the one with the most lurid cover. This one is titled THE TIME-TRAVELING Reporter AND THE Billionaire Werewolf VIKING SAVAGE. He opens it up immediately.

Thirty pages into the tepid adventures of Rognar the fierce yet sensitive tycoon and Desiderata the bold journalist slash lingerie model sees Barnes calmed down significantly. He just ran smack into Widow, sure, but he also survived that more or less intact. All the memories that came up from that were small and manageable, tied to the body - the hand signs, the smell of her sweat, her strong little grip on his wrist or shoulder or tac straps. The ghostly, bone-deep awareness of how to move with somebody barely shoulder-high, the sensation somehow doubled.

Widow knows about Motherfucker. Well - sort of. She knows Barnes has got the thing Rumlow was after, and now she knows it’s a vehicle. Barnes is certain there are people out there who know it’s an alien spaceship - after all, the thing was stashed in the lowest cavern of an old
HYDRA base, and like hell was that a coincidence - but at least he doesn’t have to worry about Widow spreading the word around. It probably really is safest in Barnes’ fucked-up assassin hands. He just wants to live in it and he’s only incited catastrophic violence with it once.

Barnes, having sufficiently pacified his nervous system, rummages around until he finds his freshest notebook, turning to the first clean page and uncapping a Sharpie. His writings have slowly morphed into an almost perfect mimicry of the report style favored by HYDRA, but whatever, it lets him record everything with a minimum of incomprehension and crazy. He’s only reporting to himself, anyway. He dates the page, checking with his phone, and writes out the entire day as best he can, trying to record the conversation with Widow verbatim.

Looking over it, he understands Widow was right. HYDRA has dug into organizations that have resources enough to protect their people, organizations that Barnes can’t attack without massive collateral damage, and Barnes is equal parts peeved and grateful for the Widow’s presence. He is not equipped for infiltration and likely won’t be for a while, because neither Bucky nor the mission can make him fake convincing normality for more than a few hours at a time. Her assistance was valuable.

Speaking of getting assistance.

There’s more and more Steve in his head. The memories of sex are bleeding at the edges, showing him the shape of the water behind the dam, and there is a lot. It feels like Barnes has just been paddling around in the ocean this whole time, occasionally getting slammed against a big rock, and it’s only just now that he’s realized the rock is the tip of a submerged mountain.

And he’s starting to suspect this mountain may actually be a volcano, and he better brace himself and hold onto his underpants if he wants to survive the inevitable magma blast. He still gets headaches when he thinks about anything specific in his past for more than a few minutes at a time, but it’s nowhere near the blackout pain it was before. It’s a miracle he’s got what he’s got, really, where by all rights he should be cogito ergo-ing at the level of a root vegetable. And he can even feel the pressure, almost, pressing up just behind the sex memories, and it’s building.

The more he reads about brains, the more it seems like there’s decent odds he might get a big chunk of Bucky’s memories back. Maybe even everything he had, barring some natural fading. It makes sense - when he actually looks at it, the clear memories he’s regained are a tiny fraction of what must have been twenty-five years of sequential human living. Bucky’s human living. That’s much, much more, really, than the Soldier Asset-thing ever had. And they’d all been recorded correctly, too - for the brain to transfer short-term storage into long-term storage, you need to not be getting electrocuted every fifteen seconds. Original Bucky was the only one who had that luxury.

The more he gets back, the more he gets of - Steve.

Widow wants to tell Rogers about him. Widow thinks it would be good news. She wouldn’t maneuver to bench an asset like Rogers unless he really was doing damage outside of what she could spin or control, and she’d said he’d been getting dangerously irrational. Her tolerance for both danger and irrationality, combined with Barnes’ hazy but certain knowledge of Rogers’ baseline for both, means that shit had gotten pretty fucking dire indeed.

In all his romance novels, there’s lots of stories where the main characters do something incredibly stupid that involves a lot of unnecessary self-sacrifice, all for their professed love. (This love gets professed pretty damn quickly, usually before the characters have even properly gotten to know each other; the authors always seem in a big hurry to get to the big declarations and heaving bosoms part.) But Barnes isn’t an idiot. He knows that’s not how things go in real life. Mothers run into burning buildings for their children, a stranger pushes another out of the way of a
speeding car, but that’s all heat of the moment. For something outside the scope of immediate chemical adrenaline, for something premeditated -

In 1943, Steve Rogers of the USO dropped out of a civilian airplane and into the midnight woods of occupied Austria, with no parachute and no gun. He destroyed a HYDRA base and freed over 200 captured Allied soldiers, all because he heard that was the most likely place he’d find his missing friend Sergeant J.B. Barnes. The articles and history books make it sound like a charming anecdote, like Rogers had swung by to pick up his old pal who’d gotten sloppy drunk at the neighborhood bar, while at the same time assuring everybody that it was a feat of incredible bravery and skill. It’s a famous story. It’s how Captain America became Captain America.

The memory comes on so strong and sudden that for a second Barnes mistakes it for a flashback. He can feel it, the rough bark against his back, Steve’s stubble dragging up his neck as he pins Bucky to the tree, and he’s shaking or maybe Bucky’s shaking and between the frantic awareness of how exposed they are and the feel of Steve’s wet searing breath it feels like his skin is about to peel off. He’s clawing reflexively at Steve’s bizarre tricolor getup, some kind of costume, jesus, and Steve is dragging in air like a cornered animal finally run to ground. Or maybe that’s him. It feels like something is disintegrating under his ribs.

Barnes finds his nails have bitten bloody crescents in his palm as reality dials back in. That was it: the factory raid, the famous story, a chunk of aftermath that never made it into the books. And then before that, the walk back to camp, and then -

Barnes has to swallow on sour spit, his mouth suddenly flooded like he’s about to throw up. He has time unspooling, the cold woods, the rough tree against his back, Steve’s tongue in his mouth tasting like blood and ash. He has the feeling of being picked up off a cold metal table, of being shoved under one scientifically perfected arm and half-carried like a sack of flour. He has a man peeling his face off over a river of fire.

Rogers walked into hell, on no intel and half a chance, and dragged him out. And you don’t do that for some guy if all he is to you is a good pal, a decent fuck. Hell, you don’t do that if he’s a motherfucking magic porn star with a ten-inch cock. Rogers may have compromised the Barnes-thing, but it’s becoming more and more clear that Rogers has been compromised right back. He’s been compromised by Barnes for years.

None of this is new information, but now it’s right under Barnes’ nose in a way it never was before. Rogers has spent the last ten months on one long murder-bender, driven by his discovery that a global cult of fascists just spent the better part of a century torturing his de facto husband. Who he thought was dead. And now doesn’t remember him. And ran from him, beat him, and shot him center mass three times - and all that barely slowed Rogers down. It took the Black Widow herself to get him to step back for a minute.

Rogers is no romance novel hero. Rogers is terrifyingly real. He’s left his mark on Barnes so deep it couldn’t be burned out, and more than once he’s bent the world to his bidding. He is a mountain. And he wants to be on Barnes’ side.

Barnes killed seven guards, down there in Manila. Contract guards, not HYDRA. Widow had no reason to lie about that. And how many others, when there was no Widow to tell him? Who else got mowed down, and he barely even noticed? He keeps telling himself he’s not HYDRA anymore but when it comes down to missions he's doing it all just the same, point and shoot, acceptable collateral -

Barnes is running out of actionable targets, the Widow’s critique of his “lure HYDRA, kill everyone” plan has exposed some pretty glaring flaws, and his only backup is a dubiously sentient alien spaceship that relies on him for anything more complicated than joyful hovering.
And now he has the opportunity to have not only Captain America but *Steve Rogers* in his corner, a position few others would survive, let alone want.

Rogers is a resource. And Barnes-thing better get over himself quick.

He can do this. He *can*. He can take control of his own behavior, even if it takes an entire avalanche of Hershey kisses to do it. And he doesn’t have to - he doesn’t - it’s not like he has to run into Rogers’ open arms and immediately drop trou and present his freshly perfumed asshole. He’ll do - a gesture of alliance. That’s all. He probably won’t even have to see Rogers’ face. He’ll just make it clear that they’re on the same side, and that he could be maybe be amenable to sharing some intel. That’s it.

Besides. He told Widow he’d do it. Like hell is he going to let that little ginger spider deal with his own bullshit before he does.

-o-

Widow said they were in the Czech Republic, and a few minutes spent accessing a commonly used backdoor into the Czech passport control system confirms this: Wilson, S. and Rogers, S. crossed in from Slovakia yesterday. Barnes lands near Prague, just before dawn, and goes through the song and dance of stashing Motherfucker - woodland is more scarce here, but he finds a boarded-up barn whose doors open wide enough for the ship to fit through - and catches an early morning bus into the city.

Actually *finding* Rogers and Wilson is going to be the work of a few days, he knows, and he might as well start in the capital. The fastest way to find them would be financial records, which are going to take some doing. Banks typically have much better cybersecurity than the average government organization, which is utterly unsurprising to anyone who’s seen the comparison in institutional funding. And the code that can crack or backdoor those firewalls is almost never for sale: people who find a way to hack a bank typically tend to keep that information to themselves.

Barnes gently konks his head against the vibrating bus window, pinching the bit of nose between his eyes. There used to be an entire network of Nazis whose jobs were to give him detailed dossiers on his targets, but they were, well, Nazis. He doesn’t miss that. It’ll be a pain in the ass to find Rogers, but it’s not like he’s fucking dying to drop into the guy’s lap. He’s perfectly fine with this op taking a few weeks of runup.

Widow probably knows exactly where they are down to the geospatial coordinates. She was also pretty eager to give Barnes a way to contact her.

Well. Barnes may not have much, but he does have the battered, convoluted knot of stubbornness that currently passes for his pride, and that means he’ll go begging to Widow when the devil starts organizing ice-skating competitions.

He disembarks the bus near the city center, intending to find himself a couple of electronics stores to acquire new phones and a fresh laptop. He’ll need to identify and set up a base of operations, since Motherfucker’s current barn does not look like it exists in the same century as wifi. He’s not sure whether to start his paperwork trail search with Rogers or Wilson; Wilson’s information is likely to be less protected, but Rogers’ will probably be easier to find. Barnes resigns himself to the likelihood that he’ll end up having to research both anyway.
He rounds the corner of a quiet side street, hands in his pockets, and there in the middle of the road is a holy mother of giant blond supersoldier climbing out of a tiny orange Citroën.

Barnes damn near gives himself whiplash spinning around and lunging for the nearest parking meter. He mashes buttons at random, heart pounding, pretending to be deeply absorbed in processing his nonexistent parking permit; Rogers shuts his car door and then leans down to talk through the open window. Barnes can see a sliver of Wilson’s shoulder from the corner of his eye. Thank god today’s bad hair day means Barnes has got a cap on.

“You said it was called - Airby and Bees?” Rogers’ voice is deep, resonant, and horribly familiar. Barnes gropes furiously at the meter casing and hopes to god he’s not leaving gouges where he’s gripping with his left hand.

“No, Airbnb, that’s the - website, that’s the name of the website. We’re looking for the address, it’s just gonna look like an apartment building.”

“Twenty-two twenty-five Vinohradská Street,” Rogers says doubtfully, which is right next to Barnes.

“Yeah, GPS says it’s here somewhere. Go buzz the bell or whatever while I park.”

Barnes, having exhausted plausibility at the parking meter, whips out his phone and desperately tries to look like a normal pedestrian definitely not on the verge of hysteria. This has got to be some kind of curse. Bucky’s ghost, haunting and haunted in turn, and motherfucking christ, maybe he should just give up. The universe is so hell-bent on shoving Rogers in his face that he might as well flop down in the street right now and let Rogers step on him.

He’d wanted to find Rogers, hadn’t he. First Widow, now this - he must be cursed. It’s the only explanation for luck like this. Barnes prays Rogers’ situational awareness has not improved since the cave and stabs blindly at the screen of his smartphone, listening to Wilson drive away as Rogers starts poking doubtfully at the doorway of the apartment building.

Barnes gets some of his sanity back when he rounds the corner and presses his back to it, no longer in danger of direct line of sight. He did, technically, fulfill a mission objective. He found Rogers. He even has the opportunity to find out where they’re staying. They didn’t spot him, and they can continue to not spot him. They’re not spies. Barnes just has to be careful.

Wilson comes up the block five minutes later. When he enters the building, Barnes silently blesses the slow-closing door and sneaks in behind him.

Wilson’s just started his way up the stairs, so Barnes lurks silently in the tiny foyer until there’s at least two lengths of staircase between them. He makes sure his footsteps are silent, straining his ears, and he can hear Rogers’ voice, that damned low pitch, echoing indistinctly from far above. He’s talking to someone with a Czech accent.

“- and we’re - ah, hey, this is my friend Sam. He did the booking?”

“Sam Wilson, nice to meet you. Josef, right? Man, the parking ‘round here…”

The voices go sharply muffled again as a door closes: they’ve entered the apartment. Barnes is still two flights below and can’t pinpoint which one, other than that it’s on the north side of the building. A glance around tells him that could be any one of the four doorways on each side of the stairwell.

Barnes pulls out his phone. A quick google of Air b and b leads him to the website, and it’s pretty easy to figure out what’s going on from there. Barnes searches Prague, and then Vinohradska
Street, and bingo: Apartment 3B, let out for rent by one Josef N. Currently unavailable for the next three days.

A door opens and shuts above him, and Barnes starts climbing the stairs again, head down; a man comes clattering past who is almost certainly Josef N., judging by the seller profile photo on Airbnb. Barnes keeps going until the next landing, absently listening to the sounds of Josef exiting the building.

Barnes is aware that just hanging around in a residential building’s stairwell is deeply suspicious behavior, no matter how invested he pretends to be in his phone, but he can’t seem to think of any reason to go back downstairs. He should case the building, at least. Maybe look for roof access. But he’s just a floor below, now, and there’s the thrum of Rogers’ voice again, just barely on the edge of hearing.

And - rapidly getting louder. There’s the sound of a door opening, and Rogers and Wilson once again fill the stairwell, talking to each other, loud and unconcerned. They’re leaving the room. They’re starting to walk back down the stairs.

Barnes is barely one floor below them: they’ll turn the corner and there he is. He’s got no time to run back downstairs. There’s no way he’ll get past them unscathed.

Barnes does what any exhaustively trained spy-assassin would do when faced with this situation: he panics. He whips around, grabs an apartment door at random and forces the lock.

The door gives with a muted little crunch. He lucks out: it opens onto a long, sunny apartment hallway, sectioned off from the other rooms. Barnes can hear a loud television, and the sizzle of a pan; there’s somebody chopping things in the kitchen. The smell of frying meat is overwhelming. Barnes carefully eases the door shut behind him and slides down until he’s crouched with his hip to the door. Bracing close enough that he can press his ear close and listen to the stairwell, he turns his head back to the apartment hall.

There’s an enormously fat baby staring at him. It’s suspended in some kind of infernal, garishly colored hell-belt on wheels, planted right in the middle of the hallway. There’s a giant yellow bow on its head. It appears to be eating what looks like a stuffed caterpillar.

Barnes and the baby stare at each other, one in abject terror and one with the blank, slightly crazed look of a prototype human that hasn’t really learned how to move its face yet. But it doesn’t scream, and then continues not to scream, so after a few seconds Barnes manages to start breathing again.

The baby kicks its feet, which makes its wheeled prison creak alarmingly. It also makes Barnes realize it’s stuck: the edges of the flat plastic top have wedged in sideways against the narrow hallway walls, more or less trapping the baby out here by the door until somebody comes along or it develops heretofore unprecedented escapist abilities. The baby doesn’t seem too concerned by this, but Barnes is pretty sure gnawing on the stuffed caterpillar is going to lose appeal eventually. And then: screaming. And then: the mother. And then, undoubtedly, even more screaming.

Barnes is just about to carefully reach out when he hears footsteps, voices, from out in the stairwell, and he immediately glues his ear back to the door. He hears Rogers and Wilson clatter past, their voices unmistakeable if indistinct, and proceed down the stairs.

“- just saying, I think it’s a little strange to stay inside some stranger’s apartment.”

“Just think of it as a super short sublet. Way cheaper than a hotel room, too. You should see some of the prices they charge for a dinky little one-room Marriott these days - ”
The baby throws the caterpillar at him.

Barnes looks at the baby, then at the caterpillar, then hastily flips the spit-sodden thing back into its arms. The baby looks at the caterpillar, then at Barnes, then gives him a terrifying, toothless grin.

“No,” Barnes mouths at the baby, but it winds up and beans him full in the face with the spit caterpillar again. He flails at it, sending it back, and the situation starts deteriorating rapidly as the baby starts to giggle.

It is clearly time to leave. Barnes produces one of his Sharpies, scoots over on his ass, scrawls *sorry about your door* on the little fake-table part of the baby prison and then awkwardly shoves a couple of American hundreds around where the kid’s bum is in the seat. He carefully unwedges the contraption from the walls - the baby bubbles delightedly at him and tries to ram the caterpillar in his face again - and gives it a gentle push down the hallway. The abominable noise of plastic wheels on the hardwood floor turns out to be a great cover for the sound of Barnes sneaking back out the door.

The stairwell is blessedly empty, of both supersoldiers and children. Barnes quickly heads down the stairs. Once again he sees the building door just barely closing behind Wilson and Rogers, and from there it’s completely automatic to slide into the easy, reflexive patterns of tailing a target.

That, partnered with his recent work DIY deconditioning himself, means he can look directly at Rogers without wanting to punch his own fucking brains out.

Rogers makes a higher-contrast picture than he’d been in DC, the last time Barnes saw him in full light. He’s tanned and freckled now, clearly spending a lot of time outdoors; his already-blond mop is sunned almost white. It’s growing out: he keeps brushing it out of his eyes and the back of his head is a labyrinth of cowlicks. He really needs a pair of sunglasses.

Wilson, next to him, is also a shade darker, but his hair and beard are aggressively neat, especially compared to Rogers the walking wardrobe accident. He’s gesturing heartily as he talks to Rogers, and Rogers is smiling - actually smiling, though to the untrained eye that look would probably be mistaken for a sun-blind grimace.

Barnes tails them halfway across the city. They’re not going anywhere fast, just sort of ambling their way along, taking a solidly touristy path through the streets. Wilson takes a lot of photos. Rogers slopes along after him with his giant meat shoulders all hunched up by the way he’s got his sad khaki pockets stuffed with his giant meat hands.

Rogers appears shockingly docile in the face of forced vacation. Whatever Widow did must’ve really taken the wind out of his sails. Or Wilson is just that good, as company goes - Rogers was smiling, after all. They seem to get along very well. Wilson urges Rogers to a variety of food stalls, and Rogers always goes. It’s a textbook picture of two army buddies on R&R.

It takes nearly an hour for Barnes to come to his senses and remember that finding these two was only the first step of the equation. He's still got to make contact. He’s got to get them on his side.

They’re sitting at a cafe on the sidewalk now, waiting for their food, and Rogers is noodling on a napkin with a ballpoint while Wilson messes with his phone. Barnes is strangling the physical, itching urge to go over there and see what the hell Rogers is drawing by yanking the napkin right out of his hands. He’s not going to do that. He is not going to do that. That would be - wrong, and - that’s not the way to do it. That’s not the way to get - allies, that’s a way to start a public showdown that’ll end up on CNN.

Barnes needs to get them something. Something useful. He needs to make them an offer.
He’s finished preparations by 0400 local time, and he spends the last few hours before dawn sitting on the roof opposite the Airbnb building, watching the sun come up. When the sky grays out to pink he sees a tousled blond head come out the front door, the cowlicks now reaching catastrophic proportions, and watches it take off directly down the street at a jog that quickly breaks into a run.

Barnes is forewarned by fuzzy recollections of the Captain America target briefing outlining a frankly obsessive exercise habit and does not move. True to form, Rogers comes back an hour later, his exercise getup now clinging even more obscenely with sweat. He trots back inside, and after forty minutes he emerges again with a bleary-eyed Wilson, this time in street clothes.

Barnes drops down to ground level, crosses over and breaks into their building.

They have absolutely zero security on their room. There’s a lock on the apartment door, but it’s pathetic even by civilian standards and Barnes picks it in under twenty seconds. Inside is no better - they’ve set up no precautions and the window sightlines turn the room into a fishbowl. Out of training, habit and annoyance he gives the room a going-over, flipping briefly through their things, tidying up and wiping his prints as he goes; it turns out the two shining beacons of muscles and liberty are huge fucking slobs. You haven’t even been in the room a full twenty-four hours, Steve, how are there socks on the floor?

He identifies Rogers’ bags as the ones with more than one set of khakis in them. Once he’s put everything in order, he leaves a data stick clipped to a keychain, looped around Rogers’ phone charger. It had taken a little while to put everything together, but he has high hopes for the result. Nothing that’ll yank them out of their R&R but nothing useless, either. A message of goodwill.

Then he ghosts back out of the apartment and heads for Motherfucker. The past two days have been terrible for his spy-assassin reputation, to say nothing of his fucking blood pressure. He is going to do nothing but sit quietly in his spaceship and listen to music for the rest of the damn day.

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Prague is very pretty, with refreshingly little in the way of rogue nature. Steve’s made some noises about finding some contacts in the city to maybe shake down a little, get some actionable intel on… anything, but without Natasha as their compass even Steve had to admit they weren’t sure where to start. Sam convinced Steve that they might as well just walk around while they’re thinking, so they dropped their packs in their rented room and then went right back out again.

That was an excellent decision. The weather is gorgeous, a warm and breezy late summer, and Steve has only just started to relax into the rhythm of vacation instead of treating it like some kind of high-stakes obstacle course he has to power through. Still: it’s been a month. Sam figures he’ll give Natasha another week to come through before he starts calling up his Air Force buddies and start asking if anybody knows somebody who knows somebody who knows something. The job they came out to do isn’t done.
But in the meantime Sam gets to experience Europe, which in and of itself is pretty fuckin’ great. Prague alone is a wealth of selfie opportunities: Sam has so many new photos to send to his mom for her strategic bragging deployments into the extended Wilson family WhatsApp chat. There’s lots of cool history stuff too: on day two they walked across the Charles Bridge, where Sam made Steve’s Catholic ass explain about which statue was the saint of what and what horrible thing they died of. And, of course, the food: Sam’s pretty sure they visit every single street stall in the entire city.

Steve wasn’t kidding about needing to eat every couple of hours. Sam has been woken more than once now by Steve getting out of bed around three in the morning, walking mechanically to his bag, filling his plastic water bottle with protein powder and then applying tap water and vigorously shaking until the resulting mixture visibly takes on the consistency of tar. The first time Sam witnessed Steve drinking this down he thought he was having some kind of weird food nightmare. This impression - and all consequent nights after - is not helped by the absolutely dead look on Steve’s face when he equally mechanically rinses the bottle and stumbles back to bed.

Sam is pretty sure having, like, crackers or granola bars or literally anything else would be a better midnight snack than protein powder, especially since it seems to only come in flavors of Yuck, Vanilla Yuck or Chocolate-Strawberry-Nightmare Yuck. But hey, Steve grew up in the Depression, maybe he likes that shit. Still: as a human with functioning taste buds and a sense of empathy, Sam has made it his mission to get Steve to snack on things that don’t look like they got poured out of the rusted engine block of a broken farm tractor.

“Okay,” Sam says, prodding the golden-brown cylinder in the paper napkin in his hands. “This is… what’d the guy call this? Turtleneck?”

“Trdelnik,” Steve says, examining his own cylinder. “But I don’t think I’m saying it right.”

“Oh, try it,” Sam orders. Steve takes a big crunchy bite and his eyebrows go up; thus safely taste-tested, Sam takes a bite of his own. “Good,” he decides, Steve nodding along and making an approving noise. “Sugary. Nice. Not gonna fill us up for long, though.”

“Sorry,” Steve mumbles, making big apologetic eyes over his sugar turtleneck.

“Hey, man, you think I’m complaining? Oh no, we’re going to have to eat some more food, how could you do this to me.”


“Hey, yeah, tell me about that,” Sam says, wiping crumbs off his beard. “You regrow, like, organs, right?”

“Yeah,” Steve says. “I mean. Well. Yes.” He takes another bite of his cylinder. “The only one I’ve completely regrown is my appendix, but the serum’s fixed damage to… pretty much everything, I guess.”

“Like, everything everything?”

“I took shrapnel to the neck last year and got gassed in ‘43,” Steve says through a mouthful of crunch, gesturing at his face. “In Poland. Some kinda HYDRA canister. We never did figure out what it was but it burned like a son of a bitch and I was blind for two days. So that’s lungs, throat, eyes - spinal cord, from the shrapnel. That was somewhere in Syria. There was paralysis, but only on my right side and only for a coupla hours. I think my body triaged that one extra hard.”

Sam, still processing the whole blind for two days bit, says, “It did what now?”
“Some things heal faster than others,” Steve explains. “My blood clots really fast, and stuff that’s worst off tends to heal first. Not great, but if a bone sets wrong I just have to rebreak it, so. And muscle adhesions are pretty easy to get rid of.”

And incredibly fucking painful, Sam doesn’t say, nor does he let his eyebrows do that thing where they try to climb up off his face and wing away into the sun. He’s learned Steve doesn’t take kindly to people telling him he should be more careful of his body, and once again, thankfully, this is not his hill to die on. “You push out bullets, right?”

“Sometimes,” Steve seesaws his hand. “If they’re deep it takes surgery. And I’ve got a piece of a .45 cal in my shoulder blade, but we didn’t know about it until I had to get x-rays after the Battle of Manhattan. I think my body’s decided it’s staying in there. The docs say the bone’s grown around it. It doesn’t affect my range of movement, anyway.”

“Does it hurt?” Sam gestures at his shoulder, balling up his napkin. “One of my buddies has a coupla chunks of shrapnel in there and he says it aches like a motherfucker.”

Steve shrugs again. “I don’t really notice. I think my… nerves work differently now, too. Some things are more… well… I’m not sure if sensitive is the right word, really, because in some cases it’s less sensitive. I barely even feel it anymore when I punch, for example. Other times it feels like I - feel the air.” Steve pulls a face. “It’s very itchy.”

“So your superpowers are pushing out bullets and having weird tingly nerve feelings sometimes.”

“I also don’t get sick,” Steve says. “There’s a bunch of hormone and immune system things going on that doctors get excited about, but I kind of tune out for that part, honestly. And when they were doing abdominal surgery on me after Insight Day they told me part of my pancreas is shaped really funny where it grew back, but it seems to be working fine, so.”

Sam considers this. “So you’re more or less just a normal dude, except your healing factor is jacked to the nth power.”

“Pretty much. And my scar tissue has the ability to regrow sweat glands,” Steve says, with the air of somebody repeating a fact told to him several times. “That’s very exciting too, apparently. I guess normal scars can’t. Oh, and my teeth grow back. When I got the serum I even grew a couple extra.”

“Wait, really? Extra teeth?”

Steve shrugs. “A molar in the back on both sides. Top and bottom. Apparently when my jaw expanded the genetics decided hey, we’ve got some room here now, let’s fill it.”

“How could you tell?” Sam says, fascinated.

“They took dental casts,” Steve says, as they turn onto their street and start ambling towards their apartment building. “Partially because they were measuring absolutely everything, for an accurate before-after comparison, but also I think so they could identify my corpse if the procedure went wrong and blew up the entire bunker.” Steve shrugs. “Also, I was missing a tooth - here, this one - from this one time I made some excellent decisions in a bar fight, so. I noticed that one all on my own.”

Sam nods along, frowning thoughtfully as Steve pulls out the front door keys. “So when you say they measured literally everything,” he says, very seriously.

Steve blinks at him as he opens the door, not getting it. “Hm?”
“Your action jackson, Steve,” Sam says, making sure to keep his face straight and his voice gravely serious. “Your beef bayonet. Your fun gun, your boing and winkle - ”

It takes him a second, but then Steve gapes, squawks and jumps him, hauling them both into the building foyer. “Sam!”

“I’m serious,” Sam cackles, not really struggling to get out of the gentlest noogie of all time. “You gotta tell me - did they make it bigger? Did they at least make it a little bigger?”

“I was engineered for peak performance,” Steve says loudly, grappling at Sam’s arms as they bump around under the stairwell. “What the hell does that have to do with - ”

“Peak performance in bed,” Sam says, eyebrows waggling furiously, which makes Steve give a disgusted noise and sort of gently tackle him into the stairwell wall.

They spend the next two flights of stairs trying to maul each other. Sam keeps demanding “How many inches, Steve! How many inches!” until some elderly lady in a headscarf leans over the railing two floors above and starts yelling at them to shut the fuck up in Czech.

“Oh my god,” Sam finally subsides, panting; their Airbnb here was a steal at the price, but mostly because it was on the top floor of a ten-story building with no elevator. Usually it wouldn’t be a problem - Sam still feels confident calling himself a fit dude even now that he’s regularly standing next to Captain McFlexoff, which he knows would not hold true for everybody - but usually he’s not trying to get upstairs after eating half of Prague’s entire food supply. “Peak performance. Did they plan for you to just punch Nazis to death? Was there that much of a gun shortage? They just hand you your Frisbee and say good luck soldier, tell you to go nuts?”


“You just like hitting people,” Sam says good-naturedly.

“I throw it too!”

“Yeah you do. And somehow it comes back every time. What’s up with that, huh? Is it magnets?”

“Maybe I’m just good at it, Sam.”

“Oh-huh. You had to have practiced. Go on, tell me you hit yourself in the face once or twice or fifteen million times. Tell me. Make my year.”

Steve huffs righteously. “I might’ve broken every single finger on both hands the first couple of months, yeah.”

“I knew it,” Sam says, fistpumping a little. “Man, and you was lucky. The Falcon program? We had a guy snap four ribs his first test flight, and he had to get med-evac’d out. I put in so much time falling I got a degree in it. I majored in bruising with a minor in cussing out three different kinds of parachute.”

“Guess that’s what you get for deciding to fly,” Steve says cheerfully.

“Hell yeah. Worth it. Better than your melee ballerina act, too.”

Sam does have to admit, giant technicolor Frisbeeism aside, the shield is actually a pretty effective weapon. It’s unpredictable and unconventional, which means most hostiles have no real protocol to deal with it, and the fact that it’s unusual and unwieldy means that Steve’s still the only one who can effectively use it despite the fact that he uses it by throwing it away. It does its job, too:
the thing’s completely bulletproof, and most people with firearms training take a few seconds to realize they should aim for Steve’s legs instead of the instinctive center mass. Those few seconds are all Steve needs to get close enough to slam the guns right out of their hands.

“We’ll get you your wings soon,” Steve says, apparently on a slightly different train of thought. “If Stark hasn’t already designed a replacement prototype I’m sure I could get him to start.”

“Yeah, Colonel Rhodes said something to that effect,” Sam says, as they pull up to their door and Steve starts groping his own butt for the keys. “No rush, though. We’ve been doing okay without them so far.”

“Yeah, but still,” Steve says, unlocking the door. “I don’t want you to not - ”

Steve stops so hard he rocks on his feet, barely two steps inside their apartment, the door still drifting open. Every single alarm bell hits DEFCON 2 in Sam’s head and he immediately grabs Steve by the shirt, hauling them back out of the doorway. He’s drawing his Beretta at the same time, but there’s no bullets, no ambush -

- and Steve grunts and eels past him, back into the room, turning a little circle. His nostrils are flared. He’s - sniffing?

“Steve?”

“Bucky was here,” Steve says, meeting Sam’s gaze with a weapons-grade case of crazy eyes.

“Because you can… smell him,” Sam says, lowering his weapon but not holstering it. “O...kay. Of course you can. What have we... what’ve you got.”

“He was here,” Steve repeats, turning another little circle. “Not long. Recently. Touched things?”

“Wow,” Sam says, because from one perspective that’s amazing and from another that’s a literal goddamn nightmare. “Fantastic.”

Steve, his head tilted so far back it’s like he’s looking at the room with his nostrils, wrinkles his brow. “He… uses vanilla shampoo?”

Sam squints at that one. “You sure it’s Barnes?”


“Well,” Sam mutters. “Guess we should be glad he’s showering at all. Alright - let’s clear it, you take that half, I’ll do mine,” he says, gesturing at the room, keeping his Beretta in his hand as he starts going over his stuff.

Steve keeps sniffing even as he gets to work, which makes it even more like Sam is sharing a room with a psychotic golden retriever. “We were just talking about your superpowers, and you don’t think to mention this,” Sam mutters under his breath, checking that the bathroom is empty of brainwashed assassins. “Don’t tell me you can smell my breath and tell me what I had for breakfast the day before.”

“No,” Steve says distractedly, taking it literally, pawing through his backpack. “No, it’s usually - if I don’t pay attention, it doesn’t - it’s just Bucky is - aha!”

“What?”

“Here,” Steve exclaims, rearing back with what looks like a keychain with a black rectangle
clipped to it; he uncaps the thing and actually sniffs it, then holds it out like he thinks Sam might want to give it a whiff too. “Flash drive!”

“Great,” Sam says, because thank god Barnes didn’t decide an appropriate calling card would be a hand grenade taped to Steve’s toiletries. “Keep looking.”

“He wanted me to find this,” Steve says, sounding halfway to giddy. “It was right on my phone charger - ”

“Yeah,” Sam says, going for his own bag. “Let’s see if he left you anything else, huh?”

“Yes,” Steve says, jumping up and grabbing his main duffel.

Sam hears him unzip it and make a noise, but it’s not an oh-fuck-we’re-gonna-die noise and so he doesn’t look up, opening his own bag. “What?”

“He folded my underwear,” Steve says, sounding shell-shocked.

“Oh,” Sam says, going still, staring into his own bag. “He also... paired all my socks.”

Steve takes a step back, then another, then falls into one of the armchairs and starts laughing, big full belly laughing, which is the most worrying emotional reaction Sam has seen from him since they were all locked up in the back of a HYDRA van on Insight Day, trundling along to certain death. Sam wasn’t sure Steve did that kind of laughter.

“He left us intel and folded my underwear,” Steve gasps, holding his sides. “I’m gonna kick his ass.”

“Good luck,” Sam tells him. “And are you sure it’s intel? Could be some kind of malware death virus that’ll eat our motherboards the minute we plug it in.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Steve says, sounding pretty happy about it.

“That’s not going in my laptop, is all I’m saying. Let’s wait for - hey, now you got a reason to call Natasha.”

“Yes,” Steve enthuses, jumping up and wiggling his phone out of his pants. Sam dumps his bag out on the bed and keeps going through it; he’s happy for Steve and all, but he is still absolutely 100% going to check that the Winter Soldier didn’t slip any scorpions into their stuff while he was playing housekeeper. It’s not that he necessarily thinks Barnes has it out for them, it’s just that Sam isn’t sure that seventy years of brainwashed murder-assassinating is an easy habit to break. There’s no harm being careful.

Sam finds no booby traps, trackers, listening devices or explosives anywhere in the apartment. That doesn’t mean there aren’t any - after hanging out with Natasha Sam has come to terms with the fact that there’s a level of paranoia he just can’t reach, justified or not - but they’d be beyond Sam’s ability to discover. Natasha taught them a couple tricks but you don’t become a spy overnight.

He straightens up from where he was poking around under the bed with a sigh, cracking his back. Steve’s focused on his phone, brows furrowed. “How’s it going?”

“She’s not picking up, but,” Steve says distractedly, tapping at the screen, then a moment later holds it out to Sam.

_We’ve had a development_, Steve’s texted. _We need your expertise_. Unlisted Number replied with
As Sam watches, a typing bubble from Unlisted Number appears, eventually blooping up into a text that says *ETA 12 hrs.*

“Good spy talk,” Sam says, turning the phone back, and when Steve reads Natasha’s reply he visibly balloons upward. “Alright, Natasha’s coming. Anything else we need to do right now? Secure anything?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Steve says, but color’s still high in his cheeks and his eyes are bright, distracted. “Sam. He was here. He made contact. He knows who I - who we are.”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees, a little more softly than he meant to. There are moments - and Sam’s seen a lot of them, now - where Steve is suddenly, achingly human, not a superhero or a weapon or a nuclear reactor in Underarmor smediums but a weird overgrown art student with zero percent chill, anywhere, about anything. It’s simultaneously relieving and reassuring and heartbreaking, to catch glimpses of who Steve could have been; there’s an awkward hypercompetitive twentiesomething that might have lived if war and fame and that fucking destiny shit hadn’t caught him by the throat.

But then again, when the Captain America comes out, it’s not like Steve gets subsumed. That *is* Steve, the rage and resolve and retribution, that’s all him. It’s not like the suit magically turns him into someone else. It’s *him* powering Captain America.

That part can be pretty hard to remember when Steve’s turning big blue eyes on him, bright with battered hope; for all that his feelings basically have to be extracted with a can opener, when Steve *does* let them show it’s pretty devastating. “D’you think he’s okay?”

“Probably.” Sam says cautiously. “I mean. Well. For relative values of *okay,* I mean - he’s clearly walking around, and, uh, breaking into places. So he’s probably - as good as things can be, I guess.” Sam’s mouth tightens. He doesn’t want to rain on any parades, but between the two of them he knows who’s capable of hailing reality right now and it ain’t Steve. “I think we should hope for the best and prepare for the worst. You saw the file, man - I wouldn’t wish that shit on anybody.”

Steve’s looking down at his hands, now, his fists set on the tabletop. “I would,” he says lowly.

“I know,” Sam says and thinks, not for the first time, if anybody appreciates just how apt a title *Avenger* turned out to be. Eye for an eye. Blood for blood. The *original* justice.

Steve’s eyes flick up to him, not raising his head. “I’m not going to stop.” His fists squeeze then relax a little. “I don’t think I can stop. I think vacation is - over.”

“Yeah,” Sam says. “Seems like.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve says lowly.

“Hey, I signed up for this,” Sam says. “This is a job that has to be done.” He knows at least that much for certain. Steve listened when they pulled him back, when he was in the worst of it; Sam and Natasha will be able to pull him back again, if it comes to it. He hopes it doesn’t come to it. “And we’re gonna do it. You got Natasha, she’s on her way.” Sam grabs Steve’s shoulder, shaking him a little and pulling him in; Steve leans into it, bumping his head against Sam’s hip. “We’ll get the gang back together and see what kinda fuckery your boy Santa Claused us with now.”
In the beginning, thinking about Bucky had been a pain so huge it hadn’t even registered as hurt. Numbness, yes, and shock, but more than that it was surreality, disjointedness, a sense of something fundamentally wrong with the universe. Bucky was gone, and nothing added up.

Now Steve can’t stop. His perfect memory is finally good for something, replaying every second of their interactions in this shiny new century, and yeah, sure, they both spent pretty much all those seconds bleeding in one way or another, but at least they were together. Steve is aware that is, at best, pathetic. Steve does not care.

After a while the memories are just a catalogue of the most important things: Bucky’s face, his broad shoulders, the curve of his spine, his chin, his metal bicep. The sound of his voice; the look on his face when somebody near him was being particularly stupid. The sharp, live smell of his sweat. The beat of his heart.

Is Bucky eating? Is he sleeping? Is he as baffled at modern newspapers as Steve is? Besides missing the 21st century memo about deodorant - which Steve could not be more grateful for - what else has he skipped out on? Is he brushing his teeth? What does he remember? What does he remember of Steve? Where the fuck is he? What the fuck is he doing?

For so long, a long time now, Steve hasn’t really been capable of thinking about - tomorrow. If he’s got a schedule in his hands or marching orders in his brain that’s one thing, but looking forward, thinking maybe someday, maybe someday I will, that had disappeared out of Steve’s life like it never existed. And he hadn’t missed it. He hadn’t realized there was anything to miss.

Now, Steve can see the future. He can see that there is a future. He’s going to catch up to Bucky and he’s going to motherfucking kick his ass.

“Okay,” Sam says, sitting down with Steve for their strategy session. “What does he like?”

“Chocolate,” Steve says immediately. “Candy, lemon sweets, angel food cake, uh…”

“Okay, that’s - wait, shit, maybe not food,” Sam realizes. “If I was a brainwashed assassin hunted globally by a bunch of psychopaths I already wouldn’t be the most trusting guy around, and eating something left for you by a dude you can’t even be in the same room with… kinda out of the question, I’m guessing.”

“You’re right,” Steve says, ignoring the sharp little sting in his heart that crops up every time he’s reminded that Bucky would rather mow through a platoon of HYDRA troops than get within ten feet of Steve. “Are cigarettes food?”

Sam wrinkles his nose, but in a handsome way. “Maybe if you leave them in the packaging? All taped up and stuff?”

Steve rubs the bridge of his nose. He is seriously going to kick Bucky’s ass. “I’m not even sure if he smokes anymore.”

“Shit, man,” Sam says. “This is hard. Maybe we can give him… rifle ammo? A really nice knife?”

“No,” Steve says immediately, reflexively, even though he knows Sam’s just joking. “Not from me. Not like - this.”
“Okay, well.” Sam slaps his thighs and lets a breath escape in a long sigh. “Alright. Let’s go get your boy some candy.”

-o-

The next morning there’s a knock on their door. Steve spits toothpaste in the sink, rinses and pads over to the door; the peephole shows nobody, but he can hear breathing and, when he concentrates, a heartbeat. “Who is it?”

“Five hundred spiders in a designer trenchcoat,” comes Natasha’s voice, and Steve pulls open the door.

“Oh no,” Natasha says, taking one look at Steve’s face. “He beat me to it.”

“He did,” Steve says, beaming, then, “Wait, what do you mean he - what happened to your hair?”

“He visited you?” Natasha says, brushing past him into the room, an answer that’s not quite an answer. “When? What’d he do?”

“Yesterday,” Steve says, unable to keep from explaining even as he narrows his eyes at the deflection. “He broke into our room and folded my underwear.”

“He also paired my socks,” Sam says in longsuffering tones, from where he’s pulling a sweater on. “Hey Natasha.”

“Hey Sam,” Natasha says, giving a wave and looking at their table. “And this is… some kind of shrine to sugar?”

“For Bucky,” Steve explains even as Sam rolls his eyes and mutters, “You ain’t wrong.”

“So you’re trying to put him into a sugar coma?”

“We’re trying to lure him in like a giant homicidal alley cat,” Sam says.

“We’re not trying to lure him anywhere,” Steve says disapprovingly. “We’re just trying to - establish relations.”

Instead of making any remarks about relations that involve a lot of eyebrow wagging, Natasha just cocks her head, which is a little worrying. “Any luck?”

Steve fishes the USB out of his pocket, where it’s been living like a good luck talisman or a rosary. “He’s left us this.”

“So he made first contact,” Natasha murmurs, holding out her hand for the drive; Steve, after a second of battling his own crazy, gives it to her. “Did he leave anything else? Do anything?”

“Not the we’ve found. Just this.” Steve has to resist bouncing on his toes, energy crackling through him like he’s caught in the lull of a firefight. “That means he’s in the area, right?”

“Not necessarily,” Natasha says cryptically. “Let’s see what this is, maybe we’ll know more.” She gives Steve one of her familiar cheshire smiles. “Who wants to sacrifice their laptop?”
Steve volunteers, partly because he doesn’t give a shit about his little grey netbook and partly because like hell is Bucky’s flashdrive going in anyone else’s computer. Natasha verifies the netbook is still clean - she’s the one who bought it for him, back in Mexico, because she wanted him to watch more TV or something, but Steve’s barely opened the thing since. The few movies they’ve watched have been on Sam’s laptop. Natasha gives him a judgmental eyebrow, because apparently she can tell he’s barely bothered to touch it, and plugs in the drive.

It’s just Word files. Even Steve can tell that much, hovering over Natasha’s shoulder. She opens a black command line prompt and types in one string of code, two, three; the files in the USB window blink and reload, but nothing changes: still the same text files, labeled 1, 2, 3. “They’re not even encrypted,” Natasha mutters.

“Because he wants us to read it,” Steve says, unable to hold it in, which causes Sam to put his hands on his shoulders and start pushing him towards a chair. “Sorry. Sorry. Just - let’s open it.”

“We’ll get there, Rogers, I’m checking it’s not programmed to self-delete after being opened,” Natasha murmurs, fingers flying over the keys, and Steve shuts up, sitting in the chair and scooting it close until he’s at Natasha’s elbow. If it does delete itself Steve’s going to get as much as he can while it’s still there.

Finally, finally Natasha clicks on 1.docx.

DEAD, the top of the page says in all capital letters. Below it is a list of names, annotated, some with just a few words, others with a whole paragraph, the words run-on, confusing: Michaels R&D Nevada restructuring 5 personnel terminated. Claude Toussaint neurologist core implants behavioral modifications MKULTRA, nerve test DC Virginia Camp Echo. Jacobson, Henry, Willis technicians. Chair. And then, further down, there’s another heading: NOT DEAD YET.

This list is much shorter.


“Intel,” Steve breathes. Bucky’s giving them intel. “What’s the next one?”

2.docx is a mishmash of text, lists and the occasional heading. Steve sees a list of banks titled favored covers, a list of radio frequencies, a long paragraph where his eye catches on elimination and cooperate and standard protocol.

“This is... a lot,” Sam says, and Steve can tell by his voice he’s frowning, serious and attentive. “Any way we can check how solid any of this stuff is?”

“Pretty solid,” Natasha says absently, her eyes flickering back and forth as she reads. “I can corroborate some of this - the Stockholm cell, these encryption codes… there’s overlap with our own intelligence. And unless I’ve really missed something, Soldier doesn’t have reason to lie to us. Not with this.”

Steve’s only half listening, skimming through what Buck’s written, greedy, looking for - he doesn’t know what he’s looking for. The text itself is impersonal, bare-bones and rushed, unfamiliar - Bucky’s notes and schoolwork and letters were always neat, measured, every word deliberate, but - that was then. This feels like he was just trying to force everything out onto the page as fast as he could, and maybe he was. He doesn’t know what’s going on with Bucky, Steve reminds himself. He doesn’t know what’s changed. The fact that Bucky brought him this is miracle enough.

3.docx is almost a solid wall of text, with some bits underlined and others with the red spelling-
Steve leans back, slowly. “Natasha,” he says bluntly. “Did you make contact with Bucky?”

“Yes,” Natasha says, turning to meet his eye as Sam shifts in surprise. “Why do you think I was only twelve hours away when you called?”


“Firstly, I’m not telling you everything,” Natasha says, and before Steve can open his mouth she says, “Because he asked me not to. I’m respecting that. We’re respecting that.”

“Yes, yes,” Steve says, because he’ll take it, he’ll take anything. “What happened?”

“We ran into each other, in Manila,” Natasha says. “It was an accident. I didn’t shoot him, and he didn’t shoot me, and we took out a HYDRA-AIM lab together. It wasn’t a big enough target to bring you two in on - I was really only there to get intel and quietly sabotage the research, but once a supersoldier is involved, well. Things got a little loud.”

“How is he?” Steve asks. “Was he - alright?”

“There is now significant evidence indicating Barnes is no longer under HYDRA control, in any way,” Natasha says directly, and Steve feels like half his organs have filled with helium, rising and swelling and pinching under his ribcage. He is going to kick Bucky’s ass. “He’s been eliminating operatives at all levels of seniority and nobody has found any indication of anybody giving him orders,” Natasha continues. “He told me he is only operating for himself, and I believe him. He wasn’t exactly friendly, and I doubt he’d pass in public as anything but a crazy hobo, but he was listening and responding and overall, physically, I think he was doing pretty well, all things considered.”

Steve shuts his eyes tight for a long second, breathing through it, forcing his chest to expand all the way and take air in deep. “Thank you. Natasha. Thanks.”

“That’s all I can tell you,” Natasha says, sounding a little apologetic, and that makes Steve sit up, opening his eyes.

“I gotta apologize,” he says, and Natasha blinks at him. “I was an ass. Not just after the cave, after the Lemurian Star, too. I wasn’t seeing the bigger picture.”

“O-kay,” Sam says. “My cue to bounce. You two sort that out, and I’ll go get us breakfast from that corner place.”


“Nobody better be crying into each other’s blouses when I come back, y’hear? Get that shit done before I get in here,” Sam says, pointing at them with both fingers before backing out the door.

Natasha quirks her mouth at him, watching him go, then shrugs at Steve, her face considering, not deflecting. “We were all stressed,” she says. “And you’re a soldier, not a spy. I should have accounted for that more thoroughly. And I do have a history -”

“That’s not an excuse,” Steve says. “That’s especially not an excuse for me. Natasha. Buck was
like you.”


“No, I mean - before. As Bucky, just as himself. The - not all things to all people. He did the same thing.”

Natasha blinks at him, slow. “That was how I knew he - loved me,” Steve says, making himself soldier through no matter how uncomfortable the words are aloud in his mouth. He owes Natasha this and more than this. “He always let me see the inbetween. I’d see him switch faces like hats, at work, in bars, in the war room, he’d be whoever he needed to get the job done. To protect himself. And I never thought any less of him for it, and it’s not right for me to yell at you for just doing what you need to do.

“I was spoiled,” Steve adds. “To me, Buck was all things all the time. I got everything. God, I was spoiled rotten.” Christ, he’d really had no idea how much. It took Bucky a month after Azzano to let Steve see any face besides Sergeant Barnes again, and even then Steve was so busy riding his real life captaincy high that he’d just… let it go. He’d known what it meant, even then, and he’d let it go.

Natasha’s mouth tugs into a half-smile, pulling him out of his thoughts. “You grew up with him,” she says. “And you only met me, what, three years ago? I’m not blaming you for that, Rogers. I know who and what I am. Nobody is owed trust. And the suspicion of my allies is a damn small price to pay, for things I’ve done.”

She turns to him fully. “I joined with SHIELD because I wanted to do good,” she says, and her eyes are clearer, somehow, than Steve’s ever seen them before. “And I didn’t trust myself to have a strong enough moral compass to take matters into my own hands.” She smiles grimly. “About time I learned you can’t let other people make moral decisions for you. But I’m a big girl now, and my point still stands: we can’t be sloppy about this. We have a duty to protect the innocent just as much as we have a duty to eliminate HYDRA.”

“I’m not arguing,” Steve says. “You’re right. You were right. I’ll be - careful.”

“That’s all I ask,” Natasha says, and then they both have a minute of not quite looking each other, surrounded by the cloud of not-quite-awkwardness that happens when one person’s too stubborn and the other is too poised to feel embarrassed.


Natasha grins suddenly, dropping about twenty years and also, somehow, a veneer of humanity. “Like it?”

“You look good,” Steve says, because she does; Natasha always looks good. She’s even somehow managing to avoid looking like a recent victim of a lice shave-off, which is what Steve usually thinks when he sees today’s cropped hairstyles. “It suits you,” he says, a little surprised by how true it is.

Natasha’s grin softens, going a little more introspective. “Good,” she says, satisfied. “Good.”

Sam takes that moment to come back in, carrying a coffee tray and a bag of what smells like sandwiches. “Oh, hey, no tears,” he says, coming over and setting down his tray. “Coffee, coffee, black tea.”

“It’s cute how you think I can cry, Wilson,” Natasha says, taking her tea and digging a twenty out of her jeans, sliding it over. “Thanks.”
“Wasn’t worried about you,” Sam says blithely, pocketing the twenty and taking a pointed slurp of coffee.

Steve rolls his eyes, fishing out his own wallet. “I was born before crying was invented, Sam. SHIELD was gonna give me a sensitivity training and explain it but I guess that didn’t pan out.”

“You are both just so hilarious,” Sam says, completely deadpan. “When this is over we’ll get y’all moonlighting at a comedy club, get a whole gig set up.”

“What happened to my ultimate fighting career?” Steve asks, handing over his cash.

“That’ll be your day job, Steve, keep up,” Natasha says, not missing a beat. “I’ll join you. We’ll do the whole bit where we put on leather underwear and break folding chairs over each others’ heads, it’ll be great.”

“As entertaining as this is,” Sam says, laying sandwiches on the table, “Before we switch careers entirely, what’ve we got going on next?”

“I’ve got targets for us,” Natasha says, leaning in, the playful grin fading off her face. “And I’ve started pushing the buttons that will, eventually, get us Colonel Rhodes and Tony Stark, in a more or less officially sanctioned capacity.”

Sam and Steve’s eyebrows go up in perfect tandem. “That much firepower?” Sam says.

“That much flash,” Natasha corrects. “That much public oversight. I want it all to get louder and messier and more complicated. Firstly, that takes the spotlight off us and onto those with way more politics and media training - that’s Rhodes and Stark. Secondly, that’ll bring in civilian oversight as well as the alphabet agencies - and Rhodes and Stark will take the brunt of that too. This needs to start happening now, before our missions wind down and we’re left in the breeze with our pants down.”

Steve frowns. “I don’t want a coverup. I’m responsible for what I’ve done just like anybody else. I’m not going to hide from it.”

“Yeah, but you don’t want to get into that now. A media circus will really slow us down, not to mention compromise opsec,” Natasha says. “You can stand on any podium you want and yell about it after, if you still want to.”

“Stark told me it’s likely I’ll be subpoenaed,” Steve says, rubbing his face. “Is that still on the table?”

“Oh, it’s always on the table, but Stark, Hill and everybody who’s ever owed me a favor in the entire DoD has been playing the world’s biggest game of hot potato telephone on our behalf,” Natasha says. “Where’s Captain America? Oh, he’s part of the international anti-HYDRA task force. Which task force? Someone else’s task force. And besides, nobody wants you on the Hill right now.”

Steve blinks, surprised. “Really?”

“Rogers, everyone smart is thrilled that you’re off the political gameboard, out here bashing heads of people who aren’t even their constituents. Your last move was annihilating SHIELD, completely destroying your closest allies - you bit the hand that fed you, and you bit it clean off. You’re unpredictable and dangerous. They call in Captain America to testify - and then what? Nobody knows which team you’re playing for, or what you’ll say, and everything about this is being televised. Nobody wants a wild card in the best of times, but especially not now.”
“Huh,” Steve says.

“They’ll be trying to find out where you stand before anybody starts maneuvering you around in Washington, and right now you’re pretty much incommunicado. Stark and Hill have been stonewalling direct communication to you, too. And - yeah, whatever, it sounds terrible, but it’s a real stroke of luck you don’t have any leveragable friends or family.”

“Well,” Steve says, meaning it: it is true, it is lucky. Jeez, he’ll have to do something really nice for Hill and even Stark, probably - fending off political, military and intelligence bureaucrats isn’t fun on your own behalf, let alone on someone else’s. “I owe you one. Them too.” He quirks his mouth. “Finally, an upside to being a friendless orphan.”

Natasha gives him double finger guns. “And never checking your emails.”

Sam raises a hand from where he’s got his arms folded across his chest. “How’m I doing, as a not-friendless non-orphan?”

“Hill’s got you,” Natasha assures. “There’s lots of stonewalling happening on your behalf too - pretty sure nobody is interested enough in you to start anything with your friends and family. Yet. Hill’s got contingency plans she’ll show you, if you wanna email her and ask.”

“Christ. Never have I been happier to be considered superhero small fry,” Sam mutters. “Thanks.”

Natasha waves it off. “So we’re alright on that front, so far,” she says. “And we’re not getting Stark and Rhodes in just yet. But I’ve got a couple things for us to smash - who’s up for a road trip?”

“No,” Steve says, kneejerk, suddenly irrationally attached to this little Prague apartment where Bucky had seen fit to pay them a visit. “No, maybe we should - stay. A few days.”

“Rogers,” Natasha says exasperatedly, seeing right through him. “He found you here, didn’t he? And both your names are still getting swept by Stark’s bots - all your digital and paperwork traces are masked or buried or unflagged wherever possible. If he found you here he’ll find you in Kazakhstan.”

“Kazakhstan?” Sam says.

“To start with,” Natasha says. “There’s a facility in Almaty hosting some people of interest.”

The need to stay where Bucky’s reached out and touched them battles with the need to get back in, pick the shield back up again, and in the end the mission wins out. Still: “I’m going to leave him a note,” Steve says. “He talked to us, we’ll talk to him.”

“Nothing specific, nothing incriminating,” Natasha says immediately. “No names, no details. And I’d stay away from anything emotionally loaded, if I were you. In my experience that ends up being more of a stressor than any kind of reassurance.”

“Fine,” Steve says, biting down on the part of him that wants to write Bucky a foaming ten-page screed in blood-red capital letters. Sam had finally shown him those Harry Potter movies last month, and Steve feels like if he wrote down anything more than the bare bones then the letter really would jump up and start bellowing obscenities of its own accord. He can do that. He can keep it - safe. It’ll be just like 1944 again, passing notes and telegrams and missives, worded right and proper and innocent while surrounded by officers and soldiers and the entire second world war. It’s not like they’d been able to say anything to each other then, either.
“Well,” Sam says. “Good thing we only had one night left here anyway. I’m gonna start packing. What’s the weather like in Kazakhstan? Cold?”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about that,” Natasha says. “We’ll have body armor to keep us warm.”

“That kind of mission, huh,” Sam says.

“Yup.”

“And then we bring in Colonel Rhodes. And Stark.”

“Oh yeah. Hope you’re rested up and ready to bring your A-game, boys,” Natasha says. “We’re going big leagues on this one.”

-o-

Hi buddy,

Hope you’re doing OK. I miss you a lot and I’m real glad you decided to drop by. We’re getting back to work now, leaving tomorrow. If you need anything just let me know.

Contact me any time.

Phone: 212 333 4544

email: aa237tyt@proton.mail

Yours,

Steve

Chapter End Notes

1. That’s probably someone’s actual phone number, so if you try calling it somebody might pick up. However, I am reasonably sure it won’t be Steve Rogers.

2. That’s probably not a real email tho.

3. Most apartments in Prague aren’t numbered, but for the sake of in-story clarity, let’s say in the MCU they are. Y’all would not believe how much time I spent trying to nail down this completely inconsequential detail. (A billion thank yous for your invaluable contributions, treebite, and for opening my eyes to the existence of ask.metafilter.)

4. The song is With You In My Head by UNKLE.
The next morning sees Barnes out before dawn again, pacing around Motherfucker in the barn, unable to settle. Sleep hadn’t happened but downtime had, so now he feels mission ready without anywhere to be pointed at.

Tailing Rogers and Wilson had been... unobjectionable.

This is just to gather necessary intel, he tells himself, once again boarding a city-bound bus. To gauge their reactions to what he’d left them. It’s important. He should know this.

Leaving the USB had been the most he could handle, or so he’d thought. Outright partnership on missions had been out of the question. Partly because, well, Motherfucker, and minimizing the number of people who know about it, and partly because Barnes was still pretty sure he’d have some kind of critical systems meltdown if he got within ten feet of Rogers.

But it doesn’t seem *that* bad, now. After a solid twelve hours of romance pulps and ipod time, sitting in the barn, Motherfucker happily hovering, his legs dangling over the edge of the hatch, Barnes feels unusually fortified and cautiously optimistic. He didn’t *completely* flip his wig tailing them yesterday, after all. Maybe they can all... coordinate together on missions, or something. They don’t have a sniper, do they? They need one. Everyone needs a sniper.

It felt - good. Correct. Handing over intel to his - commanding officer, oh jesus fucking *christ*. But Rogers is *not a handler*, and Barnes would rather glue his asshole shut than enter any kind of chain of command ever again. He reminds himself of this by thumping a bruise into his thigh with his metal fist, at least until a grandmother starts eyeing him suspiciously from across the bus and he remembers he’s trying to pass for normal.

When he left the USB he’d been thinking purely in terms of gesture, a way to show Rogers that he was no longer a hostile, no longer HYDRA’s good little dog. Widow told him Rogers already believed it, but Barnes remembered the look on Rogers’ face, down in the cave. He remembered wanting to stop that look by any means possible. Hell, he fucked up his whole op for it down there. In comparison, leaving a flashdrive in Rogers’ room was a very little thing.

He’ll see how they’re doing. If they seem amenable, he’ll leave a way for them to get in contact.

Once again Barnes climbs the roof opposite their building, the sun beginning to rise over the city’s skyline. He gets settled, shoulder to the lip of the low rooftop wall, and scans the street down below.

At first he sees their Citroën, parked in the street with its trunk popped, morning light making it look even more like a squat little orange on wheels. Then he sees Widow, the coppery glint of her cropped hair, and his first, stupid thought is just *oh, that was fast*. He’d expected Rogers to contact her after discovering the flashdrive but he didn’t expect her to be *here* the very next day. She must have been very close by.

She’s swinging a couple of big black duffels out of the back of a grey sedan and into the trunk of Wilson’s Citroën. Barnes watches dumbly as Rogers strides out of the apartment building and slings a backpack into the car, jerking his thumb back at the door.

Barnes’ gaze goes further up, as if dragged, to where the windows for their rented apartment are
standing open, curtains fluttering in the breeze. Wilson is inside, rolling up a t-shirt and putting it into a bag. He’s packing. They’re packing up.

Barnes locks up all over, cold panic washing in a wave down his spine. They’re leaving. They’re leaving now. He only ran into Rogers on accident and now they’re going god knows where, and it’s not like he can pop up down there and ask them for a destination, can he. Why are they moving so fast. Nothing he’d given them was time-sensitive. They’d been on leave. Rogers had been smiling.

He’d tail them invisibly in Motherfucker, but by the time he runs back and gets airborne their dinky little Citroën would be god knows where. He doesn’t have any trackers on him, to give a little friendly lojacking to their car. And they’re almost done, they’re ready to move, fuck, he needs to do something now.

Barnes pulls out his phone. It’s an iPhone, he’s got no idea which model, pink because it was the cheapest one and there’d been some kind of sale. He knows its number. It’s synced with the current laptop, sitting in Motherfucker’s belly next to his bedroll.

Barnes selects factory reset.

He jiggles his leg, waiting for the phone to restart, crouched on the roof with his eyes lasered in on Wilson like he can keep him in the room with sheer psychic determination. As long as somebody’s still in the room, he has a chance. The alternative is having to go down there and figure some shit out with their damn Citroën, massively increasing the risk of being seen by Widow. He does not want to be seen by Widow. This may be one of the stupidest things Barnes has ever done, but he can at least try to keep it from getting stupider.

Wilson takes that moment to go into the bathroom.

Gritting his teeth, Barnes winds up like a pitcher and heaves the phone across the street.

It arcs through the air in a flash of pink and sails directly into the apartment. Barnes hears the faint little thump as it lands squarely in the middle of the bed. He bounces on his heels in victory, baring his teeth, taking back every single bad thought he had about those giant sniper-bait windows.

Then the bathroom door opens again for Wilson, and Barnes nearly falls on his ass ducking back down below the roof. He peeks over to see Wilson walking into the bedroom, slowing as he approaches the bed, and Barnes takes that as his cue to scramble off down the opposite side of the roof and disappear.

-o-

Steve takes the stairs two at a time, feeling absurdly awake considering the amount of sleep he got. He’d spent most of the night poring over the three text files from Bucky’s USB, reading and rereading the after-action reports, occasionally cross-referencing the intel with Natasha. Bucky’s definitely been hunting HYDRA, but Steve’s still worried - if he didn’t have context, he’d say the files read like Bucky wrote them half-asleep, one-fourth concussed and all drunk. Natasha’s assessment of his wellbeing was either overly optimistic or, more likely, Bucky had been fronting like hell. The third document especially reads like Bucky is missing time - he makes it seem like there have been back-to-back missions on different continents, one after another, far sooner than is possible. Steve dearly hopes it’s just the run-on nature of Bucky’s sentences making it seem that
way and not anything - worse.

He’s alive, Steve reminds himself. Everything else can be sorted out. And Bucky’s tough, he’s the toughest son of a bitch Steve’s ever known and that’s been true since they were in short pants. Bucky used to tease Steve about turning into his ma when he got on his socialist soapbox but when things went tough it was eerie how Buck got like Mrs. Barnes, especially since Bucky was her clone baby in all but eye color. Buck got his blue eyes and soft heart from his da but in all else he was his mother’s, and Mrs. Barnes was the scariest woman Steve’s ever met, including Peggy Carter, Natasha Romanova and Sarah Rogers.

He’d gone to Mrs. Barnes’ grave, in those few months he’d tried living in New York again. She and George Barnes had been buried apart, for all that they’d done their damnedest to live together - her in Washington, him in Greenwood under a cross. Winifred’s family must have made the arrangements, since Mr. Barnes went first, barely a decade after Steve went into the ice, and Mrs. Barnes eight years after. Next to her are the graves of her mother and aunt and what would’ve been Bucky’s fourth sister - Leah Barnes, died winter of ‘28, the same week she was born.

There are Barneses, still, grand-nieces and nephews, a whole passel of them, spread out all over: California, Arizona, Beijing. Steve tracked down Becca’s son, with SHIELD’s help, early after he woke up - Robert Proctor, a lawyer in Pasadena, three kids, a thriving practice and absolutely no reason whatsoever to answer Steve’s call. Steve had gotten as far as picking up a phone before realizing, well, what would he even say? You don’t know me, but your uncle was the dearest thing in my life? Hi, I’m Steve, wanna talk about this famous dead guy you never met? Hi, I’m Captain America?

He’s not that much of an asshole. The guy’s living his life. They’re all living their lives, the children of Bucky’s sisters, and their mothers had seemed to have done pretty all right for themselves. Esther married a diplomat and moved to China, Rachel ran a ranch outside Tucson until she died. All of them left Brooklyn, it seemed, at the earliest opportunity. And hell, didn’t Steve too? He misses New York still, a faint ache that won’t scab over, but Brooklyn itself had been - too much.

There are places named after them now, and statues. Prospect Park has the worst one - Captain America and Sergeant Barnes, larger than life and squarer of jaw, erected in suitable heroic positions on a giant brass plinth, both of them staring forward with rifle and shield held at the ready. Hometown Pride, the plaque says, and maybe if Bucky’d been there with him Steve might’ve laughed, elbowed him and made a face at how fucking nuts this all was, at how they looked barely anything like themselves. As it was, Steve had to cut his run short and veer home. Thank god it’d been early enough in the morning that nobody saw him.

DC is full of war memorials, but those aren’t... personal, not in the way the Brooklyn ones are. Arlington has the official Cap monument, but it’s only the shield, and anyway it’s not like Steve went running through the cemetery every morning. DC had worked, for a while.

He wonders if Bucky knows, that there are statues to him, murals, museum exhibits. That he’s still got blood family out in the world, even if their last names changed. He wonders if Bucky wants to know. Steve, perpetual friendless orphan for all that he joked about it, can’t imagine what it’d even be like, in that position - at least when he came back from the dead, there’d really only been Peggy, for him.

Well, if Bucky does want to know, Steve’ll tell him. The odds are looking better and better than one day he’ll get the chance.

He pushes open the apartment door, ready to give Sam a hard time about being slow, only to see him standing in the middle of the bedroom, staring at the bed. “Sam?”
“Steve, man,” Sam says cautiously, pointing, and Steve sees a pink rectangle lying in the middle of the duvet. “That phone was not there when I walked into the bathroom ten seconds ago.”

For a second Steve just blinks, because, what? Then it hits him: that’s not his phone, that’s not Sam’s phone, that’s not Natasha’s phone, and she’s downstairs anyway - nobody was up here but Sam, and Steve came right up the stairs -

Steve whirls to the windows, the windows he’d opened twenty minutes ago in the vague thought of airing the borrowed apartment out. The gauzy curtains at the edges flutter in the breeze. The rooftop right across from them is half a story up, but not that far away - twenty feet, if that. Steve can tell it’s completely empty.

“Did he break in again?” Sam says warily. “I was in the bathroom less than a minute, I swear.”

“I don’t smell him,” Steve says, heart pounding. He goes to the windows, leaning out. He doesn’t see anything, doesn’t catch anything on the breeze. It just smells like the city, hot metal and car exhaust and somebody cooking something full of onions.

“Anything left up here?” comes Natasha’s voice, and a second later she sticks her head in the room. “Any longer and we’ll have to pay parking - what’s up, Steve, did you see Superman?”

“Not… Superman,” Steve says, reluctantly turning away from the windows.

“Just checking, but,” Sam says to Natasha, “that’s not one of your phones, is it?”

“No-o,” Natasha says slowly, her eyebrows going up and up. “And I’m gonna guess it’s not either of yours, either.”

Steve stares at the phone. For a crazy, burning second he feels an almost violent urge to hide it, stuff it under his shirt or down his pants or just fucking swallow it. He wants to scoop it up and run off into the night like a raccoon fleeing a dumpster bin with its prize.

“It’s Bucky’s,” Steve says, dead certain. “He chucked it through the window.”

“Well,” Sam says. “That’s… one way to give a guy your number.”

“We surprised him,” Natasha deduces, thoughtful, not looking away from the phone. “He wasn’t expecting me. Not so soon, anyway.”

Steve crosses over to the bed and picks it up, resisting the urge to bring it to his face. Metal doesn’t hold scent well, and it’s really only because Bucky had been sweating pretty hard in not very fresh clothes that Steve managed to smell him, when he’d entered their room before. When he presses the Home button it shows him a blank white screen that says Hello.

Steve hesitates, about to try swiping it, then remembers he is not being an idiot about this and holds it out to Natasha.

She takes it, giving him a look that definitely shades towards impressed. “Brand new,” she says immediately, glancing at the screen. “Or he did a hard reset. Well. Location is on,” she adds, tapping through. “That means he knows exactly where you are. Where this phone is, anyway.”

“Good,” Steve says firmly.

“Are there contacts?” Sam asks.

“None,” Natasha says. “But he’ll have this phone’s number. One-way street until he makes
contact, basically.”

“That’s fine,” Steve says. That’s better than fine. That’s Bucky having Steve’s phone number.

“It’s unsecured,” Natasha continues, tapping some more. “Completely.” Her mouth quirks a little. “That’s one way to make sure you’ll only use it for emergencies. If you keep regular contact with him through this it’s very likely you’ll compromise his location, or something even more sensitive.”

Steve frowns. “Can you make it more secure?”

“Oh no,” Natasha says. “I’m not touching that, Rogers. He did that on purpose.”

“Maybe he didn’t have the resources to secure it properly,” Steve tries.

“You can buy security, and he definitely has the resources for that,” Natasha says. “Even the pricey stuff. With his skillset it’s not hard to get funds. He did it on purpose, Steve,” she repeats. “We’re gonna respect that.”


“This is good,” Natasha tells him. “It means he wants to contact you. He just wants to do it on his terms.”

“Guess you won’t need that note,” Sam tells Steve, a little apologetic, a little relieved. He’d watched Steve write it like he wasn’t sure if he should intervene or not, but must have decided trying to stop him wouldn’t be worth it.

“It’s fine,” Steve says. It is fine. It’s in his back pocket now, folded up close - but even writing it Steve had known it’d been an off chance, Bucky returning to where he’d already been, especially now that he’d alerted them to his presence. It’s just that Steve couldn’t not write it. “It’ll keep.”

“Will that keep?” Sam says, pointing to the plastic bag on the table currently holding all of Bucky’s candy. Steve left it out until the last possible moment in what even he realizes is a mixture of completely pointless dawdling and superstition. “Because if not, imma have me some Kinder eggs for breakfast.”

“We really surprised him,” Natasha murmurs, almost to herself. She’s still tapping through the phone. “He was here the day before, why not give the phone to you then? Unless he thought he had more time.”

“Yeah, eat Bucky’s eggs,” Steve says distractedly - “Well now that you made it gross ,” Sam mutters behind him - and sidles over to Natasha, looking over her shoulder at the screen. “Can you think of how he found us?”

“Honestly, no idea,” Natasha says. “But it could’ve been anything. He’s very good.”

“You think we startled him,” Steve says, over the sound of Sam muttering something unflattering as he stuffs the bag of candy in his backpack.

“Our timeline, maybe. So he’s definitely tracking you, not me. Or my communications. Otherwise he’d know I was coming up here to bring you back in, and that was the plan even before he left you the flashdrive.” Natasha gives him a little smile. “I gave him a way to contact me, when we ran into each other. Looks like he wants to talk to you and only you.”

“Hey now, what about me?” Sam calls, pointing at himself. “You sure that phone wasn’t my
apology gift? He still owes me for my car, this brand new iphone could be his down payment.”

“If I were you I’d hold out for the full car,” Natasha tells him. “Something swanky. Leather seats and the rims that do the spinny thing.”

“Spinny thing,” Sam says, the way most people would say *rotting goat carcass.*

“Yeah. You know. I hear it’s cool.”

“I honestly can’t tell if you’re doing that on purpose,” Sam says, picking up his backpack and hoisting it over his shoulder. “That thing, where you show us how to dismantle a safe with a plastic cup and toothpick and then turn around and ask us what a Fruit Rollup is. I can never tell when you’re fucking with us.”

“I am sad Soviet orphan,” Natasha says guilelessly, wide-eyed and wounded. “My childhood, very bleak. No MTV to enrich cultural education. American things, all very new - no, yeah, you got me, me and Clint marathoned Pimp My Ride for a full two days in Burma once.”

“Good god, woman, *why,*” Sam says, and Steve hears them, but he’s staring at the phone in his hand. He’s not mad at Bucky, he *isn’t,* but god, he can’t help but feel like Buck’s teasing him. A flashdrive here, a phone there - look, I’m so close, you can almost grab me. If you were better you could have grabbed me. Steve *knows* Bucky doesn’t mean it that way, hates feeling like this, but he can’t help it. He feels like a starving dog being waved at by a steak.

“Steve? You coming?” Sam’s looking at him, holding the door open; he can hear Natasha already clattering down the stairs.

He rubs a thumb over the screen of the phone, now dark. “I need a case for this,” he says, falling into step with Sam. “How big do they make them? There’s rubber ones, right? Is there anything that’ll bounce if I drop it?”

Sam gives him an amused look. “Really, man?”

“These things leap outta my hands worse than a soap bar in the bath,” Steve retorts. “And if I could make this phone bulletproof I *would,* believe me.”

“Aright,” Sam says, putting his hands up. “We’ll get you something cute. Red white and blue, how bout that? Rubber and everything.”

“You get me the phone case, I’ll get you the car,” Steve promises, because Sam’s due that and more. “Whichever one you want.”

“Ohhh no,” Sam says. “You can’t go paying Barnes’ debts for him. He’s gonna get me that car himself fair and square. I’m gonna see to it.”

Steve grins, the buoyant feeling rising back in his lungs again. “I’ll help you,” he says, nudging Sam in the shoulder. “We’ll make him give it up. Oh, and if you have to ask yourself, is Natasha fucking with me? The answer is always yes,” he says, and ahead of them Natasha cackles and gives a little fistpump in the air.

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The Stupidest Tracker Ever works, but only just. Barnes tracks them through Czechia, through Poland, through Belarus, but any time they get more than a mile from a major city the connection craps out like bad radio. It’s helped by the fact that Rogers is obviously doing whatever he can to boost the signal, but data coverage is spotty out here in the middle of Russian nowhere and Barnes is lucky to get a ping once every couple of hours.

He checks in whenever he can, creeping into the cities and roadside towns when they stop for the night, confirming that yes, they’re really there, yes, his moronic plan is working. He doesn’t dare stay long in case Widow or Rogers notice him, but he still goes every time. But without a constant signal he inevitably, consistently overshoots them in Motherfucker, and the further they go into Russia the worse the signal gets. The past few days it feels like all he does is go looking for tall buildings to climb and cell towers to wave his phone next to.

Tonight he’s pacing the roof of a highrise in Chelyabinsk, twenty stories up, occasionally shaking his phone irritably at the night sky in a demand for better signal. At least he managed to cobble together the Apple location services code into an app that lives on his new phone, on account of the alternative being equipping a laptop with 4G and waving that over his head.

At least he has music. Barnes brings the iPod out of his pocket to change the song. He typically uses his skin hand for holding metal or plastic because the grip is better, but with the iPod he likes to feel the little trill of electricity. He likes hearing the little clicks when his metal touches the surface. Even the way the cord constantly snarls into a vicious knot doesn’t annoy him. He likes picking it apart. It’s calming.

This time the knot kinda looks like something a cat might’ve coughed up. Barnes huffs and unplugs the headphones, knowing it’ll go much easier if he gives up right at the start. Unfortunately, this now means he is trying to hold three things with two hands, only one of which is capable of significant traction.

Several things happen at once. A car backfires in the street below. Barnes gives a full-body jerk. The iPod sails out of Barnes’ hand and takes a perfect swan dive over the side of the highriser. For a second Barnes just stands there with his hand in the air, mouth open, staring at the empty space where the iPod isn’t. “No,” he says aloud, as if telling the universe to undo the last fifteen seconds. No. No!

He’s never taken a set of stairs faster in his life, and he’s pretty sure that includes the fractured recollection of the time he fled an actual exploding building. He blows through what were probably locked doors, barreling through the building and skidding out into the street, where he’s once again treated to the experience of blaring car horns and swerving drivers. This being Russia, the nearest driver actively swerves into him, but Barnes just rolls over the hood of the car and keeps going, skittering into the alleyway where the iPod fell.

The closer he gets the slower he moves. He can see the little silver shape, landed between a dumpster and some random alley debris. He crouches down. The screen is shattered, the metal casing warped and separating at the seams. He can see the circuits inside, exposed, the little gold and green bits smashed together. When he cradles it in his metal palm, there is no hum.

Of all the stupid things to cry over, he thinks, even as his lungs heave and his throat tries to close up. It’s not fair. He’d followed Jarrell’s instructions and carefully loaded three new songs onto the iPod just yesterday. He’d even thought about trying to repeat some of the breakdancing, maybe, somewhere no one could see. He was trying new things. He was doing so well.

He tries. He tells himself it’s not irrecoverable, that the iPod is one of many, mass-produced in thousands and can be replaced. But the rest of him is stronger, and rebels. He doesn’t want a
replacement, he doesn’t want a new one, he wants the old one to not be broken. He wants this to stop. He wants this to not have happened.

He wants to give in to the feeling. Sometimes leaning into the bad makes it pass faster: crying until you cry yourself out. But there’s a fine line between letting the bad feelings run out and catapulting himself headfirst into a panic attack, and right now Barnes doesn’t trust himself to see the line, let alone steer clear.

He knows he’s stressed. The run-in with Widow, with Rogers, their sudden departure - maneuvering around his potential allies is somehow more trying than any gunfight or recon mission could be. And now he’s spent the last three days in Russia, surrounded by language and people and culture that feel right to him in the wrongest way, catching the corner of his eye and tugging at him, unraveling. But knowing he’s at risk for a meltdown - somehow even more at risk than usual, which he might’ve found hilarious if he wasn’t, well, at risk - does fuckall to help. It doesn’t change the fact that his brain chemicals are currently primed to make him feel like the world is ending and that that’s a fucking good thing.

He maybe gives in just a little.

Several minutes later he’s got one bruised foot, one scuffed boot and one big dent in the nearby dumpster. He’s pretty sure some late-night pedestrians heard the banging, stopped by the mouth of the alleyway, saw him coping with his feelings and decided that no thanks, actually they hadn’t seen anything. That’s for the best, because there’s a hundred percent chance the most sociable behavior he can execute right now is growling. He’s lucky these two buildings are industrial, too - doing this shit near an apartment complex would’ve had half the neighborhood heavies out in their тапки and adidas, looking to demonstrate to him the nature of their community policing endeavors.

For a brief second there’s a small, spiky part of him that says yes, yes, that’s a great idea, let’s go out and find the nearest bratva bar. Let’s go up to the biggest baddest skinhead in the district and ask him what it’d cost for a repeat session with his mother. Winning feels good. Fighting is what he’s made for. Anything to replace these brain chemicals, to wipe him of this, this loss, this horrible panicky helpless failure.

Barnes gets back to kicking the dumpster.

He has to stop when his feet start giving him the warning signals that mean fractured metatarsals are in his near fucking future if he doesn’t cut it out already. He staggers around for a while before sliding down with his back against the alley wall, ending in a crouch, curled over the ipod’s corpse close to his chest. A parody of the first time he’d held it, giddy and hazy and feeling its little energy tickle up his arm.

Over a bundle of wires, he thinks suddenly, viciously, sick of himself. A little piece of metal. It’s not even alive, and here he is bawling like it’s a dead - a dead child, when he’d - when the things he had done and felt nothing at all -

He pinches at the thin skin of his flesh wrist, hard, and keeps going until the throbbing in his arm is louder than the mess inside. He squeezes his eyes shut and presses back against the wall. It’ll pass. It’ll pass, like everything does.

The air seems to vibrate gently, and a few seconds later Barnes hears a familiar hum. Motherfucker drifts to a stop at its usual height some ten feet off the ground, taking up a significant chunk of airspace but somehow fitting neatly into the narrow alley. The ship hasn’t got any external lights and its matte surface seems to drink them in anyway, so when Barnes tips his head up he can only see it by the glow it blocks out, an ambient halo outlining its shape.
Barnes is too tired and upset to get worked up over how his spaceship is apparently now capable of following him around like a worried dog. “Hey,” he tells it numbly, dropping his head back down. “I’m fine. Just a fuckin’... tantrum.”

The hum intensifies briefly. The air vibrates again, displacing as Motherfucker performs the smooth aerial pirouette that presents Barnes with the entry hatch, already open.

“That is creepy as shit,” Barnes tells it tiredly, pushing himself to his feet. It’s spared him a trip back up all those stairs, at least.

He’s got one foot in Motherfucker’s hatch when his phone vibrates in his hand. The tracker app got a ping: Rogers is barely a thousand kilometers away on the M-7 highway, and the signal is continuous now, the little blue dot blipping gently along the grey-beige map. They’re really not that far away at all.

When Barnes was going through their things, he saw, in Wilson’s bag, a black rounded rectangle with headphones wrapped around it.

He almost pinches himself again, at the first wild idea that tears through him. Did he learn nothing just now, from losing his little dependency? If he can’t even hold onto it he shouldn’t have it, if he’s just going to break it and smash it up, he doesn’t deserve -

That’s bad thinking. He can recognize bad thinking. His responses to certain stimuli are disproportionate and distorted due to trauma and he can fight it, he can, he is not getting beat by his own bullshit. The music is a coping mechanism and a pretty fucking harmless one and he needs it because the alternative is going back, going back, Barnes remembers the first few months and he is not going back, living with what feels like acid slurry sloshing inside his skull. That level of agitation is crippling and unsustainable. His alternatives largely boil down to medicating himself so heavily that his combat capabilities become compromised. He can’t do that. He has a mission. He must complete the mission. Surely he can have this one thing.

But stealing is wrong, and mean besides. If Barnes could go back now and pay Greasy the amateur DJ he would, and Greasy could name the price. Barnes is no longer one wrong twitch away from going the full arugula - he is not, he thinks fiercely, even as his skin hand tightens around the corpse of the ipod. He’s not going to lose his marbles over this, or over anything. He is going to deal with it. He can turn this around.

Outside of the Widow, talking about music seems to be the only thing so far that doesn’t activate the Bucky social programming. Extorting music out of other people seems to be the optimal condition for this. No, not always: he managed a civil interaction with Jarrell, hadn’t he? No extortion had been involved. The exchange had been fair.

This is an opportunity.

Barnes kneels down inside Motherfucker and very carefully lays the ipod in one of the ammo boxes, the one that holds his decommissioned notebooks, the ones he’s either filled or retired on account of them becoming unbearable to open. There’s not a lot of room left in the box, but the ipod is not very big; he deliberately closes the lid, turning his face away from it.

He unwraps six Hershey kisses and feeds them to himself one by one, because fuck everything else, he didn’t go out and start a barfight massacre. Then he feeds himself six more, for thinking up something to do besides curl up over his shattered coping mechanism and water it with his tears. Then he goes hunting for a specific notebook, because if he’s going to do this he needs to do it right.
He opens the notebook on *OPERATION REVERSE SKULLFUCK* and turns the page. He hovers over the blank sheet for a minute, uncertain, before carefully printing, in much smaller letters, *Operation Close Contact*. He starts writing.

After some time, Barnes sits back and stares at the page. An idea is starting to take form. This is going to take even more prep than the flashdrive did, but, well. What the hell else has he got going on.

“Yeah, let’s just clear our packed social calendar,” Barnes grunts at Motherfucker, closing the notebook and levering himself back onto his feet. “Christ. The things I fucking do.”

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They’re in Russia again, somewhere near Kazan this time, because Natasha had judged it to be less dangerous for them to cross into Kazakhstan via Poland, Belarus and Moscow. Apparently “Ukraine is a little frisky right now” and “this way we get all the funnest places to sneak past border customs”. Sam, who does not rank border crossings by fun-ness, legal or otherwise, was mostly concerned with how long they’d all be packed into their tiny European sardine car, but Natasha solved that problem by switching it out for a massive black SUV in Warsaw and apparently it turns out the distance would be pretty much the same anyway. Between that and the nightly stopovers none of them have tried to kill each other yet.

Steve pokes his head around the foyer corner of the the latest hotel room, holding up his wallet and giving it a wiggle. “Want anything?”

It's basically a ritual at this point. During the length of their forced vacation Steve took to going out every night, little thirty-minute convenience store runs that get them their nighttime snacks, and the habit stuck. It used to be way longer: the first two weeks Steve would stay out for nearly two hours and Sam is pretty sure he spent the entire time doing wind sprints back and forth along the rooftops of whatever poor city was hosting them that night, all on top of the running he’d do every morning.

Thank god he’s mellowed out some. “Strawberries,” Sam tells him, because Steve does better with concrete goals and also, fuck yeah, he wants strawberries. “If they have them. If not beer’s good too.”

“Strawberries, beer,” Steve repeats, sticking his wallet into his jeans. “Those frozen cream cheese things Natasha likes. Let’s hope I remember the Russian word for beer.”

“Pivo,” Sam tells him helpfully, because Natasha’s been halfassedly teaching them in the car and he’s got his priorities straight when it comes to memorizing vocabulary. “Like TiVo but with pee.”

“I don’t know what that T-thing is either,” Steve says, toeing his boots on and opening the door. “Gonna resort to interpretive dance, I guess.”

“Oh, yeah, just mime chugging from a bottle and stumbling around,” Sam says. “That’ll do it.”

“Then they’ll give me vodka!” Steve calls over his shoulder, the asshole, knowing full well that Sam will gag, shudder and grope for something to throw at him. His post-Mystery Sauce relations with vodka have been estranged at best; unfortunately the door closes on Steve’s grinning mug before Sam can find something to chuck at him.
That leaves Sam all alone with the Netflix and wifi connection. Natasha took the room across the hall, in the sense that she tossed a duffel in there and breezed back out again, saying that she needed to “take care of business” and she’d be back by midnight, don’t wait up. Sam’s not sure if she’s out there stooling pigeons or rustling grasses or whatever it is spies do, but at least she’s out and about.

Sam approves of this, and Steve’s running habits too. Whatever bleeds off the guy’s crazy energy is A-okay in Sam’s book, and it’s important for everyone to have alone time when they’re living in each others’ asscracks like this, spending all day cooped in a car. The fact that Sam tends to get free snacks out of it just happens to be a nice bonus.

So he’s alone, in his pajamas, setting up his Netflix nest and contentedly anticipating beer when there’s a very polite-sounding tap on the window.

Sam turns and feels each and every one of the individual years sliding off his lifespan as he takes in the sight of James B. Barnes, Winter Soldier, crouched easily on two inches of windowsill with absolutely no expression on his face.

Sam’s Beretta is all the way across the room. There’s no way Sam’s getting to it in time. He’s going to die in his Hokie Nation t-shirt and AIR FORCE FUN boxers because he taught Steve the meaning of friendship or whatever and Undead Bestie Original Vanilla Flavor just decided this was unacceptable.

“If this is because I taught Steve to fistbump and now we have a secret handshake, I just gotta say that he definitely still likes you best and I am not usurping anything in any way whatsoever,” Sam says, before his survival instincts or higher cognitive functions can engage in any meaningful way.

Barnes cocks his head, looking, if anything, nonplussed, then wedges his fingers under the window and forces it up. There’s a little crunch as the latch pops clean off the frame and bounces to the floor. “Whoa,” Sam says, some aggro kicking in, and, well, let it never be said that Sam Wilson backs down in the face of stupid danger. “Okay, dude, alright, you mind at least stating your fuckin’ business before you go property damaging our hotel room?”

Barnes stops, framed in the open window, and fixes Sam with a stare that should really belong on some kind of lizard. “You have an ipod,” he says.

His voice is a lot softer than Sam would’ve expected. Also, if Sam had had any kind of bet riding on what the ex-Winter Soldier would to say to him, given the chance, he would have lost hella money right now.

No, really. “I what?”

“An ipod,” Barnes repeats. “You have one.”

“Yeah,” Sam says, and since the Winter Soldier is not actively trying to murder him a few critical thinking parts decide now is the time to get possessed by the spirit of suicidal backtalk. “I got an ipod. Don’t you?”

Miraculously, Barnes nods and actually produces it, one of the newer nano ones: it might have been lime green at some point, but now it just kind of looks like it’s been dropped in a blender. Barnes holds it out to Sam, flat in his palm, the way Sam’s baby cousins show him whatever weird thing they’ve picked up off the ground - not like he wants Sam to take it, but like he wants to make sure Sam can see. “Mine’s broken.”

“Uh,” Sam says, suddenly wondering if he’s dreaming. “It… sure is. I mean. If you’re looking for
somebody to fix it, I uh... I can take a look, but you’re probably better off getting a new one.”

“Yeah,” Barnes nods, like he agrees. “Yours.”

There’s a moment where they just look at each other. “You... want my ipod,” Sam says carefully.


Sam suddenly has visions of Barnes offering his favorite stabbing knife, or a nice shiny grenade, or possibly the severed head of a high-level HYDRA operative. “What... have you got in mind?”

Barnes produces a mid-sized Tupperware container. Images of mutilated body parts flash through Sam’s mind before he realizes what he’s looking at: “Is that *mac and cheese?”*

“There’s bacon in it,” Barnes says.

“*How,?”* Sam says. His traitor mouth is already salivating. “We’re in Central Buttfuckistan, man, the last four places we stayed at didn’t even know what it *was.”*

“I educated them.”

Oh *no*. The visions of severed body parts come back with a vengeance. “How, uh. How’d you do that?”

“I showed them YouTube,” Barnes says. “And money.”

“That’d do it,” Sam says weakly. “So... uh... why do you want *my* iPod?”

“Mine’s broken,” Barnes repeats. “And we’re in Central Buttfuckistan.”

“Right.” Sam’s like ten thousand percent certain he saw at least four kids in their last bathroom-stop village with the newest version of iphone, but sure, whatever. It’s not like he can imagine the artist formerly known as the Winter Soldier strolling into an Apple store. Or, more surprisingly, stealing an iphone from some random teenager. Somehow this bulky, shaggy figure in coarse, dark clothing just doesn’t seem the type.

“And. You don’t use it a lot.”

“That’s true.” He plays stuff for Steve sometimes, but Steve doesn’t seem like much of a music guy and Sam likes to listen when he can get the full experience, i.e. not when he’s on a global terrorist extermination tour.

Sam looks at the Tupperware. The lid is opaque, but he can see through the plastic sides and it looks like cheesy pasta heaven: thick, gooey, oozing with carbs. The sides are a little fogged up too - dear god, it must be still warm.

He looks back at the ipod. He *could* try to fix it, if Barnes lets him: his dad’s a mechanical engineer and their father-son bonding time consists entirely of flying Dad’s plane or taking apart anything with a battery. Then again, Apple does their damnedest to discourage people from poking around inside their tech and really, this one looks like a tank sat on it.

Barnes licks his lips. “I’ll get you a new one. After.”

Sam belatedly realizes Barnes thinks he’s holding out and is *trying to sweeten the deal*, so he nods quick before he gets offered a free assassination of one foreign dignitary of choice or something. “Alright, man,” he says, “We have a deal,” and to his horror his hand swings out of its
Barnes blinks, furrows his brow and carefully places the Tupperware container in Sam’s outstretched hand. Sam sags a little in relief. “Let me just go get the ipod,” he says, managing to turn his back on Barnes by telling himself that if the Winter Soldier wants to cap him it won’t matter what damn way he’s facing.

When Sam turns back from his bag Barnes’ eyes are on the ipod and ipod only. He looks weirdly hungry. “Here you go, man,” Sam says, and Barnes doesn’t quite snatch it out of his palm, but only just.

The two ipods get vanished somewhere in Barnes’ jacket. Once again Barnes meets his eyes, or at least stares in their general vicinity on Sam’s face. “Thank you,” he recites, unblinking.

“No problem, man,” Sam says. He hefts the mac and cheese; it is, as advertised, still warm. “So… this isn’t poisoned, is it?” he says, and immediately regrets it.

Barnes’ face creases in true emotion for the first time, a look caught halfway between bafflement and genuine offense. “Why would I poison someone. When I have a perfectly good sniper rifle.”

“Ah. Silly me,” Sam says, thinking involuntarily of all the nine billion times he and Steve have been out and about without any kind of cover in the past week alone. “Why hand-deliver someone dinner when you can make their head explode from a mile away.”

Barnes just nods like well yeah, of course. “Poison can be tricky. Biochemistry is unstable. A lot can go wrong,” he says, frowning. “A bullet to the head almost never goes wrong.”

Then he seems to realize what he’s saying, and fixes Sam with a look of terrified earnestness. “I don’t want to kill you,” he says, painfully honest. “I can do that now. I can not kill people.”

“That’s - great!” Sam says, because, well, it is. “That’s - super. Uh… keep it up.”

Then Sam remembers that he is a PTSD counselor and technically two-thirds of the way through a psych masters, which, while probably not making him the most equipped person to help Barnes, certainly makes him the most equipped person available to Barnes right now. There’s professional responsibility involved. He can’t just send what’s possibly the most traumatized guy on earth off into the night with a cheery wave and a pat on the ass.

“Do you need any help?” he asks frankly, figuring the direct approach would work best here. “I don’t know if you know, but - I’m a VA counselor, I help combat vets transition back to civilian life, deal them with their problems. Trauma, and all that. I can...” well, what can he do? “…maybe point you to some resources or something.”

Barnes, whose gaze sharpened at the word trauma, visibly considers this. “More than what’s on google?”

Sam blinks. Right, YouTube and money: this guy’s clearly not helpless when it comes to navigating modern information. “Well. No. Not... right now. But,” he says, “if you wait a second, I can write you down some good websites, stuff with reliable info. There can be a lot of conflicting information online and personally I have a few go-to’s that help me figure out what’s what.”

Barnes watches him for a moment longer. “Yes,” he finally says, then pulls a Sharpie out of somewhere, hikes up his right sleeve and looks expectantly at Sam.

“Uh,” Sam says, “Okay, alright,” and starts reciting all the orgs and URLs he remembers off the
top of his head. He watches Barnes write in careful block letters on one veiny, pasty-white arm and becomes more and more convinced that he’s fallen asleep on his laptop waiting for his strawberries and any minute now Steve’s gonna come shake him awake and make fun of him.

But no, there Barnes is, capping the Sharpie and pushing down his sleeve. “Thank you,” he repeats, absolutely no change in inflection, and shifts his grip to the outside of the window frame.

“Wait, man, hold up,” Sam says, remembering Natasha’s admonitions about giving Barnes privacy and being well aware that from a certain perspective, Steve is behaving like the very craziest of ex-boyfriends. “I’m gonna tell Steve we talked, you cool with that?”

Barnes gives him a look like he thinks Sam’s a couple beers short of a six-pack. “He’s your operational command. And you just had contact with. A potential hostile. Why wouldn’t you tell him?”

“Wait, hold up, potential hostile?” Sam says. “I thought we were having a friendly conversation!”

Barnes just gives him what might, on a less deadened face, be called a good-thing-you’re-pretty look. “Maybe don’t do any hostage negotiation anytime soon.”

“Hey! What are you implying? We just had this whole talk! You gave me dinner! I gave you my tunes!”

“Haven’t you heard? I’m crazy as fuck,” Barnes says, and salutes as he falls backwards out the window.

Sam stares at the empty space where Barnes had been for a long time. Jesus Christ. And he thought Steve was dramatic.

Sam considers getting out his phone and calling Natasha. It’s definitely something he should be doing. Then again, she did say she’d be back around midnight. Steve’ll be back too, even sooner. And Barnes hadn’t actually done anything, just blindsided Sam into trading away his ipod for some highly dubious dinner.

Sam tries the mac and cheese. It’s fucking delicious.

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“So,” Sam says as Steve comes through the door, carrying a plastic bag, no beer and a bottle of water. “Don’t freak out, but your boy paid me a visit about fifteen minutes ago.”

He might as well have whacked Steve across the head with a brick. He stumbles, dropping the bag, and a spasm runs through the big muscles of his traps. “He was here?” Steve demands, eyes wild. He tosses the water bottle at his bed, misses, and doesn’t even look around when it hits the wall with a thump. “What’d he do? What happened?”

“He was okay,” Sam says. “Like Natasha said, mostly - no visible signs of injury, or brain damage. He was talking a little slow sometimes but I think that’s because he was, well, talking and not because of any physical trauma.” Sam had initially gone over the Winter Soldier files with his paramedic’s eyes, since they’re the closest thing Barnes has to medical records and for a while it seemed very likely Sam would be the first responder if they ran into him. But the serum Barnes got must have been in no way second rate, because all the issues Sam might’ve expected -
digestive, cognitive, behavioral - were nowhere in evidence. It’s very possible they’re there, but they’re pretty obviously not compromising his health enough to stop him from bulldozing through HYDRA these past ten months. “If he’s hurting, it’s not bad enough to stop him from climbing up and then jumping out of our hotel window.”

Steve soaks up every word like a crazy-eyed blond sponge. “What did he say?

“Well,” Sam says, because there’s really no good way to say this. “As far as I can tell, he showed up just to trade me a bowl of macaroni and cheese for my ipod.”

Steve stares. “Your ipod?”

“Yep.”

“The music-player thing?”

“That’s the one.” Sam shrugs, a little helplessly. “He showed me his old one and it was real fucked up. He told me he wanted mine and offered to trade. Pretty sure he could’ve bought a new one pretty easily, but who knows, maybe mine’s special or something. I didn’t wanna ask him too many questions in case I scared him off.” Or provoked a violent response, but Steve won’t even hear that right now. Though after his close encounter Sam is pretty reassured about the state of Barnes’ relative stability, even if the guy doesn’t quite believe it about himself.

Steve doesn’t seem to care about Sam’s failure to interrogate. “He had an ipod already? His own?”

“Yeah, but it was broken.”

To Sam’s surprise, Steve’s face dissolves into the kind of smile Sam last saw on the face of one of his college buddies when he saw his then-fiancée step out in her wedding dress for the first time. “That’s him,” Steve says. “That’s Bucky. He was real weird about music, even as a kid, God - he’d get a song stuck in his head and drive everybody up the walls for days, it was insane. His ma used to say she’d consider going to church just to stick him in a choir.”

“Oh yeah? What’d you guys have back then, gramophones?”

“Record players,” Steve confirms. “Bucky had a real nice one. It wasn’t enough for him to have it, either, he had to open that thing up, pick apart all the pieces and clean ‘em once a month. That thing was his baby. We had so many records in the apartment, you wouldn’t believe. The radio was on all the damn time.”

That’d explain Steve’s pained little grimaces whenever Sam or Natasha turned the car radio on and it immediately played music instead of a talk station. Sam used to think it was either a startle reflex or some kind of aversion to Top 40. The past week, stuck in the car and thinking about Steve’s superpowers, Sam thought maybe it was because Steve was super-hearing some kind of annoying electrical noise that cropped up right as it turned on.

“And you gave him your ipod,” Steve continues, laughing, his eyes bright. “You traded him a hundred and fifty dollar piece of tech for a bowl of macaroni?”

“Excuse me, Mr. This Soup Is So Good I’m Moving To Korea?” Sam says. “You can’t talk. It had bacon bits in it.”

“Had?”

“Listen, white man, Winter Soldier sighting or not, not even God himself could have kept me a
second longer from that cheesy mac.”

“And you just ate it?”

“I asked him if it was poisoned. He pretty much said point blank that if he wanted to kill us he’d do it with a 50 cal and a sniper blind,” Sam says frankly. “Also, he’s been watching us for a long-ass while, if he’s heard me complaining about my dire lack of mac.”

“Not necessarily, you moaned about it three times in the past three days,” Steve says automatically, but his eyes are wide and starving again.

“Three days is a long-ass while. And he told me my own music-listening habits, too,” Sam says. “So your boy is with us out here, we just can’t see him. You can leave him that note now, probably.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, dazed. “Yeah.”

“He told me I could tell you all about what happened. Made a joke, even,” Sam says, because he’s pretty sure that was a joke. “Called himself crazy as fuck.”

That gets a laugh out of Steve, even strangled and half-disbelieving. “Trades you mac and cheese for your ipod,” he says wonderingly, rubbing at his face with the heel of his hand. “That bastard. That sonofabitch. I am going to kick his ass.”

Sam pauses. He doesn’t want to give Steve false hope, but he’s not going to withhold information either, not when he doesn’t have to. “He said he’d get me a new one, after,” he says carefully. “As in, those exact words.”

Steve looks up at him, stunned and a little weepy, like somebody just hit him in the face with a sack of chopped onions. “After,” he repeats dumbly, and Sam steps in quick for a hug before he can see the tectonics of Steve’s face collapse entirely into patchy redness and snot.

-o-

It didn’t take Natasha long to find a nearby construction site that suits her purposes, both for privacy and for decent international cell service. It takes some doing for her to get to the top of the structure, but she likes climbing around in unfinished buildings, especially at night, seeing their skeletons; it makes her feel like a ghost, but in a good way. A cartoon ghost, a woo-woo ghost, delighting in the pointlessness of her invisibility and kept company by nothing but her own echoes and the moon.

And Clint, technically, through the phone. They’d been exchanging updates, but now Natasha’s just texting him increasingly arcane memes to see what kind of baffled poetry Clint will come up with from trying to reverse-engineer internet humor. She’s just finished snickering over a particularly inspired interpretation when a call from Maria Hill takes over her screen.

Well, it says BUNNY DAZZLETUSH and the contact photo is a screenshot from a video clip titled Virgin Triple Gangbang HARDCORE, but it’s Maria. Natasha likes to make sure anybody going through her phones will be too baffled, distracted and uncomfortable to get any useful data.

“Alright, I like that better than the roadkill diner one,” Hill says.

“Thought you might. What’s up?”

“What’s your timeline?” Hill asks. “On your current op.”

Natasha thinks. “Nothing that can’t be pushed back. What’ve you got?”

“We’ve got a hit on large-scale AIM movement. Offshore, a ship down near Chile. We have reason to believe there might be some materials onboard that were originally locked up in SHIELD containment.”

Natasha, who has a pretty extensive knowledge of what lived in SHIELD containment, very nearly winces. “We can get to an airport in three hours. Do we know what was stolen?”

“All the intel I have on this is being routed to your dropbox now. Three hours, that’s… Kazan International? Give me twelve, I’ll send a Stark plane to meet you.”

“Tomorrow evening, then,” Natasha says. “God bless the private sector.”

“Yeah, this way I only have to come up with a corporate coverup instead of doing actual diplomacy. There’s you, Wilson, Rogers… we’ll transfer you into a quinjet in Colombia, maybe even Florida.”

Natasha’s eyebrows go up. “This is sanctioned?”

“If all goes well? Yes,” Hill says.

“Ah. That kind of op.”

“Yeah. So bring whatever you’ve got. The wheels are turning but as of right now what you requested is not guaranteed.”

“When is it ever,” Natasha sighs, rolling her eyes briefly skyward.

“Stay safe, Betsy. Wouldn’t want you to lose that other eye.”

“Be good, Bunny,” Natasha says sweetly, and makes kissy noises into the phone until Hill laughs and hangs up.

Chapter End Notes

1. Factory resetting an iphone wipes everything off it, but for the sake of story fudging let’s say in the MCU you can do a version where it stays linked with its host computer/cloud account for ~location~ purposes. Like, if ya phone get stolen and reset you can still find it if you had it synced with your computer/cloud account. LOOK IF TONY STARK CAN HAVE HOLOGRAMS I CAN HAVE THIS OKAY

3. Hokie Nation. In this story Sam did undergrad at Virginia Tech, where he did Air Force ROTC and majored in aerospace engineering. (His thesis project was totally a jetpack.)
4. The chapter title is from the song Давай-няривай by Любэ.
Rhodey’s in New York a lot these days - HYDRA members are being tried in the Eastern District court, the one where they prosecute Al Qaeda terrorists, which means Rhodey gives a lot of testimonies and depositions right here in Brooklyn - but he still doesn’t see Pepper all that often, so when he gets a text that says *office dinner?* on his way out of court he sends back an immediate yes.

He stops at a Juice Press on the way and picks up one of those nasty chia drinks Pepper likes, then takes the private elevator up, the doors opening to his approach and automatically whisking him to the C-suite floor. “Good to see you, Jarvis,” he says, nodding at the cam in the corner.

“A pleasure as always, Colonel Rhodes. I believe Mrs. Potts will be finished shortly,” and Rhodey enters her office anteroom just as an intern finishes laying a stack of takeout and two massive bloody marys on the coffee table.

The glass doors defrost a minute later and Pepper becomes visible, sitting on her desk with her legs crossed and still speaking into a bluetooth piece in her ear. She shoots him a smile and he nods; she looks good, in a sleeveless blouse and cropped pants despite the AC chill of the office, and Rhodey absently notes that he hasn’t seen her in anything with sleeves in - a while.

Since the AIM incident, he realizes. Maybe he’ll ask her about it. Eventually. One day. When her face doesn’t freeze over into her PR expression the second anyone mentions it.

Rhodey is one of seven people who know that Virginia Potts currently has oodles of highly volatile nanotechnology floating around in her biological systems, which can be colloquially referred to as her body. It’s Rhodey, Pepper, Tony, and four doctors from Tony’s private medical team. They’re gonna keep it that way. Pepper’s made it quite clear that she just wants to keep living her life, and she can’t do that if she’s locked up in a clinic somewhere getting experimented on by the likes of Thaddeus Ross.

Tony’s pulled another miracle out of his ass by stabilizing the Extremis and Tony’s miracles tend to stick, so honestly Rhodey’s more worried about the psychology. Pepper had taken something of a private sabbatical, after her brief flurry of action immediately after Insight and the AIM disaster; Hill and Binita and Wendy and Jerry the VP guy had handled things until Pepper returned to full capacity, and it seemed to do her a lot of good, but something in her has… hardened, almost calcified, since.

But you wouldn’t know it unless you knew what to look for. Pepper comes out of the office all smiles, saying “Jarvis, privacy protocol three, please,” as she hugs Rhodey one-armed and kisses his cheek, sitting down together in front of the takeout mountain. Privacy protocol three is a full blackout and means she wants to bitch without any chance of it coming back to bite her. They’d made a pinky promise years ago that Rhodey would never use anything he heard to gain instant riches in insider stock trading and Pepper would never tattle if Rhodey said any potentially treasonous things about the US government.

There’s also the obvious mutual unspoken pact of Venting About Tony. It’s been working pretty well for them so far.
“So,” Pepper says, prying open a takeout lid and revealing a burger the size of her head. “How’s our legal system? Still intact?”

“And kicking,” Rhodey says, already salivating. He takes the container handed to him and briefly experiences universal love and goodwill upon seeing it’s blue cheese and jalapeno with extra hot sauce. “How’s corporate America? Still watered with the blood of orphans?”

“Same old same old,” Pepper agrees, and from there it mostly devolves into chewing. Pepper does give him the usual shit about his piquant and refined flavor choices, which Rhodey finds unfair considering he has to experience the primal horror of seeing Pepper visibly consider pouring her chia drink into her bloody mary.

“Pepper, I love you, but if you think I’ll stay in the room while you do that shit you got another think coming,” he tells her in heartfelt honesty.

She makes a face at him like there you go, ruining all my fun, but she does put the chia drink down. “You never tell Tony to put away his chlorophyll smoothies.”

“That’s because I don’t see what goes in them,” Rhodey says. “Chlorophyll? You two are as bad as each other, Christ. Is he still drinking that?”

“Apparently he acquired the taste,” Pepper says. “He says it gives him energy.”

“He doesn’t need more energy,” Rhodey complains, despite the fact that Tony still loses his breath sometimes after walking up the stairs. And Tony hasn’t been idle, despite the heart surgery: the minute Pepper came back she sent him off on field trips to bribe, threaten and cajole every single lawmaker in DC in between coding benders in his workshop.

Another side effect of the whole AIM thing is that Pepper has gotten… political, which Rhodey definitely isn’t knocking but is something he isn’t quite sure how to deal with. SI’s relationship with the government has always been smoothly transactional, up until the whole Iron Man thing, but even after that they remained firmly on the list of preferred contractors, even for the DOD: Tony continued making armor, and certain defensive technologies, and Pepper and her hand-picked sales force had clawed, bit, begged and bled to stay on-contract. Pepper had always treated the government as something between a preferred client and a micromanaging shareholder, keeping them at arms’ length while still maneuvering to make them happy.

That’s not the case anymore. Rhodey’s not sure if it’s the threat of becoming a state-sanctioned guinea pig or if SI finally has enough clout in the energy technologies market to be able to stop privileging their governmental relationship, but either way Pepper has moved on from the standard lobbying practices and into more heavy-handed maneuvering.

And Tony’s actually been doing it - not that he doesn’t like sharpening his claws on Capitol Hill, but usually he prefers playing in his garage, and since Iron Man happened, well, Tony’s fighting has been rather more literal. But the minute Pepper stepped back into her heels Tony stepped back from his suits and put on his other suits, his Hermès and Kiton and Brioni, and started reminding people he’s not just a pretty goatee in a pair of polished metal panties. Pepper used to be all about damage control for that sort of thing, making sure Tony didn’t spit in the drink of the wrong Senator, but nowadays that is… less the case.

Rhodey’s not sure how he feels about it, and he hasn’t had the time to ask around - or hell, go directly to the source and ask Tony and Pepper what they’re doing - but he figures he’ll find out when it all blows up. They survived Tony’s public unscheduled deep-sixing of the SI weapons division and consequent nosedive on the DOW, so Rhodey figures that whatever they’re plotting, it really can’t be that bad.
“So,” Pepper says, when they’ve finished their burgers. “You’re not actually here to see me.”

Rhodey raises an eyebrow even as alarm bells start very gently clanging in the back of his head. He sits forward. He’s only in New York for the day, to go over some documents with the main prosecution team and meet with a judge, and he’d thought the meeting seemed a little redundant. “I’m not?”

Pepper’s mouth twists wryly. “I did want to see you, but apparently you needed to have a covert meeting here, and this was the way to do it.”

Rhodey frowns. “A covert meeting with who?” It can’t be Tony. If he were here to covertly meet Tony he would’ve already leapt out from behind the couch cushions and tackled Rhodey into the carpet. Who the hell else can he meet under guise of seeing Pepper - oh.

“Sorry about the cloak and dagger,” Maria Hill says from behind him, coming around the couch, the sound of her heels eaten by the thick carpet. “But you know how it is.”

He does. The media’s quit dogging his every step, but Rhodey knows he’s still newsworthy if he so much as blows his nose in a way deemed “out of character” by whatever pundit is gasping for attention today. Two months ago the full details of what happened in the World Council massacre got leaked, and the digital mesh facemask technology became public knowledge: a little more paranoia to fuel still-burning fires. Now half the tabloids go into hysterics any time a public official even remotely connected to the HYDRA investigation does something ‘unusual’.

“Reasonable precaution,” Rhodey allows, as Pepper nods at her, nods at him and gets up to head out of the room, tablet in hand. “And you’ve probably got a good reason.”

“I do,” Hill says, settling neatly into the couch opposite him with a paper file in her lap. She’s as blunt-faced and opaque as ever, somehow managing to make a tight navy dress look as boring and interchangeable as her old SHIELD jumpsuit. She was Director Fury’s second in command and now runs operations for Pepper, and both times she’s managed to pull off some wild shit while still flying under the radar during a crisis - first during Insight and now during the endless legal horsefuckery going on with Stark Industries. Looking at her, Rhodey can see how she’s made a career out of it: being indispensably invisible.

And Tony trusts Hill, inasmuch as he trusts anyone. Rhodey still kind of wants to thump his head on the coffee table a little bit, because Hill is no longer working for the US government, but Captain America and Black Widow and god knows how many other ex-agents are handing her intel like she’s still deputy director so it doesn’t matter if she hasn’t got clearance. So Rhodey’s not thrilled about it, but it could all be far worse: Stark Industries was the only organization with the resources to snap up all of ex-SHIELD’s R&D personnel, making sure none of them scattered or went AWOL, which was the best outcome anyone could hope for, given that SI has a long and mutually beneficial history of cooperating with the government when it comes to national security. At least on this Pepper hasn’t changed. Hell, Hill herself spearheaded the initiative to make all the freshly hired scientists testify in the HYDRA hearings, coming in every time Rhodey’s task force hauled someone in before a judge.

And she doesn’t bother with the small shit, so whatever this is, it’s gonna fuck up his whole day, night and weekend. Rhodey settles back into his couch with a sigh. “How much am I gonna hate this?”

Hill smiles, wry. “Oh, plenty.”

“Hit me.”
“Well, on the whole, HYDRA’s running,” Hill says. “But they’re running right into the arms of other organizations who’re just as nasty, and making use of the opportunity. One name in particular keeps cropping up.”

Rhodey resists the urge to drop his head back and stare at the ceiling and question god’s plan in its entirety, with added expletives. “Who is it now?”

“AIM.” Hill’s mouth quirks. “You might’ve heard of them.”

“Hell no. Seriously?” Rhodey stares at her. “I thought we smoked those assholes!”

“Apparently a bunch of other scientists saw Killian crash and burn and got inspired,” Hill says. “If I’ve learned nothing else from SHIELD it’s that there isn’t a scientist alive without some version of the ‘it’d work if I did it’ complex.”

“Jesus,” Rhodey says, disgusted. “So, what, now we got a repeat infestation of fire-breathing psychopaths?”

“Thankfully no,” Hill says. “This seems to be all crazies who didn’t go down the supersoldier path. They’ve just decided to do all the other horrifying biotechnology stuff. And when I say all of it I really wish I was kidding.”

Rhodey pinches the bridge of his nose. “Where’s this coming from?”

Hill sighs. “You know Stark Industries hired a lot of SHIELD scientists.”

Boy, does he. It’s been real interesting over on the legal and PR side of things, hiring employees that signed NDAs and noncompetes with an organization that, oops, turned out to have been treasonous to the US government. Wendy and Binita and Jerry and Hill are great, but thank god Pepper’s sabbatical lasted less than a month because it took both her hands on the wheel to keep everything from cartwheeling off a cliff.

“Since I’m also one of the main liaisons with the government for SI, in certain circumstances, most of those scientists report to me,” Hill continues. “We’re helping them go through their own notes and the INSIGHT datadump, verifying and expanding on intel.”

Rhodey nods; they’ve been handing it over to the FBI and CIA and the taskforces where applicable, whenever anyone uncoveres or remembers something actionable. A lot of his own intel even comes direct from Hill. “Well, over the past couple of days I’ve been going through the more recent reports. I started seeing discrepancies between what the scientists said they’d been working on and what the task forces and FBI have been seizing. I asked some questions, had JARVIS hunt down some money trails, and long story short - I’m pretty sure AIM got ahold of a big chunk of the materials being held in SHIELD-HYDRA containment facilities.”

Rhodey stares at her. “Hill, pardon my language, but what the fuck.”

“I know.”

“How did this happen?”

Hill sighs. “Some of the materials were never fully processed, and the security protocols necessitated a lot of the paperwork be kept offline or hardcopy only. Plus, from what we can tell, HYDRA infiltrated security on the SHIELD prisons and containment facilities. So not enough people knew there was a potential liability, and we had enemy agents actively working to exploit it. Basically: we got screwed.”
Rhodey gives in and does let his head loll back against the couch. “Just once, I’d like somebody to set up a covert meeting to tell me some good news.”

“Well,” Hill says. “I’m also technically here to tell you I’ve got a live target, if you and Stark feel like taking a nice personal day out and about.”

Rhodey’s head comes back up. His first reaction is an all-caps HALLELUJAH, because his past year has consisted of ninety percent paperwork to ten percent asskicking. He’s more or less deliberately engineered it that way, because while there’s plenty of people who can asskick there’s not nearly as many he can trust to execute bureaucracy, let alone do it as ethically and efficiently as possible. So he makes sure he’s the one dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s while strapping young gentlemen fresh from Quantico go around stress-testing their body armor and kicking suspicious doors down. Rhodey signs off on their missions and hears their debriefs and tries not to hate everything.

And now here’s a chance to go gallivanting off in the sun with his best pal. That definitely comes with no strings attached. “Why me and Tony?” Rhodey asks warily.

“We’re dealing with hazardous materials - unknown chemicals, unknown technology. Between you, Tony and the suits, your capabilities would be invaluable.”

“Just us?”

“Rhodes, there’s nobody better to finish the crusade against AIM, especially after last year, especially after what went down with Killian and with the President. Now that they’re holding hands with HYDRA leftovers? All the better.”

“Does Tony already know about this?”

“As of right now, no,” Hill says. “But by tonight he will.”

“And if I say no?”

“Widow goes in with Rogers and Wilson and whatever else she has up her sleeve, and we work backchannels to re-secure any materiel and have emergency services on standby.”

And Tony will go too, Rhodey knows. He’s been itching to do more than the test flybys in the new suit Pepper has been surprisingly lenient about allowing him. “Does this really require an Avengers payload?” Rhodey says. “Can’t they send in twenty Marines and a hostage negotiator?”

“That’s the catch,” Hill says. “The target is a container ship parked just off the coast of Argentina.”

Rhodey stares at her. “There’s no way you can get me authorized,” he realizes.

“Exactly. We need this stuff back, and you’re the best ‘official’ channel for it,” Hill says. “It was all locked up for a reason. You’ll go there, ‘discover’ the goods, and, well, you can’t possibly be expected to leave a situation when it’s hot, can you?”

“How will we justify me ‘discovering’ it?”

Hill shrugs “Just say Stark had radiation show up on his scanners or whatever.”

Wow, this just keeps getting better and better. “And when we’re done? What do we do with this stuff? Who’ll have jurisdiction?”
“The DOE,” Hill says. “And the CDC, if there are biological agents. They’ll have the infrastructure to take it on. They’re the ones who handled this kind of stuff from the first SHIELD containment divvy-up, and I think we’ll be able to prove these are stolen materials that need to be returned to the United States.”

“Can’t you go to them directly? I know who Tony has on speed dial, and it’s everybody and their mother up on the Hill.”

“Stark might have everyone on the Hill, but the Hill isn’t doing so well right now. The entire State Department is still bending over backwards trying to fix the damage from that time it turned out we were hosting the goddamn neo-nazi nerve center and their head honcho was our Secretary of State. Our best bet is to send in plausibly private agents to resolve the situation, and since I don’t trust the CIA to tell the full truth about whether or not they wiped their asses this morning, you’re it. At least you and Tony won’t disappear the material, sell it to terrorists or overthrow the government of Chile while you’re at it.”

“Yeah, we’ll just up the chances of it turning into a media blowout by a factor of - ” Rhodey stops and narrows his eyes. “Hold on, did someone request Tony on this? Tony, specifically?”


Rhodey’s eyes narrow further. On the one hand, Romanova is a spy, an assassin and the girl who slid in under Tony’s and Pepper’s noses to infiltrate Stark Industries. On the other hand, that saved Tony’s life. She’s an Avenger, and she works with Captain America; she dumped those INSIGHT files at some pretty significant personal cost.

With SHIELD gone and Congress still upended, nobody really knows what to do with Widow, but Rhodey’s heard mutterings with the word traitor involved, some of them from the Pentagon. After Dushanbe she’s no one’s best friend, but given that Rhodey is here, listening to Hill argue for international action that’s all but guaranteed to go tits-up, means she’s probably got enough dirt on enough people to not only keep herself alive but to get her own way, too. “Black Widow is running this? What’s her endgame?”

Hill sighs. “I know you have a… history there, but believe it or not, Widow is definitely on your side here. She’s made a personal and professional commitment to rooting out and eliminating HYDRA and its derivatives.”

“So does she want a mess?” Rhodey says frankly, because for all Tony’s good qualities and intentions, that’s what they’ll be getting. “Because this here is gonna be a mess. You can’t have covert in the same hemisphere as Tony.”

“I think that’s the plan,” Hill says. “She wants public accountability, for bipartisan action in the right direction - and we can work with that, because we need to consolidate an anti-HYDRA bloc in the West. We need a tangible spearhead to unite our front, and Rogers is currently not an option. The whole reason AIM managed to reform is because of infighting. Mostly American infighting. But I don’t have to tell you that.”

She doesn’t. “We need to put a face to the good guys that isn’t Rogers, because if you put Rogers in front of a camera right now he’d break it,” Hill continues. “Pull Rogers off his quest and the only thing we’ll get is infighting, drama and an international PR nightmare. So now our best case scenario is to leave him to his punching and pass the torch to you.” Hill inclines her head. “If you’ll have it.”

It’s true Rhody hasn’t been on the public stage nearly as much as he was before; he gives soundbites and talks to the press but it’s as Colonel Rhodes, head of an anti-HYDRA task force,
not as Iron Patriot, robot of America. After the Battle of Manhattan, Avengers became instant symbols of the nation - real icons, spread through every home via CNN ticker tape or WalMart action figure. After the AIM incident and the Presidential award ceremony Rhodey got put on that bandwagon too: last month his cousin showed him the action figure her son wanted, an Iron Patriot figure with a slightly different red-white-blue color scheme and a suit that looked like a repurposed Transformer. But nowadays he wears suits more than he wears the suit, and sure, he mostly did that to himself, but -

“If I’ll have it,” Rhodey repeats. And then, accusatory: “You want me to become a politician.”

“A voice,” Hill says, as if it’s any different. “Nobody’s running for office, it’s not like that. We just need somebody to speak up and say hey, we’re not done yet. The fight’s not over, and we’re not doing enough. For that we need high-profile figures who aren’t tools of the establishment that produced HYDRA - and that’s you and Stark.” Hill shrugs. “Besides. Tell me he isn’t itching to get out there.”

He is, which isn’t exactly a good thing. Pepper’s got a little more iron in her grip these days, especially when it comes to Tony, so it hasn’t been Rhodey’s problem as much as it could be, but he knows the day is coming when Tony gets tired of gunslinging on the Hill and puts his red and gold on again, and that’s going to be a problem.

The only reason they haven’t become a target for global military-industrial machination is because the Avengers did not stay the Avengers after the Battle of Manhattan. Tony rebuilt his tower with its nice welcoming suites, but Thor went offworld, Banner only pops in every couple of months, and Rogers, Romanova and Barton were quietly subsumed into SHIELD. Wilson wasn’t part of the Battle of Manhattan and hasn’t resurfaced in a superhero capacity since Insight Day. Rhodey himself is safely ensconced in his task force: all of them slotted in nice and neat into the system.

Who controls the Avengers? If there’s an Avengers to control, then that question is going to be the only one that matters, and answering it is going to get ugly. “Maria,” Rhodey says tiredly. “We can’t have a good ol’ gang gets back together moment. We can’t spearhead anything. You said it yourself: Rogers is rogue, and it’s only his Cap persona protecting him. Widow flipped off the Pentagon, and now she’s doing this and it’s only a matter of time before everybody decides they’re tired of getting jerked around by a former KGB agent. After Insight -”

“That’s why it has to be you,” Hill says, leaning forward. “You and Stark. You go out flying, your sensors accidentally pick up radiation or something, you go to check it out, boom, you save the South American coast from getting irradiated or biobombed or whatever. A beautiful miracle. And that’s why it has to be both of you: the world might believe you were there on official American orders, but Tony Stark? He gives the government total plausible deniability,” Hill says. “And Rogers, Romanova, Wilson - they were never there.”

“And then what?

“Then you get to hand the Joint Chiefs of Staff a political and material victory with a nice tidy bow around it. They get to say that Iron Patriot risked his life to save the blah blah international community blah de blah blah. And you get to turn to the media and say: it’s not over. We need to do more. This won’t be the Avengers, James,” she says. “This will be you. Besides - would you trust anyone else to do the job?”

And this is why people like Hill are dangerous: because they know where to press. Rhody stares at her for a minute longer, then rolls his head back against the seat and stares at the ceiling, feeling like a fourteen-wheeler’s done a couple donuts between his shoulder blades. “I’m gonna take a week off,” he tells nobody in particular. “I’m gonna visit my good friend Tony Stark. We’re gonna do some upgrades on the armor together. We may even do a long-distance test flight.
Sometime, say, tomorrow. We might even go somewhere down south.”

“That’s all I can ask,” Hill says, and she’s too much a professional to show satisfaction but Rhodey can feel it anyway.

-Natasha blows back into the hotel to a thoughtful Sam and a suspiciously red-faced Steve. Natasha squints at them. “Did you have feelings while I was gone?”

“JB paid us another visit,” Sam says bluntly. “Well, me, anyway.”

Steve, mouth already open to wax rhapsodic over whatever the hell Soldier has done this time, stops and looks at him. “JB?”

“You think I’m calling a grown man Winter Soldier, white man? You think I’m calling a grown man Bucky?”

“What’d he do now?” Natasha says.

“Sam,” Steve says, pointing, “traded him an ipod for some macaroni.”

Natasha’s brain tries and fails to submit the proper reference flashcard. “Is that...code?”

“No, just macaroni,” Steve says.

“And cheese, and bacon,” Sam says. His expression momentarily turns beatific. “Still warm.”

“O-kay,” Natasha says. “Maybe tell me from the beginning.”

They tell her. Barnes made contact - actual face to face contact, willingly - and gave Sam food, real actual food, which Sam actually ate. Barnes spoke and listened and wrote down trauma assistance resources. In exchange, he wanted Sam’s... ipod.

“Do you keep personal information on that ipod?” Natasha asks. “Is it network linked?”

“No,” Sam says. “It’s an itouch but I never used it to take photos or anything. I don’t even have the wifi on, I always keep it in airplane mode to keep the battery from draining. Honestly, I really think he took it for the tunes. He had his own ipod and it was all fucked up but he was still being really careful with it.”

Well. That’s interesting. “Bucky really liked music,” Steve adds earnestly. “He was obsessed with it. I think he could name every single band that played in New York in the 1930s.”

Natasha cocks her head. “You didn’t give him Steve’s candy?”

Steve’s eyes widen and he turns to Sam. “You didn’t give him the candy?”

“I gave him my ipod, which is what he asked for,” Sam says pointedly, probably to avoid admitting he ate all the candy. “With all my shame playlists on it, even, which, wow, now is the worst time to remember they’re all still on there.”

Natasha pauses. “How shame?”

Sam sighs, briefly closing his eyes. “I might’ve had a... Kelly Clarkson phase.”

“Good,” Natasha says, mollified. “Emotional body armor. It’ll be good for him.”
Steve looks from one of them to the other in incomprehension and visibly decides he doesn’t care. “He told Sam to tell me about it,” he tells Natasha instead, his face lighter and more open than she’s ever seen it - ah, so that’s what hope looks like on him. It’s kinda sad, ironic and telling that she doesn’t see it more often on the face of a supposed American icon. “He told Sam he’d get him a new ipod. After.”

“After,” Natasha repeats. Well, that’s a good sign; extrapolating on the situation as described to her, she’d say it’s only 30/70 odds that Soldier was lying. He never struck her as the type to say whatever it took to get the result he wanted, but then again, he wasn’t exactly saying much for the duration of their mutual company. And Steve had told her: Bucky was like you.

Alright, maybe 40/60. But if he’s not lying that means he’s planning for the future, or at least thinking about it. “That’s good,” Natasha says aloud. “That gives us something to work with, something we might be able to expand a rapport on. Which is great, because we’ve got a change of plans. Hill just contacted me direct and gave us something urgent.”

“We’re not doing Kazakhstan?” Steve asks.

“This takes precedence,” Natasha says. “Hill wouldn’t call me unless she needed us, she’s got Clint and his wetwork buddies if she just wants a quiet asskicking. This stuff - well.” She rolls her neck and sighs before turning her face to Steve. “Remember that mission we had last year where we intercepted a couple of bioweapon prototypes?”

“In Syria?”

“Yep. The one where you took a grenade to the neck, got paralyzed and I had to haul you out like a giant blond duffel bag.”

Sam cracks up. Steve makes a face that would be a pout if it wasn’t for the general chiseled-ness of his bone structure. “I remember.”

“Yeah, good times. So you know how we escorted it to a hazardous materials containment facility? The one full of other super toxic biochem stuff?”

Sam’s laughter dies away. “I’m guessing this next part is gonna be less funny.”

“Yeah,” Natasha says, faux-light. “And it only gets more exciting from here. Apparently the containment department was HYDRA to the neck, and when all the scientists bailed they took a lot of the contents with them. AIM’s seized a bunch of material held there, and we’re still trying to find out exactly what’s missing, which is so fun when your best case scenario is ‘enriched plutonium’. So we don’t know what they have, only that it’s all bad, and now they’ve got it on a ship rounding the coast of Tierra del Fuego.”

“How do they know that?” Steve says, brows down, fully back to his rigid mission face.

“Money trails for specialized containment equipment,” Natasha says; she’d looked through her dropbox files on the way back here. “And satellite imagery.”

“If it’s specialized equipment, wouldn’t Hill be able to get an idea of what they have?” Sam says slowly. “Like, are we talking industrial radiation shielding, biohazard containers, what.”

“Circuit breakers and special kind of socket plug, actually,” Natasha says, mouth quirking. “And a type of battery array. The hazardous materials were already held in containment - AIM and HYDRA just had to move the units. But certain kinds of bioagents and chemicals require ongoing stabilization to keep from degrading or detonating, and there are very specific power requirements
for it. *That* they couldn’t move, and had to acquire or build independently. Those materials and components are trackable, though universal for the containment units - so we don’t know what they have, but we know where they have it and how much.”

Sam sighs. “Is it a lot?”

“It’s a lot.”

“And Hill brought this to us,” Steve states. His arms have folded rigidly in front of his chest, but Natasha’s not sure he’s actually noticed.

“The commander in chief can’t send anybody and the state department’s still trying to find its own ass, but there’s a good chance Colonel Rhodes and Tony Stark will join us for this op.”

“Unofficially,” Steve says, not like he disapproves but like he’s going down a checklist in his head.

“Unofficially.”

“So we’ll have to come back to Kazakhstan,” Sam says resignedly. “Can we take a direct flight next time?”

“Sorry,” Natasha says, grimacing briefly. “The tradeoff for no bureaucracy. If it feels like we’re getting jerked around on the end of a yo-yo string, it’s because we are. We get the intel as it comes in.”

“Hell, you’re telling me,” Sam says. “My unit got sent to Baghdad, to Fallujah, back to Baghdad, back to Fallujah again in *one week* this one time because the brass couldn’t make up their damn minds, and they didn’t have the excuse of not having the entire American intelligence machine at their disposal. At least you two smell better than a Chinook full of paratroopers.”

“And I wasn’t exactly dying to visit Kazakhstan,” Steve says. “But - ”

“We have to tell Bucky?”

“ - we have to tell Bucky.”

“So… how?” Sam says.

“The hard way,” Natasha decides. “Steve, go break into a hardware store and get a steel trashcan, whatever size they have. Sam, you’re coming with me. I saw a construction site a couple blocks away with a full dumpster.”

Sam eyeballs her. “Full of what.”


“Oh,” Sam says, looking considerably more on board as he gets it. “Faraday cage.”

Steve looks up from where he’s stuffing his boots on, frowning. “What’re you doing with - oh,” he says, the light coming on for him too. “The phone signal?”

“Yep,” Natasha says. “He’s most likely tracking the location in real time, if he’s piggybacking off the iPhone service. We can interrupt the continuous signal and send him a little message.”

“We’re doing this tonight?” Sam says, but he’s already started hunting around for his pants.
“Yeah, because god knows how long it’ll take. Come on.”

Steve straightens up from tying his shoelaces. “How come you get Sam?”

“Because I like making you do crime,” Natasha says. “And because if anybody asks why there’s a black guy hanging around in the middle of the night we can take care of it the Russian way, which will somehow still be quieter and more subtle than the Captain America way. Come on, chop chop.”

They chop chop. Steve lopes off down the street and they head in the opposite direction, walking the few blocks to the construction site Natasha just came from. They find the dumpster in short order, Sam looking visibly relieved that it is, in fact, full of nothing messier than a couple of twisted girders and some brick rubble.

“So... we’re just gonna interrupt the signal until Barnes comes to see what’s up?” Sam asks, climbing up to straddle the metal lip; Natasha hops up behind him and gets yanking at the cardboard. “Or texts or calls or whatever?”

“Yup.”

“You think that’ll work?”

“If it doesn’t, I’m turning Steve loose and he can tear up every building in town,” Natasha grunts. “Until either we find him or he takes notice. We’ll spell out ‘Bucky Barnes Eats Ass’ on the roof in sparklers, I don’t know. Put Steve out there in a G-string and nipple tassels. Whatever gets his attention.”

“You really want him on this op,” Sam says slowly, lifting up a chunk of metal sheeting so she can get at the stack underneath.

“Yeah, I do,” Natasha says, swinging her other leg in to get extra leverage. “This is big. Extra manpower won’t hurt.”

“Even with Iron Man and War Machine taking point,” Sam says.

“As of right now War Machine is not guaranteed,” Natasha says, hoisting up her pile of cardboard. “I’m trying to get Rhodes leeway or at least the right orders, but even if it happens it might not be on time for this. As for Stark - well. He’d be useful on this op, especially with the unknown hazardous substances, but he’s not the most reliable operative even when he is trying to be a team player. And he usually isn’t trying.”

Sam nods, thinking on this. “So we’re going across the Atlantic,” he says after a moment. “Tomorrow. You think Barnes can make it in time?”

“I have faith in his capabilities.”

Sam sighs. “Whatever you’re not telling us about Barnes. It’s not gonna bite us in the ass, is it?”

“I highly doubt it,” Natasha says, because ‘the Winter Soldier has a hypersonic stealth jet prototype’ is only a problem when applied on the global scale. “No more than anything else about him will, anyway. It’s not gonna bring attention down on him any more than he already has just by virtue of existing.”

“Alright,” Sam says, holding out his hand to help her down off the dumpster. “So… we send some smoke signals, he contacts us, we… send him classified mission details over a completely unsecured phone line?”
“Oh, there’s ways around that,” Natasha says. “We can make our own security. We just have to be a little creative.”

Barnes really should sleep, because it turns out losing his marbles over a dead ipod and then spending twenty-four hours bringing mac and cheese into the world takes a lot out of a guy, especially when there is a significant shortage of marbles to begin with. But he’s got the payoff of all that effort, and he’s holding it right in his sweaty little assassin hands, and he can’t possibly be expected to sleep when his new little white rectangle almost certainly contains music he has not heard.

He is not disappointed. Wilson has 1,148 songs loaded on the ipod and upon the initial scrolling through Barnes does not recognize any of them. Wilson has playlists, too, with exciting names like summer jams and old skool and HYPE.

It occurs to Barnes that he can… he can make playlists of his own. It’s like a little sunrise in his brain. He can organize the music. He can do it right on the ipod. He sits for a moment just thinking about that, caught up in the idea: it feels bigger than it should be but not in a bad way, the pressure inside his chest light for once, like it’s pushing him up. He can sort and arrange and label the music. He can think up any kind of classification scheme he wants.

He should listen to all of Wilson’s music first. Do it properly. It’s not going anywhere - this time, it is definitely not going anywhere, even if he has to coat his metal palm with glue for it. Maybe some kind of… sticker? Sandpaper? He gets distracted with that, clutching the ipod protectively to his chest, but when the screen goes dark from inactivity he startles and remembers he’s inside and on the ground and the worst that can happen is the ipod accidentally gets kicked under his weapons rack or something. Not that he’d ever kick it. Or drop it. He doesn’t fuck up the same way twice. He won’t.

He carefully untangles the headphones and puts them in one at a time. The main songs playlist is in alphabetical order. That’s as good a place to start as any. He wriggles his shoulders against Motherfucker’s cool inner wall and closes his eyes.

Time begins to return when his phone starts to ping. Literally no one on earth has that number, so it can only be the tracker signal tuning in and out again. Barnes lets it sit; he’s finishing up a playlist titled chillaxxx and the songs are slow and dreamy and the tracker app can wait, he was literally just there anyway -

Barnes freezes with his finger hovering over the ipod and mentally replays the last few minutes of audio.

His brain is very good at pattern matching. Despite the soft guitar and singer crooning in his ear, he identifies the last 23 pings as occurring at regularly repeating intervals. Irregular regularly repeating intervals. It can’t be caused by dropped and refound connection or GPS satellite sweep. This is something else.

Barnes scrambles up and crouches over the phone, placed on the very edge of the open hatch for signal access, impatiently scraping away the strands of hair tickling his face from the occasional cold breeze. The tracker dot is blipping in and out regularly. Something is pinging in the back of his head. He watches the dot. His brain is very good at pattern matching. And this is -

Barnes’ eyes, which had been steadily widening, narrow again. He should’ve fucking known Widow would find a way to exploit the connection - hell, this might be Rogers himself, god knows he gets tricky when he’s motivated enough. Barnes doesn’t want to set a precedent, but - well, what if Rogers has something actually important to say?

Gritting his teeth, he taps it open, types in the right number and sends out a single question mark. If Rogers starts calling he’ll just fucking hang up.

The reply comes less than thirty seconds later. It’s a video.

He can tell right away Rogers is in it, because his enormous pink face is taking up the entire preview screen. The play button is hovering directly over his nostrils. Barnes grinds his teeth some more and stabs his finger at it.

“Hey B- uh, buddy,” Rogers says immediately, and his voice goes through Barnes like a shiver, uncontrollable. “We just wanted to make sure you’re uh - up to date and stuff. Na- I mean, our friend says you’ll get what this means, so, uh, here you go,” and Steve steps out of the camera frame to reveal a familiar grinning ginger gremlin.

Widow waves cheekily at the camera, then signs mission tomorrow immediate departure combat expected heavy assault rendezvous coordinates to follow. She signs red money airborne metal combatant and insufficient. She signs requesting air support.

She winks. The video goes black, then starts to play again.

Barnes blinks a couple of times, rapidly. That’s - well, it’s not sniper duty, but he can do air support. He can definitely do air support. If he’s reading that ad-hoc sign grouping correctly then they’ll have Iron Man Tony Stark joining them, but if Widow thinks that’s not enough…

It’s probably not a ploy to draw Barnes out. For one thing, he’s reasonably sure that if Motherfucker was in any way detectable by current military technology, he’d already have been chased by at least five different air forces any time he got more than a hundred feet above sea level. If Widow just wants Barnes to come with, then… well, he’s already following them, and they already know it.

And, hell. Maybe they really do need air support. He can provide.

Typing with one finger, he taps out confirmed.

A minute passes and the signal starts to blip in and out again, this time in the long-short patterns of numbers. Barnes writes out them out as they come - Sharpie on his calf this time, hiking up his pants leg, his notebooks across the room out of his reach - then texts them copy, out just in case Rogers starts Morse coding overexcited love notes or something.

Then Barnes looks down at his leg, reads the coordinates and immediately has to slam his eyes shut as a spike of migraine-hurt stabs right behind his eyeballs. This is - this is - he is not supposed to remember. He is not supposed to remember. He shouldn’t know this. This got wiped hard, so hard it didn’t come up until Widow gave it a yank, and even now it wants to stay buried, it’s not for him, he - he -

Barnes lurches out of Motherfucker to spit and gag, landing on hands and knees on the cold cement of the parking garage roof. He loses a little time to the phantom taste of rubber on his tongue, and when he comes back he’s collapsed further onto his elbow, drooling copiously on the sleeve of his jacket. Fucking great. It’s not enough for trauma to be dangerous and disruptive and annoying, oh no, it has to be disgusting too.
Getting back on his feet takes two tries and a bout of nausea that threatens to put him right back on his ass again. He’d thought he was over this. He spent all last month un-fucking-doing this. He threw up in a bucket for a week straight. He went to South Dakota. Why is this still happening to him.

PTSD has no cure, only alleviation of symptoms. He knows this. Trauma changes the shape of the brain and all you can do is keep going and try to nudge it back. Stuff can get better for a while and then drop the fuck out again. None of this is news. He justs has to keep going.

He just has to keep fucking going. Well, al-fucking-right.

He makes sure his pants leg is down again by groping around his calf and looking determinedly in the other direction. The headache is an uncertain hurt behind his eyes, a throbbing pulse building and ebbing back again like it’s threatening him not to try that shit again. Too fucking bad.

He doesn’t need to see the coordinates again. He thinks he knows where it is but he googles it just in case, half-shielding his eyes with his hand and staying out on the pavement in case he has to hurl again. He barely sees the result - Argentina, south, on the coast - but that plus the returning stab of headache is enough to confirm he’s on the right fucking track.

He cannot go in blind. If this got wiped so thoroughly and so recently then chances are it’s big and still in operation. He will need this intel. Rogers will need this intel. Whatever’s in Barnes’ head needs to come out.

He’s never tried to pull something so recent before. The last wipe had been during the Insight mission, and that plus the roughly 72 hours on either side of it are still hazy and full of holes. It’s mostly flashes of Rogers’ bruised face interspersed with the crush of water in his lungs. He hasn’t gotten anything more back, but then again, he hasn’t pushed much at it either.

Every time he thinks it’s over, it’s not over. He should get that fucking tattooed somewhere, since he doesn’t seem to have learned it in the past seventy-odd years. He was not done fighting, he was not done being experimented on by Nazis, and he is not done throwing up.

He has to try. At least he has his method now, his weeks of practice sucker-punching his own cerebellum, horfing his guts out on three different continents. He got some pretty deep stuff out. He got Bucky’s ghost, his… sexual proclivities, his mother. He can get this too.

And if this time it doesn’t work, he’s damn well yanking out his brainstem and tying it into a tzistzis.

Barnes grimly settles in for some quality headache time with his washcloth and water bottle and bucket. This is going to be bad.

-o-

“This is awful,” Tony complains, clomping forward in his suit. It’s a little bulkier than normal, a little less stylized-streamlined, but Rhodey doesn’t care. “I feel like the Michelin Man.”

“You can feel any way you like, Tony,” Rhodey tells him placidly. He’d taken advantage of Tony’s newfound pliancy and hadn’t let Tony out of the lab until they stuck in enough shock absorbers and impact dampeners to cancel out a mid-sized asteroid strike. “Just don’t forget to thank me when your ass walks off a midair torpedo collision without a concussion.”

“You guaranteeing my collisions now, honeybear? I’ve got about four hundred people in Finance, Insurance and Legal that’d all line up to tell you how that’s a bad bet.”
“I don’t make bad bets,” Rhodey shoots back. “That’s why you’re all dolled up. Alright. Iron Patriot authorization code T286B94, Colonel James Rhodes, flight check, all systems.”

“Colonel James Rhodes authorization confirmed. All systems online,” replies the War Machine autopilot voice. It’s just the basic robot vocalizations, no fancy modulation like Jarvis has, mostly because Rhodey decided it’d be too complicated, pointless and embarrassing to program it to sound like Cortana. “Flight check complete.”

Rhodey can feel Tony rolling his eyes through the suit but doesn’t hold it against him. Tony’s been allergic to protocol since birth. “Jarvis, my buddy, you good to go?”

“Affirmative, sir. And may I say what a pleasure it is to have you joining us, Colonel Rhodes.”

“Yeah, what’s up, Jarvis,” Rhodey says. “How’re the new mods looking?”

“I wholeheartedly approve of the upgraded shock dampeners, sir.”

Tony gasps. “Betrayal! In my own suit!”

“Yeah, keep complaining about how we’re trying to keep your bones unbroken and your brain inside your skull,” Rhodey says. “It’ll definitely get you somewhere. Come on, we’ve got a drop point to get to.”

“Oooh, a drop point. Are we doing codenames? Eagle One, Eagle Two, Delta Alpha Niner Niner?”

“Those aren’t even - you - Tony, literally the whole world knows you’re Iron Man. Goat farmers in rural Turkmenistan know you’re Iron Man. They see a flying metal man go overhead, nobody’s gonna go ohh damn, I sure wonder who that was!”

“Hey, point of order, that flying metal man could be you and saying ‘rural Turkmenistan’ implies the existence of non -rural Turkmenistan,” Tony says.

“You’ve never been to Turkmenistan - ”

“- seen one ‘stan, seen ‘em all - ”

“- that’s culturally insensitive - ”

“- and I’m so sure the unique and lovely people of Turkmenistan give a shit about what one admittedly highly intelligent and dashingly handsome individual says about them on the other side of the globe.”

“They do when it’s you, and if you said it to anybody but me they’d all give a shit in a hurry.”

“You see me talking Turkmenistan with anybody else, honeybear? You think I’d do that to you? I’m hurt. I’m attacked. I am wounded and upset. I am, in fact, overcome with negative feeling, from you, my dearest, my bosom viper -”

“I’m overcome with the need for you to shut up,” Rhodey says. “We are not doing codenames. This isn’t a mission at all. We are two guys being pals, just out enjoying the - why are you laughing. What now.”

“One day I will succeed in making you a meme,” Tony gasps, his gauntlets clanking against his abdomen as he clutchesthis belly laughing in the suit. “One day. I swear it. You’re going viral.”
“I assure you I will work tirelessly to the contrary,” Rhodey says, making a mental note never to google *meme* in order to preserve what’s left of his battered internet-related innocence. “Can we just get to the launch point? Can we do that? Will that be happening to us anytime soon?”

“You only had to say the word, my darling, my endless fountain of fun,” Tony says, but Rhodey’s wise to his ways so they end up kicking off at the same time: Rhodey doesn’t do playing catch-up. The white-blue of the arc reactor combustion lights up the launch chute garage of Tony’s new Malibu playground and they blast up out of there in tandem, two gleaming metal specks disappearing into the sky.

-o-

The Stark private plane drops them at a private airfield, where they collect a jeep from an unsmiling man that Natasha hands a roll of cash to and thanks in Spanish. She drives them to another airfield, a strip of ground hacked out of the jungle somewhere in Colombia, and the plane waiting for them there is a quinjet.

It looks a little banged up and the engines aren’t the latest model, but it’s definitely a quinjet. There’s no insignia and a bunch of serial numbers have definitely been filed off, but when Natasha enters a number into the discreet keypad on its bay doors the quinjet opens up.

When Natasha told them Stark was sending a plane Sam half expected a Cessna with wings of literal solid gold, but he’s guessing this is probably about the same in exclusivity, not to mention expense. There’s a massive crate waiting for them in the hold - more of a small shipping container really - and when Natasha presses her palm over a panel near the seam it hisses open to reveal several smaller crates inside.

Three of them is just weapons: rifles, handguns, explosives. Another has body armor, and a fifth one is full of what looks like coveralls, made of dull grey material with the SHIELD logo stamped on the arms. “Armored hazmat suits,” Natasha says. “Nice.”

“Bulletproof?” Sam asks.

“No, but holds up against mild to moderate stabbing. Body armor goes underneath.” She shows them the vacuum seal activation points at the neck and wrists and ankles and then teaches them how to strip the SHIELD patches off without compromising the integrity of the suit fabric. There’s headgear too; they look more like motorcycle helmets than anything else, but Sam’s just gonna trust that they’re actual hazmat gear and not discount motorbike helmets some SHIELD/Stark intern painted the right color.

“We have - ” Natasha checks her phone - “two hours before takeoff. Suit up.”

“And then?” Steve says.

“Then we wait to see if Colonel Rhodes is joining us or if we’re taking the quinjet all on our own.”

“When will we know?”

“About an hour from now.”

“How will we know.”

Natasha rolls her eyes. “When they do a loop-the-loop as they fly over our heads. We’ll get a transmission, Rogers. They’re flying in from Malibu, when they cross the Yucatan they’ll give us a ping. We’ll fall in behind.”
“Alright,” Steve says, a little dubiously. Sam examines his hazmat coverall, looks down at his jeans and starts stripping them off; after a glance over at him Steve does too. Natasha shucks down to what looks like a short-sleeved neoprene surf suit and gets the coveralls to her waist, going to the other side of the container to pick out body armor and start strapping it on.

Steve drifts after her. “Bucky’s not here,” he says, in what he probably thinks is a subdued tone.

“He’ll show up,” Natasha says, unperturbed.

“What, once we’re in the air?”

“I’m not worried about it,” she says, in a tone that strongly suggests Steve shouldn’t be either. Steve opens his mouth, thinks better of it and then starts looking around the cabin like he’s expecting Barnes to already be hidden onboard, disguised as a seat cushion or something.

“Oh, and Wilson,” Natasha says, turning around in the container. “There’s a care package for you.”

Sam has a very confused moment where he wonders how on earth his momma got the coordinates, means and clearance to send him something all the way the fuck out here before his brain checks back in again and reminds him to stop being crazy. Natasha plants her foot on one of the sleek silver crates and gives it a shove, sending it sliding over to Sam’s feet.

It’s about four by four feet, sturdy metal with a biometric panel on the top. He presses his palm to it. WILSON SAMUEL T scrolls across the readout, right next to a sharp little STARK INDUSTRIES in the corner. It is not from his mom. It’s from Tony Stark.

“Oh, sweet Moses,” Sam breathes as the crate beeps, whirs and unfolds itself under his hand, revealing a very familiar bodypack, gauntlets and stability boots. He doesn’t even care that Tony Stark somehow has his DNA. “My babies, I have missed you. Come to papa.”

-o-

When the memory finally breaks, it hits a little bit like a crowbar to the throat. Barnes’ eyes snap open. “Oh no,” he manages aloud.

-o-

When the Yucatan coast on the Gulf starts to approach on their horizon Tony activates the transmission to link them up with Widow and Wilson and Rogers. There’s a little beep as it patches through. “Hello, strangers,” Tony says jovially. “We’re Tin Can Man and the Iron Band -” Rhodey imagines he sees the back of his own skull as his eyes roll - “and we’ve come to invite you to a very special party!”

“We accept,” comes Romanova’s dry, familiar voice over the radio. “Switching to individual comms, frequency one two two point five. I’m gonna go waaaaay out on a limb and assume you’ve got access to Stark encryption.”

“You know what, I’m just not sure, let me check,” Tony says, and Rhodey opens up a new comm group on the right frequency before this can turn into late night standup. “Closed channel, this War Machine, do you copy.”

“Copy, War Machine, this is Cap,” comes Rogers’ voice. “Comms check, sound off.”

“Widow, copy.”
“Falcon, copy.”

“Hey, Wilson, how’d the test flight go?” Tony says cheerfully, because he was put on this earth to make Rhodey’s doctor continuously up the dosage on his blood pressure medication. “You did do a test flight, right? You really should have, we didn’t have time to.”

“Iron Man copies,” Rhodey says wearily. “Ask about his flappy wings later, Tony.”

“You love his flappy wings,” Tony retorts. “You spent hours on his flappy wings. You redesigned the entire intake mechanism in one afternoon for those flappy wings.”

There’s a little dying-gerbil wheeze from Wilson’s channel. “War Machine built these wings?”

“Oh, you know, we had some time to kill, we were tooling around in the lab a little,” Tony says airily. “Your project happened to be at hand. Rhodey wanted to get his hands dirty.”

“Thank you sir,” Wilson says, a little strangled. There’s muffled snickering in the background, most likely of the Captain America and Black Widow variety. “I will take extra care not to crash now sir.”

“Don’t mention it,” Rhodey says. “I’m happy to help.”

“I did do a test flight sir. They handle really - dream. Like a good. Like a dream. A - good one.”

“Yes, thank you Falcon,” Rhodey says, trying his best to mercy kill this conversation, for both their sakes. “Jet’s all fueled up? Got the coordinates?”

“We are airborne and ready to go,” Widow confirms. “Take point, we’re right behind you.”

“Roger. War Machine out,” Rhodey says, rolling his eyes at Tony’s hasta la vista, ‘vengers! as he adjusts his course and points them to the south.

-o-

There’s one text on Barnes’ phone. T minus 30 minutes to opsec comms blackout. It’s from thirty-five minutes ago.

Great. He’s sweaty and shaky and he’s got to get to Chile and figure out how to find Rogers, let alone join his op without shitting his pants. Shitting all of their pants. He wonders how the hell he’s going to signal to them he’s a friendly, if nobody’s seen his ship before and the only established point of Barnes-Rogers contact is now under comms blackout.

Fuck it. He’ll stick his arm out the back hatch and wave if he has to. He’ll cross that bridge when he gets there, he just has to get there first.

Barnes lurches up and plants himself over the console. The ship lights up around him. He fumbles the headphones of the ipod back into his ears and hits play, on the basis that he’s going to need all the help he can get. It’s a good thing the stratosphere has no posted speed limit. Motherfucker is going to love this.

-o-

They’re approximately twenty miles out from target when things start going sideways, though the situation is not immediately apparent as such. “Oh, hey,” Tony says on their private channel. “Somebody’s pinging me.”
Rhodey frowns at his HUD, checking his proximity sensors. Nothing. “On what?”

“IFF receiver. No code, just a flat ping.”

Rhodey’s frown deepens. The IFF system is used by Americans and some NATO countries, but it’s a privately manufactured technology so it’s definitely not out of the question that someone else has bought it. “I’m not reading anything on radar.”

“Me neither. Must be a long-distance call.”

“What’s the - I’m getting it now too.” Rhodey frowns at the pulsing light on his HUD. “Send Iron Patriot ID,” he orders his autopilot, frown deepening at the failed query marker he gets in reply. “I’m getting nothing, they’re not receiving. Tony?”

“How’re they pinging but not receiving?” Tony mutters, thinking aloud. “It’s a closed system. Their shit might be broken, I don’t know. There’s like twenty reasons they might not be able to… hell, the system’s old as fuck, the last goddamn patent for it was filed in nineteen-forty-three.”

“Hail them,” Rhodey decides, because if they’re being pinged then that could anything from a clumsy civilian SOS to something military giving them a polite heads up to an incoming fuck you. It’s international airspace, but who knows what the fuck is happening these days. “Try the… one-twenty-one point five, that’s the civilian international air distress frequency.”

“Yeah, okay - welcome to buttfuck nowhere, thirty thousand feet and climbing, this is Iron Man speaking.” Tony says, a new channel chiming open. “We don’t take orders, questions or requests, stranger danger, but wanna tell us why you’re - ”

“What doesn’t kill you makes you stroooonger,” blares out of the comm, and the rest of Tony’s sentence is lost in pounding noise.

Rhodey jerks a little in the suit, flight path wobbling, before he realizes it’s a song. There’s a rhythm there, and a melody; it’s pretty badly distorted, but it’s definitely someone shouting over what sounds like two guitars dogfighting in a recording studio.

“Is that music?” Tony yells over the horrible noise. “Oh my god, is that Kelly Clarkson?”

Of course Tony knows what it’s called. It sounds a lot like the country nonsense one of Rhodey’s teenage cousins plays to drive her mom crazy. “Shut it off,” Rhodey yells. “Close the damn - thank you. Civilians,” he swears. “Some jackass in a private plane thinks he’s funny.”

“And that’s the international air distress frequency?” Tony says indignantly. "What a dick.”

“Don’t act like that wouldn’t have been you fifteen years ago,” Rhodey says. “Some ass got bored and decided to screw around. He’s probably probably not even airborne, I got nothing on radar still.”

“Me neither,” Tony admits reluctantly. “Probably on a yacht down there. Damn, why didn’t I think of that back in the bad old days? I had all the military frequencies, I could’ve been having the time of my life serenading pilots with my Celine Dion karaoke remixes - ”

The jet materializes out of nowhere. Literally. One second, just air between him and Tony. The next second: huge ass fucking WHAT -

“Scatter!” Rhodey bellows at Tony, but Tony’s already rolling, thank god, the two of them peeling off fast, and Rhodey reflexively fires off a volley of microrockets on the basis that anything materializing over your shoulder at five hundred miles per hour is probably not there to
be friendly about it.

If he was wrong, it doesn’t matter. The thing - the jet - does a tight, effortless barrel roll, and somehow that sends the rockets flipping right over it, the jet dropping down to reveal Tony on the other side. Luckily Tony also fired, and since they’d both dropped into evasive maneuvers the rockets mostly just shred each other over the hull of the jet. Something about the rockets’ projectile trajectory seems off to Rhodey, something not right, but he can’t focus on that because a fucking jet just appeared between them and it’s keeping pace with their suits and if it didn’t show up on Tony’s sensors then -

“What the fuck is that,” Tony says, a lot breathless and a little high pitched. “Rhodey, are you seeing this, what the fuck is that.”


“Copy, Cap, we got a bogey,” Rhodey says tightly, rolling to make sure he can see Tony, matching his scatter flight pattern. “Unidentified jet just dropped out of nowhere, didn’t show up on the scans, don’t recognize the model - ”

“Hostile?”

“No promises,” Tony says grimly.

“We fired at it but it hasn’t sent anything back,” Rhodey says.

“Nothing hit either,” Tony says, in the tones of a man planning to change that.

“Cap, be advised, go dark until situation with unidentified aircraft is resolved,” Rhodey rattles off. “Stay back, do not engage. Don’t let them know there’s a quinjet up here too.”

“Do you need backup?” Rogers asks.

“Not… yet,” Rhodey decides. The jet’s in front of them now, Tony and Rhodey slowing thanks to their evasive maneuvers, and while it’s definitely a jet it doesn’t look like any plane on the market, military or otherwise. It’s got stubby wings and no visible windshield or windows, the body an odd sort of wedge shape with a smooth near-featureless matte hull; if Rhodey had to call it he’d say it looks kind of like that one NASA scramjet prototype, except the wings are upside down, it’s big enough to hold passengers and if that’s not a supersonic intake turbine Rhodey will eat the entirety of his metal-booted, jet-propulsion-enabled, three hundred thousand dollar foot. But it’s not doing anything. It’s just, well. Flying.

As they watch, it clumsily waggles its wings side to side a little. Almost like it’s… waving them hello?

“Wait,” Rhodey says slowly, incredulously. “Wait. Did we just get buzzed?”

“Oh my god,” Tony says, realizing, rapturous. “Oh my god. Ohhh my dear jesus god, they’re pulling a me - okay, alright, Stranger Danger, it’s no ACDC, but points for recognizing great style - ”

The jet does another neat little barrel roll and pulls back between them, shaving a couple feet off its altitude so Rhody and Tony can still see each other over its top. It doesn’t fly like anything Rhodey’s ever seen, and there isn’t a straight line anywhere on the ship save for the sharp flat tip of its nose. It’s dark, matte, metal, and it’s - changing: its hull almost seems to be moving, rippling, gold tracery flitting briefly over its metal skin, like circuits done in calligraphy.
A windshield appears out of what was previously a featureless blank plane, the matte suddenly rippling into glass, and as it clears Rhodey can just make out a humanoid figure at the controls. No: he can make out - *an entire silver arm* -

“No fucking way,” he swears aloud. “Tony. Tony. Look at the -”

“No way,” Tony breathes, then starts cackling like a witch. “Hey Cap!” he calls gleefully, switching comm channels. “Your boy is here and he’s a fan!”

“What?”

“James B. Barnes, Steve-o! You never said he was cool!”

“He what - he’s on the plane? How - ”

“He’s the pilot!” Tony’s still laughing. “ Came up out of nowhere, buzzed us in the *sweetest* looking jet, seriously, where did he get that, between this and the arm it’s like he’s *trying* to make me jealous - ”

“He’s got his own goddamn ride,” Rhodey says, still processing. “Jesus, where is he refueling that thing?”

“And what a sweet, sweet ride it is. I’m saying hi,” Tony says, and switches comm channels before Rhodey can tell him no.

The music blares back on, and Rhodey suddenly realizes it’s *Barnes* out here emitting the tortured screams of Kelly Clarkson wailing from hell. “Yo!” Tony shouts. “Winter Wonderpants! You’re on an SOS line, and while I admit playing hasbeen American Idol country *does* qualify as a cry for help - ”

“Tony,” Rhodey says tightly, raising his voice to be heard over the blare of *WHAT DOESN’T KILL YOU MAKES A FIIIIGHTER, FOOTSTEPS EVEN LIIII-IGHTER* . “He still might be hostile, for all we know the guy’s brains are cream cheese - ”

“Can’t be, he’s flying a plane,” Tony says reasonably. “C’mon, Scary McNightmare, clear the channel, don’t make me resort to skywriting - ”

The music stutters, repeating over itself briefly like a glitching record, then dissolves entirely into noise. Rhodey winces away from his in-suit microphones because the resulting static now somehow sounds wet, a horrible grinding *kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk*i’m aaaaa a fff ff ffffriendlyyyyyyyyyssshhhhhsssssssiiiiii’s a friendly a friendly howwwww do I tell tell telllllllssshowwww doesss thissssss thinggg evennnn hhhaaa ve radio, christ,” and Rhodey has to fight the urge to smack himself on the ear with his hand mid-flight. His ears and brain and comm systems are *really* not happy with the way the horrible garbled static somehow rescrambles itself into a *voice*.

“Sweet mother of all radio malfunctions, Rhodey are you hearing this,” Tony says. “Yo! Barnes! Do you read me!”

More pressingly, Rhodey is looking right at his audio feeds and now his suit can’t even tell him which comm channel this shit is coming from. He’s getting the StarkOS equivalent of a *404 error*. “Unnamed aircraft, you are well within minimum separation distance,” he tries, raising his voice over the noise. “Requesting identification. Do you copy?”

There’s a sudden, abrupt moment of silence, then - “You can *hear me*?” the voice demands, shocked, and there’s a sudden wash of that horrible wet static again. In front of them, the jet does
a highly undignified wobble, which doesn’t sound impressive until you think about the physics involved in doing that at an airborne four hundred miles per hour. The comm spits out what sounds a lot like $kkkkkkKKKKkkkkffffffuckfuckfuckffffffhhhhhshshssss$ before it abruptly cuts off into silence.

Rhodey’s ears ring. In front of them the jet almost seems to - flicker, like it’s about to disappear the way it came, but it stays. “Tony. Tell me you got that.”

“Yeah, I did, and I only have one question: what the fuck just happened,” Tony announces.

“Jarvis, speak to me.”

“There appears to be radio interference manifesting in audio waves, sir.”

“No shit, J, I could’ve told you that, my ears could’ve told you that. Is this ambient, targeted, what? Cap, are you getting this?”

Rogers cuts in already yelling as Tony flicks his channel open. “- don’t care if - Iron Man? Do you copy? What’s your status?”

“Are you hearing this?” Tony demands. “This fucking Top Gun Silent Hill shit with a side of Kelly Clarkson country? Your boy is playing some weird ass shit and I can’t imagine it’s for us, so - ”

“What? No, we’re - there’s nothing like that, and don’t shut off our comm again, we need to -”

Rhodey makes an executive decision and clicks off both their channels, arcing his flight path just a little closer, pulling up cautiously alongside the jet until he can see the glint of that metal arm again. “We can hear you,” he tries, in his best nobody-better-freak-out-on-me voice. It’s probably not worth mentioning that Mister Winter Soldier’s radio here sounds like it needs a fucking exorcism. “You are hailing Iron Patriot of the United States. This is international airspace. You are inside the minimum safe aircraft separation distance. Do you copy?”

For a couple seconds Rhodey thinks no dice, but suddenly the sickly crackling blows back into his audio feeds and he gets a faceful of $kkhhhhhhhhhhssshshsssssnmmmmnno no no nnnnooo wwwwant want know knowwwwww iiiiiII I copy.” The distortion resolves into a voice just as freakishly as before. “I copy. I copy.”

“This is Colonel James Rhodes of the United States Air Force,” Rhodey says, proud of the way none of his wince shows up in his voice. “Am I correct in that I am addressing - Sergeant James Barnes?”

This burst of static is louder but mercifully much shorter, like being smacked in the eardrum with a tuning fork instead of a wrench. And this time Rhodey hears him clearly: “I - guess,” Barnes says, rough and a little faint but no longer sounding like the voice of a possessed coffee grinder. “How - did you know?”

“I can see your arm through the windshield,” Rhodey tells him. “It’s... distinctive.”

As he speaks he realizes the pilot figure is looking right at him, a dark head on a dark-clothed body with the only light coming from the bright silver arm. They’re above the cloud layer, everything around seared in superatmospheric sunlight; Rhodey can’t make out much, just a vague suggestion of deep eyesockets and a full beard. It doesn’t look anything like the pale, solemn face that used to stare out of Rhodey’s history textbooks, but to hear Tony tell it the guy’s quite literally been through hell and Rhodey can’t fault him for not looking like a pouty-faced movie star anymore.
Christ, what’s the protocol for talking to an American war hero turned brainwashed assassin ghost story? “Look,” Rhodey tries, figuring being coy isn’t going to win him anything. “Without sounding like too much of an asshole, what the hell are you doing here?”

“Air support,” Barnes says, sounding pretty confused, static creeping at the edges of his voice again. “Widow - asked?”

So this is what Romanova had up her sleeve. “Right,” Rhodey says. “And you showed up. In a jet.”

“I don’t know what the minimum aircraft separation distance is. But. I won’t crash into you.”

“Well, great,” Rhodey says, just as Tony zooms ahead of them and does a loop-de-loop to get their attention. “Yeah, Iron Man, what,” Rhodey says tightly, opening the comm again.

“Sugartits, what the hell, I leave you alone ten seconds and you’re flirting off without me,” Tony says. “How’re you doing, Sergeant Cyborg? We haven’t met but hi, I’m Tony Stark, and I can already tell you we have a beautiful relationship ahead of us.”

“Hold off on the proposals,” Rhodey says. “Sergeant, you… what did Widow tell you?”

“She said, come help. And I - ”

“How’d you find us?” Tony interrupts. “We’re radar shielded, show up on most systems as a couple of really ugly birds and we damn well don’t have registered flight plans. So how’d you know?”

“You showed up,” Barnes says uncertainly. “I - saw you?”

“So you just pop in out of nowhere?”

“I just found you,” Barnes says, sounding confused.

“A little warning would’ve been nice,” Rhodey admits, because having this thing just fucking appear before him has definitely shaved some time off his life.

“Yeah, yeah, maybe ping us before you pop up literally six feet away,” Tony says. “More importantly, how’d you pop up? Thermoreflective shielding, mirror panels, what?”

“I don’t know,” Barnes says, the bewilderment rapidly growing into annoyance. It’s a common symptom of interacting with Tony Stark. “I didn’t even know this thing had radio.”

“This thing? What is this thing, exactly.”

“It’s - I don’t know,” Barnes repeats, this time like he cut himself off at the last second. “I. I call it Motherfucker.”

“Motherfucker,” Tony says, equal parts indignant and in love.


“You want - what, our mission briefing?” Rhodey says, a little incredulous.

“The base. It has ground-to-air systems designed to combat the Iron Man weapon,” Barnes continues, like he didn’t hear him. “I remember. 2012. There was - that was the goal. This was a weapons development division.”
“How do you know?” Tony says.

Barnes swallows audibly, the static rising again. If Rhodey didn’t know better he’d say the quality of the audio directly correlated to Barnes’ mood. “This was - the last place they held me,” he says. “HYDRA.”

Rhodey frowns. He knew the intel around this was never great to start with but it’s never fun finding out it’s even worse than he thought. “On a ship?”

“Off the coast. These coordinates. I - remember. Let me take point,” Barnes says. “It could be - bad. Please.”

Rhodey wishes he could exchange looks with Tony, but he settles for turning his head and seeing the Iron Man helmet also turned facing his way. “Look,” he says. “Sergeant Barnes, there are unknown hazardous materials onboard -”

“And we’re trying real hard not to poison the fishies,” Tony says. “Or, y’know, dump potentially self-evolving biological agents into the water. That’s why they sent us in the first place.”

“So we’re grateful for the assist, but we have to take point,” Rhodey says.

Barnes makes a frustrated noise, or maybe that’s just his radio fizzling at them again. “I can help,” he says, in a tone that might have been plaintive on someone with a greater emotional range. Or any emotional range at all, really. “You don’t know what they have. I have shields. I can help,” he repeats, like they didn’t hear him the first time.

“I understand,” Rhodey says, trying to figure out the most diplomatic way to tell the Winter Soldier, Sergeant Bucky Barnes, to sit tight and look pretty while they handle it, not least because the guy has a magic jet and by all accounts isn’t the most mentally stable. He also needs to figure out a way to convince him to stick around anyway, because the whole damn world is chasing him hell for leather without success and here he’s just practically delivered himself to Rhodey’s lap. And they’re, you know, a little busy, but afterward Rhodey would damn well not say no to figuring out just what the hell is going on here, and he opens his mouth to take a stab at that just as a massive blue flash of light explodes from below.

“Oh shit,” is what comes out, and Rhodey dives.

-0-

Barnes doesn’t have time to think, just lurches them forward, dropping Motherfucker’s nose so the beam hits him head on instead of Iron Man and War Machine above him. The light breaks over him in a blinding flash and for a second he braces, but all that happens is the ship shuddering all over like a boat rocked by a big wave on the sea. Motherfucker’s ! ! ! ! shrills briefly, but whatever the shields are, they hold.

“What the hell was that!” echoes through the ship: Rhodes. “Barnes, are you hit? Tony - what the hell was that, we should be out of range -”

“I told you they’re experimenting out here!” Barnes snarls, for the moment forgetting all about the nightmare of Motherfucker literally reading his mind now and fucking broadcasting it directly like the world’s worst radio show. He’s not hesitating or uncertain anymore; once the bullets start flying he never is. Another light flash comes from below, this one aimed right at him, and Barnes dodges just in time. He itches to go invisible again, but he can’t: if he disappears now he makes War Machine and Iron Man the only targets in the sky. “Get out of here. I’ll handle this.”
“We can’t just - fuck,” Rhodes shouts, spiralling wildly out of the way of another light beam.  

“What’s going on,” Rogers’ voice booms, and for once it doesn’t make Barnes twitch and shiver. He can’t even be grateful for it, though, because it’s most likely due to the fact that he’s in an active firefight. “We saw a light flash -”  

“We’re being shot at,” Stark says shortly. “With some nasty fucking shit, if I’m right, which I always am. Did that light look blue to you, War Machine?”  

“Yeah -”  

“Tesseract weapons,” Stark says grimly, and a sour taste floods Barnes’ mouth, his vision suddenly flashing with cold, crystalline blue. “Remember those, Cap? I watched them decommission that helicarrier set you found, but hey, who wants to bet Fury lied to my face and SHIELDRA’S been all over that shit anyway for the past two years -”  


“Not Barnes,” Rhodes says. “He took the blast head-on, he’s still here.”  

“What?” Rogers snaps, and Barnes could very well put his face in his hands right here and now. “Bucky? He’s -”  

“All of you, pull back,” Barnes snarls, abso-fucking-lutely stickaforkinit done. “I have shields, I’ll fucking handle this, you - you can - you can go pirouetting in once I’ve blown their fucking heads off.”  

“Bucky,” Rogers says, the way devout people sometimes say God, and Barnes actually, physically finds himself throwing his hands up like his - his - his mother, okay, brain, now is not the time. “Shut up. Shut up.” His breath is coming in harsh pants, uneven. “Don’t - don’t. I’m doing it. ‘Cause you can’t. So shut up about it.”  

“You heard him,” comes the Widow’s voice. Thank god, she understands: she knows what he’s for, clearing the way for more breakable personnel to come in behind him. “He’s got the equipment, let him clear it.”  

“Yeah, Rogers, save the domestics for the afterparty,” Stark says.  

“If I - if anything happens, Bucky -”  

“Rogers I will beat your ass myself,” comes Wilson’s voice. “Let the man do his job so we can do ours.”  

“Go,” Barnes says when he can talk again. “Get out of range. I’m doing this,” and luckily thinking something like no I don’t want to talk anymore gives Motherfucker the hint to cut the radio off into blessed silence.  

It gave him radio. There he was, circling Chile like a chump until Motherfucker registered two flying metal specks and told him about it, and he really did think he’d have to open the back hatch and wave his arms at them just as their voices seemed to come from either inside his head or from every part of Motherfucker at once. Maybe there’s no difference anymore.  

And Motherfucker’s still trying to show him information about it, with more insistent enthusiasm than he’s come to expect. Barnes grits his teeth. He usually tries not to pay too much attention to the windshield-dashboard data influx when he’s flying, because at best it’s like trying to drink from a firehose, and thank god Motherfucker got the point and dialed it down after their first
couple of flights because otherwise he’d probably be blind. But now it’s caught on that he’s in a combat situation, that he’s being fired on, and it’s pretty insistently trying to give him information he’s not sure he can even receive.

“Ow,” Barnes finally snaps, for lack of a word that conveys whatever you’re trying to jerry-rig into my brain feels like trying to open an umbrella in a tube sock and should PROBABLY NOT BE HAPPENING. “Square peg round hole, pal, whatever the fuck you’re doing I am not getting it, it’s not happening, knock it the fuck off. aaaaaaaaaahh ohmmyyjjjesus shitting god fuck!”

Something - happens. It’s that feeling of circuit completed again, except this time instead of sticking his fingers in the metaphorical light socket he’s got all four limbs wrapped around a lightning rod and it’s going straight through his heart. For a moment it’s like his spine is liquefying, and then - perimeter, gravity, atmospheric, heatsink, discharge - all shielding systems online - 32/41 sensors operational - cycle completed. No network uplink. !!!!!!!!

“Glurrgh,” Barnes says. He has - six engines. No, he has legs. Two legs. Two legs, two arms, two lungs, two response cores and a - start over. !!!!!!! Try again. Atmosphere rippling over his hull. The Iron Man suits are two energy-metal specks abovebehind him. Would he like their elemental composition breakdown? His hands are on the console. The console is in his head. He is fully biolinked and ready to respond -

“Glah,” Barnes gasps, throwing himself backward onto the floor.

This time, the ship stays linked. The datastreams mute themselves but the connection stays live, they stay airborne, and he can still feel everything. It doesn’t exactly hurt, but it doesn’t feel great to suddenly have a - another body, a body that isn’t a body, with silicon nerves and metal skin and approximately sixty new senses he didn’t have before and couldn’t name if his life depended on it. His brain feels soggy. His skin - his real skin, he pats himself - is tingling. It wasn’t like that before. It wasn’t that complete before.

The whole ship shudders as another blast strikes the shields, the energy dissipating in crackling streams over the hull. The tingling intensifies in a wave over Barnes’ body and he curls up involuntarily, twitching.

“Barnes?” echoes through the ship. “Barnes, come in. You’re not moving.”

Barnes coughs, shuts his eyes and focuses on Rhodes’ voice. “Fine,” he grits out, and he can feel how it echoes down the connection and out through the ship and into radio waves, this time with his hands nowhere near the console. “I’m fine. Technical…difficulties.”

“Copy. We’re out of range,” Rhodes says, only a little reluctantly. “Whatever you’ll be doing, do it quick. I give it twenty minutes before we get civilians trying to investigate the light show.”

“Copy,” Barnes repeats hoarsely, rolling over and forcing himself on all fours. He needs to take out their - artillery, their lasers, whatever the hell this is. Their offensive weapons. That goes first. He knows how to do this. If you don’t have the element of surprise, destroy their offense. Then: the comms tower. The engines. Don’t let them call for help or run away. This is familiar. This is what he does. He’s still right here, no matter what kind of terrifying new protocols just got shoved into his brain.

Motherfucker thinks it’s finally managed to fix a, a faulty connection. A bug. It thinks parts of its navigational module have finally recovered functionality even if he’s returning baseline scans [null] [null] [null] empty set. No match. Establish new baseline?

“You have the worst timing,” Barnes snarls at Motherfucker, who pings back with a query series
that basically boils down to it has no idea what it’s done wrong but it’s very multiple status checks worried about him. He’s in the middle of heightened bioelectrical activity combat, they’ve only just managed to complete neural uplink get him fully online, was he organic processes interrupted hurt?

“Go fuck yourself,” Barnes snaps, shoving himself up and back over to the console. Motherfucker is overjoyed, or, at least, that’s how “optimal operational criteria met” is translating. His ipod is still lying on the console where he dropped it; he yanked out the headphones the second Rhodes started speaking back to him. Barnes wipes his streaming eyes on his shoulder, pockets the ipod and only hesitates for a second before putting his palms down again.

The whole windshield datastream nightmare unfolds in front of him, just in time for him to jolt the ship backwards out of the way of another energy beam. He gets himself invisible with a flick of a thought and then takes them up, over, hovering directly above the distant dim grey shape of the boat. He squeezes his eyes shut for a long second, blinks fast and opens them again.

The entire bay below is lit up like a tinsel tree, an aura of light almost like a dome centered around the one flat barge ship floating in place. Parts of it are highlighted, vibrating gold and blue in Barnes’ vision - his... brain, perception, whatever - and those aren’t bad colors but they aren’t good colors either, no nice safe grey. The dome itself is pale gold, a thin film of light in a perfect half sphere sinking into the water - but there are other lights, under the dome, pulsing a deep, nasty orange.

It’s a whole fucking light show down there, and it... doesn’t quite match up to the actual... ship.

Barnes drops a few hundred feet, getting closer to the dome. They’ve stopped firing now that the Iron Men are gone and Barnes is invisible, but that means between the glow and the general clutter he can’t tell where the weapons are, or make out distinct physical features of the ship. The aura of the dome is rendering itself in his vision, too, information coming in from Motherfucker, more detailed the closer they get. He can tell it’s energy readings and possibly measurements but that’s as far as his understanding goes - focusing on the data just makes the tingling intensify, and symbols start appearing in his vision and on some of the flat console screens, but getting biolinked or whatever the fuck hasn’t magically given him the ability to read alien. He’s not as compatible as Motherfucker clearly thinks he is.

There’s a crackling noise and a buzzing vibration that makes Barnes startle. They kept drifting down for the seconds he wasn’t paying attention and now the flat wedge tip of Motherfucker’s nose is - touching the dome, the interaction between energy fields making little zzipzzzzzip noises.

On an impulse that can barely be called a hunch, he pushes them down another ten feet, passing entirely through the surface of the haze.

The view of the bay under the dome is very different from the one above it, but Barnes can’t care about that. The second they passed through something dinged hard on the sensors and Motherfucker painted it an orange so deep it’s almost red. It’s right below him, glowing so sharp it’s hard to actually see, but Motherfucker knows it’s there and it really doesn’t like it.

Barnes drops them down closer, then closer again. It doesn’t resolve; when he squints and tries to ignore the glow all he can see is dull grey sea.

There’s something under the water.

If they almost went to space they can handle a little submarine time. Barnes takes a deep breath on automatic and drops them nose-first under the waves.
Visibility goes fast, but Barnes is following the hard orange glow projecting outwards into his eyes from his brain. It sharpens as he gets closer, like it’s coming into focus - he can feel Motherfucker’s sensors processing more data, rendering the information as it comes in. More symbols blossom and scroll in the corners of his vision; he can feel a subtle rearrangement run through the internal systems of the ship, a reaction to his intent and his environment, just like when he’d been trying to figure out how to reach out to War Machine and Iron Man and it fucking… grew itself some kind of radio.

The orange light flares as they pass some invisible threshold, and Motherfucker’s !!!!! goes shrill again. Barnes pulls to a hard stop and eases them back. The sensors are still rendering: Motherfucker can tell he’s focused on the light now and it’s pulling more, mapping… something for him.

It lowers the intensity of the orange highlight, letting him see a dim outline of something that looks like a dark, rounded cube sort of pod. He thinks it might actually be glowing, but it’s hard to tell between Motherfucker’s helpful lights and the drift of silt and particulates in the water. Motherfucker’s visualization gets clearer; more light snakes away in what looks like a sort of pipe, and further up it branches, streams leading away into the complicated cluster of a ship. That’s untangling itself now, as Motherfucker tracks the energy, faster and faster as it understands what he wants to be looking at, and Barnes sees the orange light go through node points and then… diffuse somehow, into a thin regular film -

He looks back down at the pulsing orange pod just below him. It’s what’s powering the energy field up there, the glittering dome.

Well. Barnes has no real idea what it’s for, but he’s pretty goddamn sure he should get rid of it.

He briefly studies the pod. Motherfucker excitedly reports what it’s made of - alloy/alloy/silicon/alloy/fluctuating waveparticle component - and tries to map it for him in six dimensions. Barnes ignores all of that and imagines the nasty little nugget detonating like cartoon dynamite.

This time he feels it happening, the microsecond one-two query series that Motherfucker bounces off to make sure target yes power yes confirm yes he means it and then all six engines cycle up and cascade something like sheet lightning over the - the hull of the ship, the whole thing is conductive, the beam coalescing from the fields around the hull. Of course Barnes never found any gun barrels, the entire damn thing is the gun -

The blast knocks them ass over teakettle. Motherfucker pinwheels through the water, engines shrilling as the shields get hammered by pressure waves of that orange thing gone nova. So much for the fishies, Barnes thinks hysterically, and then thanks his erratically lucky stars for the stabilized gravity as the underwater explosion bats them around like a pinball. He has to squeeze his eyes shut on the cartwheeling information of his windshield display but he doesn’t need to see to fly.

He gets Motherfucker to find atmosphere and go there. He should probably see what the hell he just blew up.

-o-

They’re at an angle and approximately two miles above sea level when the thermals light up. “There goes Barnes,” Rhodey says, watching a ripple of heat blossom on his HUD. That’s expected: what he doesn’t expect is for the ripple to cut off, never expanding into anything like a full-blown explosion. A second later a small shockwave registers on the stabilizers. “What was that?” Rhodey demands. They’re just far up enough that they can still see the ship, especially with
the HUD zoom enhancement: it’s a little grey dot far, far below. “He just hit something, but -”

“ - why can’t we see anything,” Tony says under his breath, the voice he gets when he’s slamming through hypotheses one after another, discarding outcomes almost as fast as he models them. “We saw the heat, there was heat, but then - did we just see an exothermic reaction just stop? Is that what happened? Jarvis, run the model, is that even fucking possible?”

“We’re going back down there,” Rhodey decides, cutting his arm thrusters to start cutting altitude. He’s a big fan of the guess and check method. “Cap, stay high, we’re going down for a flyby -”

There’s a noise that sounds a lot like FOOM, and the next shockwave that registers on the stabilizers can in no way be described as little.

“Not even a fucking whisper,” Tony breathes. Rhodey knows he’s been watching his sensor arrays. “Just fucking. Boom. Look at this, Rhodey, are you seeing this? I only picked up a blip in the last two seconds before detonation and that was the bombs, that wasn’t him, madre de Dios this is giving me an erection.”

“Maybe save that for the afterparty,” Rhodey grunts, but he’s mostly busy making sure their drop doesn’t turn into freefall. They’ve shed altitude fast, fast enough that they’re barely a mile up when below them the entire bay seems to - flicker? Something pops out of the water like a champagne cork just as the surface erupts into steam, the ocean boiling over, and Rhodey would assume that to be Barnes and track it except - that’s not a barge down there anymore. That’s not just one ship down there anymore.

Rhodey pulls up short and stares. Tony hisses a breath through his teeth, swerving up beside him. “That is not human tech.”

“That’s a warship,” Rhodey breathes, shocked cold. He knew HYDRA were domestic terrorists, Americans committing treason, but it’s still a kick to the gut to see what could be the goddamn USS Tripoli down there. “That is more than one - Rogers, come in hot, we need backup. They had some kind of illusion up. It’s not one ship, it’s five. Tony - flank ‘em.”

“Eighty seconds out,” Widow reports. “Did you say illusion?”

“Visual shield, camouflage, whatever,” Rhodey says. “Barnes blew it to kingdom come.”

“Blew up something,” Barnes mutters, his voice cutting in crystal clear. Apparently his radio frequency is summoned by saying his name. “Colonel. Rhodes. I have a - energy map. The transport ship, far left. Something bad under the hull.”

Rhodey zeroes in on the transport ship, a massive catamaran with a helicopter flight deck that looks like it sailed straight out of goddamn Mobile, Alabama. “Alright,” he says. “Designating targets Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo, left to right starting with the barge. Delta and Echo, that’s the destroyers -”

“Look what they’ve got mounted on the deck,” Tony says urgently. “The - barge, the big flat one, Alpha boat, whatever. That’s a railgun and it’s pointed at land, we need to hit that first.”

“Alright, we take Alpha target, you three on Delta and Echo,” Rhodey agrees. “Widow, Falcon, Cap, we need the command towers and the engine rooms. Take out personnel but keep them alive where possible. We’re going in to seize the ships and find out what they’ve got here. Anybody gets any useful intel, speak up, and remember we’re dealing with hazmat, for god’s sake keep projectiles to a minimum and nobody blow anything up.”

“Copy,” Rogers agrees tightly, Widow and Falcon echoing him, and a moment later Wilson
zooms in out of the sky and drops Cap onto Alpha target, the central flat-barge ship. The quinjet lands on the opposite side of the deck moments later, its bay disgorging Widow almost before the doors finish opening.

“Somebody needs to keep an eye on our quinjet, make sure nobody takes a joyride,” Widow says, disappearing down an access hatch into the bowels of the ship. “Barnes? You there?”

“Copy,” Barnes confirms. Ahead of them his jet appears out of thin air, showing them where he is, then disappears again in a straight up now you see it now you don’t. “Holy mother of Stephen Hawking,” Tony yelps, rolling so as not to hit Barnes’ ass. “Jarvis, you get that? Are you getting that?”

“Barnes,” Rhodey acknowledges, like he didn’t just nearly choke on a mistimed swallow, watching the matte grey aircraft just bloop back out of existence again. “Do you have anything nonlethal? Potentially nonlethal?”

There’s a moment, like Barnes has to think about it. “Highly fucking doubt it.”

“Nothing that won’t explode?”

“Beam weapons only.”

“Alright, guard the quinjet and watch our backs in the air,” Rhodey decides. “Iron Man and I are going in. Alpha target, center mass.”

He and Tony dive, and just in time, too, because the railgun Tony saw is starting to visibly power up, the barrel starting to ratchet upwards. They land on either side of the thing - it’s massive, easily the size of a shipping crate, bolted to the deck so its long two-pronged nose won’t overbalance it and dump it into the sea; that’s not smart, though as Rhodey touches down he can see the bolts and welding are silver-shiny and fresh, brand new.

There’s a skinny white guy in a windbreaker with a tablet in hand gaping wild-eyed at their three-point landing. Rhodey tazes him with a palm to the chest, shoves him to the side and snatches the tablet out of his spasming grip. He tosses it to Tony, who catches it, extends a fingertip jack and jams it in. “Anything good in that?”

“Don’t think we need it - J, eat it up. Whoever put this together was a big dreamer with a failing engineering grade,” Tony says brightly, cocking his head at the railgun. “Ten points for scifi coolness, negative ten billion for structural instability. Seriously, they welded this thing to a barge.”

“Think we can flip it in the ocean?” Rhodey says, circling the mounts with a critical eye at the bolts.

“I’m amazed they haven’t done it themselves,” Tony says, tossing the stripped tablet over his shoulder and bringing both hands up, fist closed in the laser firing position. “This hull is like three inches of steel and it’s not even centered, it’s seriously incredible this thing hasn’t ripped the deck up and pitched headfirst into the water.”

“Lucky for them we’re here to help.” Rhodey aims his own lasers and they fire at the same time, carving a neat rectangle around the base of the gun mount. The haunting shriek of tearing metal rises to a crescendo before they’re even halfway through; the gun is still humming, powering up - whatever windbreaker guy initiated must have been automatic - but it’s rapidly tilting under its own weight and they barely have to help it along. It turns out its battery array is right beneath it, just under the hull, so it takes that with it too, going over the side with cables popping and metal
groaning in an avalanche of tortured steel.

“Hah! Laser beats railgun every time,” Tony says as the railgun hits the water with a massive *FOOSSHHH*, water spraying twenty feet into the air. “Make a note! AIM’s engineers are fucking stupid.”

“Is it just me or is it weird that nobody’s come out to stop us?” Rhodey asks, turning a critical eye on the completely empty deck.

“I know! Nobody’s even charged us with a freeze ray,” Tony complains. “What the hell kind of mad scientist outfit is this? I want to speak to a manager.”

“I guess they didn’t think anything would disturb their optical illusion thing,” Rhodey says. “Either that or it’s everybody’s day off.” He clicks his comm. “Rogers, Wilson, you meeting any hostiles?”

“Some,” Rogers grunts.

“Are they armed?”

“Not anymore,” Widow answers, a couple of thumps coming across her line.

“Great. Barnes,” Rhodey says, changing to the open channel and hoping for the best; he still has no clear idea how to properly hail the guy. “You said Charlie target, something under the hull?”

“Yes.”

“Copy. Rogers, Widow, Wilson, the rest of Alpha target is on you. We’re going in.”

Charlie target is so close that they basically sort of hop over in one repulsor-assisted jump, with Tony craning his head like he thinks he’ll catch a glimpse of Barnes. “The guy’s invisible, Tones.”

“Yeah, but there’s no such thing as invisible, not *invisible*- invisible, that doesn’t - fuck, there’s no *turbulence,*” Tony says, thinking aloud, and shit, yeah, that’s it, that explains the nagging wrongness of the microrockets’ flight patterns, the movements of the jet itself. “When it pulled up between us it should’ve had us doing aerial ballet and *nothing,* not even a shiver, what the *hell.*”

“This guy is fucking physics without a condom, what do you want,” Rhodey mutters, then opens a private channel and prays that whatever receiver Barnes’ jet has got won’t pick up on it. “More importantly, I can’t get a weapons lock on it. Between that and the cloaking - if this goes ass up you do not engage, do you understand? We retreat until we figure out how to match the firepower.”

“Honeybear, we are *Iron Man,*” Tony says indignantly. “*Iron Men.* If we can’t take him, nobody can.”

“I’m not - *ugh* - Tony, that thing was *invisible* forty seconds ago, he took a fucking laserbeam to the face without a scratch, who knows what the hell else he’ll pull out of his ass.”

“If I may interrupt, sirs, I am sorry to say that reviewing the data, no weapons lock was possible,” Jarvis announces apologetically. “I infer that you have visually identified an airborne vehicle that as of yet some of the suit’s sensors cannot process.”

“See?” Rhodey says. “Jarvis can’t even see him!”
“I have got to get my hands on it,” Tony swears, ignoring everything Rhodey and Jarvis are saying. “We have Cap, you think that’ll get us an in, help me set up some playdates? I think that’ll net me at least one playdate. He’s got a metal arm, I’ve got a metal suit, he’s an assassin, I’m the ex-Merchant of Death - damn, he’s just like me except I did it bigger and better. Obviously. Not that it’s a competition, obviously, obviously not, the point is, we can relate. We can bond.”

“It’s a match made in heaven,” Rhodey says flatly. “And I’ll do everything I can to nurture this beautiful connection once we’ve made it out of here without anybody blowing anybody else up, okay? Tell me what the scanners are saying, I’m not picking up shit, there’s interference everywhere.”

“My scanners are the same as yours, honeyboo, light of my years. Guess we’re doing this analog,” Tony says cheerfully, forcing one of the watertight inner doors open with a crunch.

They see one guy on their way down through the hold, but he just yelps and spins to run so fast he loses his glasses. They don’t even bother to fire at him, though Tony does sort of raise his palm in what turns into a halfhearted wave instead of a repulsor blast. He’s running away from their destination, anyway, which is the main cargo hold and does, in fact, contain something nasty.

“Hoo boy,” Tony says standing in the open door of the first section as Rhodey covers him. “Yeah, that’s definitely radiation. Guys, we got plutonium down here,” he calls into the group comm. “Uranium too, if I’m reading these helpful little labels right. Jarvis, scan and catalog, show us what we’ve got.”

The next cargo hold has bioagents. Everything is in containment units, at least; there’s an independent power source and battery array in here with them, all the hazmat containers locked into neat little rows like they’re ready to be moved, so Rhodey checks that the power source doesn’t have any booby traps or detonators or anything and leaves it all alone. He clears the room, activates his wrist laser and welds the entryway shut as a stopgap measure until they can get all the AIM goons accounted for and secured. Tony locks off the plutonium room by pinching the massive hinges flat on the doorframe. “You know what this means? It means Barnes can detect radiation through lead shielding. Do you know what I’d do to get my hands on that jet? No, because neither do I. Is this what having a sexual awakening feels like?”

“Are you seriously implying that you never had one?”

“Don’t say that, kittenf-- are seriously implying that you never had one,” Tony says, as the rest of the cargo holds turn out to be full of nothing, nothing, spare battery arrays and, finally, crates of automatic weapons. “Ugh, boring. Come on, let’s hit the Bravo boat, maybe they’ll have a live warhead or something.”

Bravo target does not have a live warhead, but it has a series of ad-hoc labs that can’t seem to
decide between chemistry, archaeology and physics. There’s a lot of different types of equipment pushed up against the walls, some of it looking surgical, even, but mostly what’s in the center of the space is whiteboards and flat high school lab tables. A lot of them have dark, grimy, strangely curved chunks of… stuff on them, some suspended in complex examination matrices, some just lined up on cloths with little tags on them. “Chitauri debris,” Tony says, half the levity gone from his voice. “Hah. I might’ve preferred the warhead.”

But here they finally find personnel, aka three people in one of the labs typing frantically on laptops. When Rhody comes in they take one look at him, scream and try to scramble away, mostly succeeding in falling over and bringing their chairs down with them.

“Is it seriously just you guys?” Rhody demands, clomping over and lifting up the nearest guy with one hand. They’re all pasty daylight-is-for-jocks types, in khakis and hideous sneakers, but this guy’s clearly struck out in more ways than one, from the unfortunate haircut to the coffee stain covering most of one corduroy-clad thigh. “Where is everybody? Tell me,” Rhody says, when it looks like Unfortunate Haircut doesn’t want to do anything but whimper.

“You should tell him,” Tony says from behind him, and Rhody doesn’t have to look to know he has both palms up, repulsor vortices open. “If you don’t, then I’ll have to come over there and ask the same thing but in a slightly different way, and believe me, I am way fucking meaner.”

“There’s others,” the other guy blurts, flat on his ass on the floor and clutching his laptop to his chest. “People - people aren’t on the ship full time, we just - ”

“Who’s in charge here?” Rhody says.

“D-doctor Mathers is on vacation until Tuesday,” the guy says, bewildered.

Rhodey holds in a sigh. “Who’s Doctor Mathers?”

“H-head of cryptoarchaeology?”

Tony steps forward. “What were you shooting at us earlier?”

“W-what?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, sunshine. What was it, a laser, a beam weapon, what?”

“Please! I’m just a geologist!”

“A geologist working for AIM,” Tony says sweetly. “Which, if you’ve been within ten feet of a working television for the past year, you’d know is an organization I have a little bit of a personal problem with. And somebody on one of these fucking boats fired lasers at us, so one of you better open your mouth and tell me something that’ll convince me not to to give you a live action replay.”

The guy in Rhodey’s grip just whimpers. “It’s a-an automatic defense systems,” the guy on the floor manages. “Part of the energy field, it - it’s got its own sensors and it’s, it’s self-maintaining?”

“At least it was until you blew it up,” the lone woman says bitterly, which, okay, lady, not sure that’s your most pressing problem right now. “How did you even do that? Nothing can even go near it once it’s activated, we can’t even get in there just to look - ”

“We’re just better than you,” Tony says. “Any guards onboard? Who else is here besides you three?”
“There’s engineers for the engines,” the guy on the floor says. “And a crew. Some… security people but they stay on the other ships, the military ones. They don’t like to come here.”

Well, at least Rogers’ team would get a little bit of a workout. “They don’t know anything,” Rhodey says, disgusted. “Round them up, we’re moving on.”

“Ooh, lucky you, you get to wait until the professional interrogators,” Tony tells them, which at least keeps them docile as he steps forward to secure their hands together.

“Barnes,” Rhodey says, switching to the open channel and muting his external audio as he turns his hapless geologist around to secure his hands, using the thin wire staple things Tony came up with as a sort of alternative to zipties. They’ve only got six of these per suit, they’ll have to come up with some stopgap measures pretty quickly. “You said this was where you were… kept. Anything we should be looking out for?”

It’s a few seconds before Barnes replies, and when he does he sounds pained, uncomfortable. “If you see - a chair. Not a normal chair. If it has - things, for the head. And. Restraints.”

Rhodey abruptly flashes back to his first task force mission raiding the DC bank vault, finding the nightmarish thing in the center like a scene taken right out of a slasher film. He knows now it’s designed to electrocute the brain in a precisely targeted manner, and that the voltage is in excess of what’s survivable by normal vanilla humans. Between that and the strange drugs in enormous doses, the forensics guys investigating it had decided that it was a performance execution site for HYDRA prisoners. No normal human could have sat in the chair and survived.

“Understood,” Rhodey says. “If we see anything like that, we’re melting it down.”

“I think these ships are different ships,” Barnes continues, subdued. “Some of them. I remember a… submarine?”

“What? Are you telling me we should be looking for a submarine here?”


“Alright. Jesus.”

“If there’s a submarine, it’s not here.”

“Well at least there’s that. Thank you, Sergeant.”

“... yes,” Barnes says in response to that, sounding the most uncomfortable he’s been so far, and there’s a little sizzle of static that Rhodey takes as his cue to leave the guy alone.

“Alright, let’s clear this place,” he tells Tony, hoisting the geologist and Miss Complainer up under both arms. “We’ll confiscate everything once we get all the personnel secured. For now let’s get the prisoners on the deck and go through room by room.”

They fly out of Bravo target, moving relatively slow in order not to accidentally give their prisoners whiplash. Rhodey can see human figures have started swarming over the deck of the barge, though from a glance it’s not nearly as many as he expected for that size of ship. He wonders idly where they were that none of them popped out when they ripped up the railgun, but then again, when he and Tony stormed in these three brain heroes had chosen to type instead of running, and if they were doing it to send distress signals then so far it wasn’t working.

None of the people on the barge seem to be combatants, either: there’s a lot of frantic dashes to the
emergency exits, all of which gets cut short by Wilson and Rogers showing up and making short work of jettisoning the lifeboats. Wilson shoots holes in half of them, Rogers shears some more off the sides of the deck with his shield, and the milling personnel are left to make like bowling pins as Rogers and Wilson plow through and move on.

Watching those two fight is an… experience. Rhodey witnesses with his own two eyes Captain goddamn America running full tilt across the deck, leaping up into the air, Wilson catching him by the arms, retracting his wings, the two of them leaning into the momentum so they spin end over end like some kind of horrible pinwheel so Wilson can sling Rogers around like a hammer throw and launch him directly into - the command tower of the Echo target destroyer, alright, okay. Rogers sails headfirst into the windows, his shield coming up at the last second, and Wilson basically does a midair somersault and deploys his wings half a breath away from splattering himself across the ship deck.

“Any chance I can get in on that too?” Widow says, sounding just the slightest bit out of breath, and Rhodey angles his flight path just in time to see see Widow sprint over the deck of Alpha target, plant her foot directly on the face of a guy struggling to get up and use him as a stepping stone to launch herself up at Wilson. “Alpha target control room locked off and secured,” she reports, curling back neatly to put a bullet in the shoulder of her stepping stool as she lands in Wilson’s arms. “Advancing to Delta.”

“We found alien debris, some labs and a couple scientists,” Rhodey reports to everyone. “We haven’t searched all of Bravo but there’s a good chance all the extra dangerous stuff was on Charlie. The scientists said Delta and Echo are probably the only ones with armed combatants but don’t take their word for it, I hear there’s this thing they might do called lying.”

“I don’t think we need to be two per ship anymore,” Tony says, depositing his squirming AIM guy onto the deck next to his compatriots. “I’ll go to Echo, you handle Bravo, scream if you find anything interesting, we get this done twice as fast and all get home for dinner.”

“Well when you put it that way,” Rhodey says, and jumps back into the air again.

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Barnes carefully maneuvers the ship until it’s hovering next to Rogers’ quinjet. He hasn’t opened his eyes in nearly ten minutes and he’s not planning to, because Motherfucker has yet to slow down its cheerful datadumping directly into his skull. He hasn’t slept in so long. His time-to-eat phone alarm has gone off eleven times since his last calorie intake and he hadn’t even noticed and he can’t muster up the energy yet to dig out an emergency energy bar.

It’s almost a relief to follow the Colonel’s order. The Avengers have it handled. He’s just going to stand here and guard their exit strategy and try to figure out a way to get Motherfucker to shut up for just one goddamn fucking minute.

-o-

Steve feels like he’s very gently losing his mind. He’s going off the deep end by degrees, hearing Bucky through the radio, through the phone, through other people’s stories but never anything more and he may be a supersoldier but he’s not made of fucking stone and things are starting to come apart here. He feels like something inside of him is going to chew its way out.

Steve knocks out a guy desperately trying to access the Delta target control room, kicks the door in and snaps the ship’s steering wheel off its mount. If Bucky wanted nothing to do with them he wouldn’t be circling them like a wary cat, delivering mac and cheese and chucking phones through the windows. If Bucky wanted nothing to do with Steve then he wouldn’t be here, and if
he remembers anything about Steve he’ll know that there’s only two ways to go. Steve knows he’s intense, knows he’s too much, but that’s just how he’s always been, nothing or everything, and Bucky has never picked nothing.

And now he’s here. Steve shears the main navigational display in half with his shield, knocks out another guy come running up to the control room and jumps out the window. He lands in a roll and runs for the engine room, Sam swooping by overhead and depositing Natasha onto the deck ahead of him. For a second it feels strangely like the Lemurian Star mission that started all this, for all that the ships they’ve boarded are very different and the personnel here have little to no combat training and are in far fewer numbers besides.

They hit the stairs to the engine room and Steve grabs Natasha around the waist, vaults the railing and drops them six stories down, taking the impact in his knees and landing in a crouch; Natasha uncoils from him, uses his shoulders like a pommel horse and slams a boot into the throats of both of the extremely startled men in front of the engine room door. They’re down and choking in seconds and it takes Natasha less than a minute to do something with their belts that leaves their hands tied to each other behind their backs, slumped on the floor. Steve uses the time to get the engine room door open, verify it’s empty, come back out and close it, twisting the hand wheel until it snaps off with a scream of tortured metal. “Delta target secured,” he reports, nodding at Natasha’s gesture and hauling up the two coughing prisoners under one arm. They’d come in fast and hard and unexpected; the two destroyers hadn’t even managed to bring their ship-mounted guns into play before they’d taken the weapons rooms. He and Natasha aren’t even out of breath. “Widow and I heading topside. Sitrep?”

“Getting prisoners onto the decks, on Bravo target now,” Sam reports. “Could use some help rounding everybody up.”


“So that’s Alpha, Beta, Delta, we got the whole alphabet wrapped up,” Stark says, flippant. “Did that feel weirdly easy to anyone else? No? Just me?”

“Are you trying to jinx us?” Rhodes says.

“I guess everything feels easy after fighting aliens,” Sam muses.

“We had our hard bit! We nearly got lasered to death. Our goose would have been well and truly cooked if it weren’t for Cold War Thunder. Now that’s a guy who knows how to crash a party.”

“Keep an eye out anyway, we don’t know if any of them sent out an SOS signal,” Rhodes says. “I’ve got nothing on radar, but I think the last forty minutes proved that it doesn’t necessarily mean anything - ”

Steve barely hears any of it, taking the stairs two at a time. Bucky’s up there somewhere, in his mystery plane guarding their quinjet. He’s not going to fucking vanish on him this time. “Delta, Echo, Alpha target secured,” he tells the team channel, reporting on automatic. “Command center disabled. Engine room secured.” Bucky will be near the quinjet. Steve drops the prisoners on the deck and pivots on the jet like he’s got a homing signal.

Natasha, of course, basically reads his mind. “Rogers,” she says, but she doesn’t try to stop him.

“I need to talk to him,” Steve says tightly.

“Don’t push him,” Natasha warns.
“Uh huh,” Steve says, because Bucky’s always let Steve push him. Pushing is all Steve does.

“Is he - of course he is,” Sam says over the comms. “Good luck, man, tell him the mac n cheese was heavenly.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, not really sure what he’s agreeing to. The wind and the waves and the distant shouts of AIM goons encountering Sam and Natasha’s pacifying efforts are loud, but he can hear something else now, a low audible hum. He yanks off his helmet and tosses it away, letting it bounce off behind him but making sure the comm unit is still wedged tight into his ear. His hair is too heavy with sweat to fly up in the wind but it does flop over his forehead, too long, as he strides across the deck with senses straining, trying to see with his ears.

The sound is quiet and reverberating off multiple surfaces, but as Steve rounds the quinjet he catches sight of a strangle patch of air just off the edge of the deck. He can see ripples almost like heatwaves, the edges of the distortion hovering above the deck, and he breaks into a run before he can fully process what it is he’s doing. It’s fine. It’s not even fifteen feet up. Steve jumps.

That’s very definitely Bucky’s yelp in his ear, but Steve barely gets to hear it through his own oof as he smacks into an invisible edge. Something ripples through him on contact, some kind of current that makes his skin tingle and his hair stand on end; he starfishes desperately, scrabbling for traction, until he’s spreadeagled on what he can only assume is Bucky’s windshield.

Bucky cannot be said to be thrilled at this turn of events. “Mother of shit fucking Rogers!”

“Hey Buck,” Steve wheezes. Up close the invisibility is pretty disturbing: his eyes start watering as his brain tries to figure out what the fuck he’s looking at that isn’t there. “Did you - hrgh - mug Wonder Woman or what?”

“What? What?”

“You know,” Steve grunts, clawing his way up another inch. He brings his hands up one by one and yanks his gloves off with his teeth; he needs all the help he can get up here, and bare skin gives a better grip on slippery surfaces. “Invisible jet.”

“It’s not a jet,” Bucky snaps, tone caught between Steve you magnificent moron and whoever is being stupid in my immediate vicinity had better stop. Steve feels a little bit like his sternum is going to crack from the stinging rush of familiarity. “Bucky,” he says, god, he sounds giddy. “Hey. Hi. Thanks for - helping us out.”

“What are you doing,” Bucky says dangerously.

Steve tries a smile, even as his eyes start crossing from the invisibility effect. “What, I can’t come up, say hi?”

“Rogers!”

“Barnes.”

“I’ll barrel roll and throw you off,” Bucky says, but his voice is shaky. “I will.”

“I’ll cling,” Steve threatens, but he has to talk around the smile. Now that it’s here it doesn’t seem to want to go away. He had thought about what he’d say, how to talk to Bucky now that he might be - different, but here and now all that comes up is their old familiar bullshitting. “Like a barnacle. You can’t get rid of me.”

Bucky makes a strangled noise of rage that’s pure music to Steve’s ears. “Come down,” Steve
says. “Land the… plane, or whatever. We have the room. We could use your help down here. Some more, I mean.”

“... No,” Bucky says.

“Turn off the invisibility,” Steve tries.

“No.”

“I just want to see you.”

“No!”

“What, is your lipstick smudged? I’ve seen it all before, Buck, just let me - ”

“No.”

“I can do this all day,” Steve warns.

“I can spin us like a top until you puke,” Bucky growls.

But you haven’t yet, Steve thinks, about to say it, and bites his tongue at the last second in case that breaks the spell. He would’ve before, he never ever shut his mouth to Buck before, but Natasha keeps telling him over and over he’s not the same person and, well, she got to see him, hadn’t she. Maybe it’s time he took her advice. “Okay,” Steve says, conceding. “Okay. We’ll just - talk.”

Bucky doesn’t exactly sound like that delights him, either. “What do you want, Rogers!”

Steve bites back on the first hundred or so answers to that, all of which more or less boil down to you. He needs to triage. “How much do you remember?”

There’s a little burst of static in his comm, like the radio itself is hissing at him. “How the fuck should I know!”

Fair point. “You remember me?”

The squeal of static is even louder this time, making Steve flinch away from his own ear. “It’s - okay,” Steve says, grimacing. “If you don’t. We can - well, we can try - ”

“My head is swiss cheese, Rogers, leave it the hell alone!”

A unfamiliar pit of worry opens bottomless under Steve’s ribs. “Are you alright? How’re you feeling?”

“Right now,” Bucky says dangerously, “I want to take my brain out. With both hands. And chuck it in the ocean.”

That doesn’t sound good. “Do you need help? We can - ”

“Until you puke, Rogers!”

“Yeah, all over your windshield, and I’ll still be hanging on after,” Steve says automatically, a little bit undermined by how he slides down several inches and has to scrabble for purchase again. “Bucky. Come with us. I have a team, you’ll like them. Whatever you need, we can help you, we’ll debrief - ”
It’s the wrong word. The ship shudders like an angry horse under his hands and Steve almost loses his grip. The static in his ear sounds like it’s hissing at him, making Bucky’s voice sound like a real animal growl. “No.”


“You!”

Steve’s head goes back. “Me?”

“Yes!”

“What - Bucky, what the hell do you think I’m gonna do?” Steve demands, bewildered.

“I don’t know,” Bucky snaps, his voice cracking a little. “I don’t know, I - in my head, I - I - ” The comm line crackles again, hissing and popping, eating up Bucky’s voice and dissolving all in a rush.


There’s a minute of silence. Steve can feel the current, whatever it is, through his body, making the fine hairs on the backs of his hands stand up. Bucky’s in there. Bucky’s just inches away. Steve gives up and shuts his eyes, resting his forehead against the cool humming surface of the jet.

The comm comes back to life quietly, with an-almost silent switch from dead air. “This is,” Bucky says, then swallows, and this time Steve can hear how it’s costing him. “This is. Already. A lot.”

“Okay,” Steve says, softer. Okay. He’s not great at gentle, he’s not great at - this, but he will be, he can be for Bucky. “It’s okay, pal, it’s alright.” He doesn’t want to raise his head or open his eyes. He does anyway. “It’s alright. I just - I want you to know, okay? That I’m - here. If you need anything. Anything.”

There’s a few moments of harsh breathing. “I don’t want to be like this,” Bucky says suddenly, like it’s torn out of him. “I - I - ”

“Hey, hey, it’s alright,” Steve says, the alarm flaring again, pressing his palms to the slick surface like he can get to Bucky that way. He’s not used to worrying about Buck, not like this, last ten months notwithstanding - he thought he got used to the ache like a coal in his stomach but it’s nothing like that, not with Bucky right in front of him. “You’re alright, hey, you’re fine.”

Some more, slightly harsher breathing. “Fuck this shit.”

Steve can only press himself closer to the cold metal. “I know.”

“It’s. Hard.”

“I know.”

“Things are different now,” Bucky says miserably.

“I know,” Steve says, god, does he know. “But. Bucky,” Steve says, because Bucky has to know this too. “This hasn’t changed. Me for you - nothing’s changed.”

Bucky makes a noise that might be a snort, thin and a little hysterical. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” Steve says. “Bucky, we - hell, I threw up directly in your lap once. One time you
Yeah,” Steve says. “Bucky, we - hell, I threw up directly in your lap once. One time you accidentally spilled pea soup all over one of my work illustrations. Hell, if we managed not to strangle each other through all of ‘36…” Steve sets his jaw even as he tries to smile, wanting Bucky to hear it in his voice. “I said to the end. I meant it.”

He can hear Bucky breathing abruptly, clearly, no noise or static, like all of a sudden he’s there just behind Steve’s ear. “You’re on my side,” Bucky says unsteadily, like he has to make sure. “And I’m. On yours.”

Steve gives up and presses his face back to the invisible windshield again, his eyes squeezing shut around the edges of his smile. It’s not forced anymore. It feels like his face is cracking open. “Yeah buddy. That’s right. That’s exactly right.”

He just listens to Bucky’s breathing for a moment. This time he doesn’t want to raise his head or open his eyes and he doesn’t. There’s nothing to see. He’s slowly slipping off, he can feel it, but he doesn’t even care. There’s just the sound of Bucky right next to him, breathing, and he barely has to fool his other senses at all.

“We coordinate,” Bucky rasps. “On missions.”

Steve’s head pops back up. “What?”

“Missions. We work together. I can’t - I can’t all the time. Talk. But - we work together. I can be support. Like now. Aerial. Long range.”

“That’s - just fine,” Steve says, his mind racing. “That’s perfect. How will we - ” he stops. He’s slowly sliding off, he realizes, because Bucky, that tricky bastard, has been slowly tilting the jet’s nose down a few degrees at a time. “Hey!” he says, outraged, scrabbling, and Bucky stops trying to be sneaky about it, tilting more inches. “What gives!”

“I’ll check in,” Bucky says, sounding much more certain. “Once a day, on the phone. Now. Get off my spaceship.”

-o-

The ships are seized. The hazardous materials are as secured as they’re gonna get. A prisoner and body headcount is underway. Overall, the mission has been a success - a shockingly easy one - so now Rhodey just has to take care of one other thing.

It’s a pretty damn big thing. “Tones,” Rhodey says on the private channel, his external mikes muted as he drags two squirming, shouting guys in lab coats down the narrow hallway of Echo target. They’d made a brig out of the hole in the deck left on Alpha target; prisoners were being sat down in rows in the empty space where the railgun used to be, in the middle of the deck under open sky and Wilson’s guard, their only way out via airlift. Rhodey’s going over there to join him: these guys are mostly scientists and who knows what they’ll try. “You got a secure connection to the Tower? To Hill?”

“Yeah, standard call, tell Jarvis to route it through his servers,” Tony says. “Stop struggling, Einstein, if I drop you in the water all that happens is you’ll be wet when I pick you up again.”

Rhodey grins a little and dials, though he sober slightly as the call active icon pops up on his HUD. This is probably not going to be the most fun conversation.

The line connects. “Hill.”

Rhodey makes extra sure his external audio is off. “Hi. We need some bird’s-eye strategy in real time.”
“Now?”

“Now. We’ve got the Winter Soldier here in an alien warplane.”

There’s a brief silence. Hill doesn’t do exclamations. “You’re sure?”

“Who else do we know running around with a tin arm answering to James Barnes?”

“There have been multiple doppelganger sightings. Has he - ”

“He confirmed, answered to Barnes, and Rogers confirmed,” Rhodey says. “Doppelgangers, Hill?”

“There was a thing. Is he hostile?”

“No,” Rhodey admits. “Said he showed up to help because Widow asked him to. And he did.”

“Is he - stable?”

“He’s piloting a jet that is almost certainly alien tech,” Rhodey says. “Is he compos mentis? I don’t know. But he’s got it together enough that he just helped us take out five ships and yeah, he can follow orders.”

“I need to talk to Widow,” Hill says, just as there’s a beep and a buzz and Tony hacks into the call. “What’re you chatting about, sweetcheeks? It’s not fair to talk behind my back, you know, you might get my feelings hurt.”

“I’m not paid to care about your feelings,” Hill says.

“I’m not paid at all,” Rhodey mutters. “Tony, patch in Widow - hell, Falcon too. Might as well make it a conference call.”

“Not Cap?” Tony says, a couple more beeps coming from his end as he adds the others in.

“No,” Rhodey says, because he got the memo about how Rogers has been haring around the world like a scalded tomcat, all but writing COME BACK TO ME BABY in HYDRA agents’ blood. “We need to talk about Barnes.”

“What about him,” Widow says, as Wilson goes, “Uh, hello?”

“This is Rhodes, Hill, Stark, Widow and Falcon,” Rhodey says. “We’ve got the Winter Soldier here and I need to know what the hell we’re going to do. Have we got time? Falcon, what’s Cap doing?”

“He’s… uh.” There’s some rushing noises and a thump on Wilson’s end. “He’s… engaged with Barnes.”

“No kidding,” Tony murmurs, sotto voce.

“Good,” Rhodey says, ignoring him. “That’ll give us a minute. Falcon, keep an eye on him, tell us if it looks like Barnes will bolt.”

“If he does, there’s nothing we can do about it,” Wilson says. “The guy’s got an invisible jet.”

“Wait, he’s invisible but he hasn’t gone yet? How can you tell?”
“Cap’s… hanging off his windshield.”

“Wait, what?” Tony says.

“I don’t know what to tell you, man, he just kinda jumped on there.”

“Really?”

“Are you seriously surprised?”

“So that buys us our minute,” Widow cuts in. “Rhodes. What did you need?”

“I need to know what we’re going to do here,” Rhodey says. “With Barnes. For those of you in outfiel, I’m head of an anti-terrorist taskforce charged with ending HYDRA’s domestic operations. Barnes is an American citizen but he’s also the… Winter Soldier. If I bring him in, what am I getting?”

“Problems,” Widow says immediately. “You put him into the system, you won’t get him back out.”

“Hold up, hold up,” Wilson says. “You’re not proposing like - arresting him, are you? What’s the international version of arresting? Can you even arrest people?”

“I’m considering giving him protective custody,” Rhodey says, though technically that’s up to a judge and no, he technically can’t arrest people. But nobody needs to know that.

“He has been going after HYDRA targets, so he does have actionable intel,” Hill adds. “What he knows could help us bring operatives to justice.”

“And Widow just told you what’ll happen if you bring him in,” Wilson says, not buying it. “You won’t get what you want, and I bet the CIA or whoever else won’t either. Hell, they’ll probably stick him straight in Guantanamo.”

“Or worse,” Widow says. “We don’t know what he knows, Hill, if anything - he hasn’t been active in nearly two months. It’s possible he’s run out of anything actionable.”

“How many of his hits were on American soil?” Rhodey asks.

There’s a moment before Hill replies, either calculating or reluctant to answer. “Very few.”

“Got a number?”

Hill sighs. “Out of forty-seven confirmed targets? Two.”

“Has he joined with any group? Any new affiliation, backers, anything?”

“Not that we know of,” Hill admits. “There are also no reports of him going after anyone who isn’t HYDRA.”

“So at worst he’s a neutral party,” Widow says inexorably. “Who’s assisted us multiple times, at cost to himself. Last week he delivered us a sizable chunk of intel about HYDRA’s inner workings in good faith. He’s made face to face contact with us twice and acted as an ally both times. And just now he was the decisive factor in ensuring this mission’s success.”

Hill sighs again. “Several high-profile HYDRA operatives were interrogated in regards to the DC Hostile. They confirmed superhuman abilities,” she says. “Even if there wasn’t hard video evidence of the overpass fight, him going toe to toe with Rogers - hell, the way they talk about
him, you’d think he was regrowing limbs and firing jets of lava out of his asshole. Point is, Homeland Security knows there’s a second supersoldier, and so does the CIA, and the Pentagon, and so far they’ve kept it quiet, which means they’re not planning to hand him over to Congress for a just, fair and public trial. If he comes in with any hope of coming out a free man, he has to come in with Colonel Rhodes.”


“Kill him,” Rhodey says, just as Widow says “Own him.”

“So… which one,” Wilson says.

“He’s valuable, for what he might know as well as just as an operative,” Widow says. “The smart thing would be to capture him, see what they can get. America wants supersoldiers: look at all the programs after Rogers. The Soldier is now the only other one confirmed to be a success. And once they have him, they can always kill him later.”

“He’s a biologically enhanced rogue wetwork asset with no political affiliation, no obvious or easy leverage points and control of a vehicle that I can tell you right now will be classified as a WMD,” Rhodey points out. “That’s a kill-on-site threat. From what you’re telling me, even if anyone with enough clout to protect him did want to open negotiations, they can’t get ahold of him even just to talk. He doesn’t want to talk. That’s elimination grounds right there.”

“Is he capable of negotiating?” Hill says. “I understand there are concerns about brain damage and mental stability.”

“As of yesterday he was,” Wilson grumbles. “He negotiated me right out of my ipod.”

“Wait, what?” Rhodey says.

“He’s present, aware and capable of rational decisionmaking,” Widow breezes on, before Rhodey can ask ipod? What the hell? “And he told me he is not interested in joining any organization or group. He was pretty emphatic about it. He’s also got Captain America in his corner, even if nobody else really knows that yet, and we really should not underestimate Rogers on this one.”

“He needs to disappear,” Tony says.

There’s a short silence from all channels, and not only because everybody’s realizing Tony’s been on the line this whole time and somehow hasn’t been saying anything. “No, not like - Jesus, ew, stop looking at me like that. I mean he needs to drop off the radar,” Tony says. “Fake his own death, whatever. Nobody will leave him alone otherwise.” Rhodey can hear the twist in Tony’s mouth, wry under his goatee. “You said it yourselves. Another supersoldier, this time minus the popular public presence and pesky moral compass? The CIA’s already creaming itself, and that’s just the start. This kid’s gotta die, and in the messiest way possible - as long as there’s a body there’s a very valuable research specimen out there on the loose. We’ve got to set him on fire or drop a building on him or something.”

“Don’t let Rogers hear the moral compass bit,” Widow says. “But otherwise, seconded.”

“Oh, I’m sure the kid’s chock full of morals, ethics, whatever, just like I’m sure that’s been fucked to fuck and it’s a miracle he can tell which way is up,” Tony says. “He’s compromised, is what I’m saying. Compared to Rogers - which is the only real comparison here - he’s downright vulnerable. He’s been fucked with enough, and I personally don’t want the Pentagon or the Kremlin or who the fuck ever else to get a chance to continue fucking with him some more.”

“Good,” Widow says. “I’ll see to it.”
“We are going to ask him how he feels about us deciding his future for him though, right,” Wilson says, in a tone that makes it less a question and more of a threat.

“I’ll talk to him about it,” Widow says. “Or maybe you will, if he decides to give you another dinner delivery first. And if it does come down to it - ”

“Shit, okay, he fell off,” Wilson cuts in. “Rogers is back on the deck. I think Barnes is - yep, the guy’s definitely leaving. Left. Steve is on the deck now. Aaand incoming - ”

“Okay, seriously, I know we were kidding and all, but I’d sell half my liver and at least one kidney for sixty minutes alone with that jet,” Tony says.

“Nobody wants your liver,” Rhodey says. “Medical researchers wouldn’t want your liver even if they could find it. But no, yeah, really, what the hell is that thing?”

“Rumlow was looking for experimental tech, he didn’t know what kind, in that HYDRA cave base underground two months ago,” Widow says. “Barnes found it first. And learned to operate it. Somebody patch Rogers in and everybody quit acting suspicious.”

“That’s my cue,” Hill says. “Widow, let me know your plan of action, I’ll see if I can help. Hill out.”

“Wait, hold up, Red Avenger, how do you know about his jet?” Tony says. “This was HYDRA?”

“I made a lucky guess and happened to be in a position to have it confirmed,” Widow says. “He was showing up all over the place, making it look like somebody was faking Soldier sightings, and I realized he had a vehicle capable of radar evasion and at least supersonic flight. When I told him my guess he basically confirmed.”

“So that’s the doppelganger thing,” Rhodey says.

“Yep. And the jet might not be HYDRA,” she says. “Rumlow didn’t even know what it was, and it was in an abandoned base, not part of its active operations. It’s possible they found it or stole it and just stashed it somewhere.”

“Okay, definitely alien tech, then,” Tony says, satisfied.

“We’re talking about your man’s ride,” Rhodey hears Wilson say, as a clear aside to Rogers just as the comms beep with the addition of another channel. “What’d he say?”

“He called it a spaceship,” Rogers says.

“Yes! Told you!” Tony crows.

“I talked to him,” Rogers continues, sounding a little out of breath. “He wants to coordinate on missions with me. With us.”

“Good,” Widow says immediately. “We’re figuring out how to help him. The Pentagon and the CIA have expressed interest in capturing him alive and bringing him in for interrogation - ”

“No.”

“- and we’re figuring out how to make sure that doesn’t happen,” Widow continues calmly, as if Rogers hasn’t said anything. “So far, our best bet looks like helping him fake his own death.”

“We got it handled, Cap,” Tony says, in the extra-light way he gets when he’s trying to be
“You say the word, we give the DOD their own tails to chase and drop him right off the map.”

“But we have to talk to him first,” Wilson says, doing reassuring much better than Tony does. “He said he wanted to join us on missions, right? We’ll talk to him then. We can’t decide anything definitive right now anyway.”

“...Right,” Rogers says, sounding like he’s origami-folding away a lot of emotion but no longer in danger of detonating. “We’ll talk to him. I’ll tell him it’s on offer.”

“Great, excellent, great,” Tony says. “Rhodey, sugarbear, you still have your whole week of vacation left, right? What say you help me manufacture a very convincing fake of a certain metal arm?”

“I’m going to be spending my vacation lying my ass off to the Joint Chiefs of Staff,” Rhodey grunts, finishing his check of the rest of the ship and stepping back out onto the deck, his last three prisoners squirming in his grip. “And so will you, in case you thought I wouldn’t drag you right in there with me. This here is is a whole ‘nother month in front of every lawyer and reporter and congressperson in DC.”

“Hey, yeah, speaking of, Jarvis, dump audio-video to the private servers and scrub everything else, burn it, all of it. No digital record of anything, we weren’t recording. Make sure War Machine here is extra clean.”

“And the rest of you, figure out what’s going on with Barnes,” Rhodey says, kicking off into the air and ignoring the startled yelps of his AIM passengers. “The sooner we have a plan the better, because you bet your asses the CIA will be planning something right back.”

“We will, but it might take some time,” Widow says. “Our relations are currently… new. It may take a little while to convince him we’ve got his best interests in mind.”

“Wait, what do you mean new,” Rhodey says, cutting his thrusters for a gentle landing next to the brig; his prisoners might be evil but they don’t deserve high-impact bone fractures.

“We’re working on it,” Rogers says, a little defensively, pacing next to the edge of the deck with every line of his body on edge.

“I thought he was with you guys,” Rhodey says, handing Rogers a squirming science guy; Rogers automatically takes him, lowering him into the pit with an absentminded air. “No. Not really. He hasn’t… welcomed it.”

“We’ve been respecting his boundaries,” Wilson says, once again in that tone that’s just the slightest bit too calm and friendly to be a threat.

“And… there was a possibility,” Rogers says, like the words are wire in his throat, “that for a while he was still operating under HYDRA command. That his missions, his kills - that it was all him being used to wipe their tracks.”

“Hah,” Tony says. “Yeah, no. I read the files, and speaking as a guy with a degree in holding grudges - what your guy is doing out there, Cap, that’s definitely vengeance. That’s definitely some salt-the-earth, fear-me-now-for-I-am-wronged type shit going down. In fact, when can we get him the formal invite? We’re Avengers. We avenge. He’s practically one of us.”

“You just want to touch his arm,” Rhodey says.

“And his rocket ship,” Tony says indignantly. “I’m not just after him for his body, that would be
“rude.”

“So his body and his material wealth, that’s all?”

“But honeybear, that’s what true love is,” Tony says, sounding wide eyed and credulous. “At least that’s what all the nice ladies in leopard print keep telling me.”

“Invite him to the clubhouse later,” Widow says. “We need to figure out how we’re faking his death well enough to dupe every intelligence agency in the world.”

“That’s easy,” Tony says. “Holograms. Give me five days to plant all the transmitters and we can have him seen picking his nose and-or choking to death on a sauerkraut panini in a public location of your choosing.”

“We need a body,” Widow says.

“We need his metal arm,” Tony corrects. “Or at least something that looks passably like it. A prosthetic, some teeth, boom, forensic investigators the world over can throw themselves a party. We add enough fire to the problem, they’ll be scraping soot off our evidence for six straight months before they’ll even be able to tell what it is.”

“Let me just say how uncomfortable I am that you have this much insight into what it takes to fake a dead body,” Wilson says.


He’d seen Rogers’ head jerk around. “Helicopter,” he says tersely, and a second later the distant sound of chopper blades fills the air. Tony kicks off, rising up into the air and facing the incoming helicopter. “TV crew,” he reports. “Grupo Telefe, apparently.”

“We need to go,” Widow says, dragging one last prisoner over to the brig and handing him over to Rhodey to be lifted down. “We can’t be seen here, this is supposed to be all Stark and Rhodes.”

“Wait,” Wilson says, gesturing at the brig full of weepy, stunned or mulish prisoners. “What about these guys? None of them count as witnesses?”

“They never saw our faces and I doubt they’ll be letting them grant interviews,” Widow says. “Plausible deniability, that’s all we need. So long as nobody got any footage of shield-throwing or Falcon-winging we’ll be fine.”

“It’s not gonna look great for them to have video of three mysterious figures running out of here in an unidentified jet, though, which they’re already going to have, so if you don’t want them tailing you up half the South American coast my suggestion is to book it now,” Tony says.

“Booking it,” Widow agrees, beckoning to Rogers and Wilson and heading for their quinjet. “Stark - I’ll be in touch. We’ll talk to Barnes and have a plan of action ready for when we’re done routing the international AIM bases. Give us a call if you find out the CIA’s issued our one-way ticket to Guantanamo.”

“You betcha,” Tony agrees, and he and Rhodey turn around to face the incoming free press and all its consequences.

-o-

They’re halfway to the quinjet when Steve turns to look back, slowing down a little to get a
glimpse of Rhodes and Stark standing guard over the makeshift prison hole, their faceplates turned towards the incoming news chopper. “Maybe we should stay,” Steve says, even as he doesn’t stop moving forward. “Help deal with cleanup.”

Natasha looks at him a little strangely, her face blurred by the darkened visor of her hazmat suit. “They can handle it,” she says. “We have that thing in Kazakhstan, remember?”

“We can help for a day or two,” Steve says. It’s both strange and familiar to feel the little spur of guilt - well, not guilt, exactly, but whatever it is that tells him he has a duty, that he has to make things right. “They’ve got nearly forty prisoners, guarding that with two people will be a pain even if they are War Machine and Iron Man.”

Natasha keeps looking at him with that touch of strangeness, slowing along with him. “Media will be here in less than five minutes,” she says. “If they see us here, that’s us in the spotlight. It’ll make it much harder for Bucky to contact you.”

Steve wavers, torn. “Yeah, but. Just running out on them like that, it’s not right.”

Natasha stares at him. Sam turns to stare at him too, then abruptly slings an arm around Steve’s shoulders and starts hustling him towards the quinjet, picking up their jog into a run. “If this is what fifteen minutes with Barnes does to you, I am committed to making it happen again. Get in, Rogers, we’re letting the big guns handle the reporters and radiation this time.”

“Time was we were the big guns,” Steve mutters, but he’s not exactly digging his heels in here. The spur of guilt twists and grows but it’s really having a hard time competing against Bucky.

“We still are,” Natasha says breezily, looking happier than she has in weeks. “We’re just different guns now.”

Chapter End Notes

For explanations of terminology, tech, links, helpful visuals and other supporting facts, here is a tumblr post full of all my insane wheatgoogling.

1. Wonder Woman came out in 1941 and her invisible jet was introduced in 1942, so Steve totally could have made that joke.

2. The chapter title song is No Way by Doomtree. The song playing in Bucky’s head - helpfully broadcasted by Motherfucker - is, as you may have guessed, Stronger by Kelly Clarkson.

3. Dear quietnight, goddess of podfic: I made you do Russian, Croatian, Spanish and Korean. I made you do sign language. I made you do !!!!!!. And now this. I am so, so, so sorry.
Barnes pitches out of the hatch and into a bush that feels like it’s made entirely of barbed wire. This immediately becomes the least of his problems. The second he gets outside he gets in range of all Motherfucker’s sensors and it’s… it’s very… it’s like seeing himself from the outside but from above and behind and six times over and upside down to boot, watching himself try to cringe away from his own head. If this is what having an out of body experience is like he wants none of it. He curls up in his stupid thorn bush and gulps for breath with his hands pressed into his eyes.

He has no idea where he is, but it’s probably somewhere in Asia: he can smell bamboo, and the distant chittering of monkeys filters through the treetops. Some horrible mystery animal is whooping its fucking head off in the foliage nearby.

A moment later Motherfucker seems to understand Barnes is utterly uninterested in seeing himself in six dimensions and switches to shoveling atmospheric pressure data down his metaphorical throat. He flails an arm at the sky, claws his way out of the bush, staggers upright and points a weaving metal finger at Motherfucker. “You,” Barnes growls. “Cut it out. Stop it.”

Motherfucker continues in the manner in which it is accustomed to and continues to pour data onto him in oblivious bliss. “This is worse than the fucking -”

Twins, Barnes had been about to say, except he - doesn’t know any twins. Esther. Barnes stares, unseeing. Who the fuck is - Leah? No, Leah is… dead.

There’s a clear, whole memory of a tombstone, small, frost-rimed, the dates criminally close in number. What a fucking Christmas arrives with no more fucking Christmas arrives with the image of his dry-eyed white-faced mother, gripping his shoulder tight as they march through the snow in funeral black. Sergeant Barnes is survived by his parents George and Winifred and his three younger sisters Rebecca Rachel and Esther Barnes -

“What am I supposed to do with this information,” Barnes bellows into the jungle.

A flock of brightly colored birds explodes out of the treetops. Motherfucker flips over in midair and all but shoves him back into the hatch, stopping a few vibrating inches short of the lower edge hitting him in the ankles. It’s quit with the atmospheric data and is now showing him bioelectric signaling density for miles in every direction.

“Life signs detector,” Barnes says hoarsely, panting, because apparently the brain to mouth barrier has been obliterated entirely and his train of thought doesn’t run on one set of rails anymore. He feels deeply, deeply crazy. He has a direct mind-to-mind connection with a UF fucking O. He had twin sisters named Esther and Rachel Barnes - Bucky had twin sisters named - but he can’t do that, can he? He can’t say my mother and not my sisters - he can’t pick and choose. Either he is real or he isn’t, and if he isn’t real, then who the hell is it experiencing this latest meltdown?
Whoever it is had better get his shit together, because standing around losing it in the jungle is not a long-term viable action plan.

A faint ripple of yellow light materializes in the corner of his vision, and after a few alarming seconds Barnes realizes it’s Motherfucker showing him the fluctuating energy output of the fucking… silenced phone alarm going off in his own ass pocket. It must be the one for food. He’s missed - eleven meals. Twelve? He better not make it thirteen.

He climbs back inside the cabin. The tremor in his hand eases a little as he methodically strips energy bars, shoves them in his mouth and chews. One bite per two gulps of water. Three bites to a bar. Twelve bars for sufficient caloric load per sitting. The calculations are easy and familiar.

Motherfucker’s internal sensors are limited, so it’s having a difficult time determining the chemical composition of the bars as he chews. This does not stop it from trying.

Barnes looks at his Hershey kisses, then dumps the entire bag out in his lap and eats until there aren’t any left. He hasn’t tried to bang his head against any walls yet to make everything stop, and that kind of restraint deserves all the positive reinforcement it can get.

Motherfucker only stops trying to access his taste buds once he stops eating. Its exploration of him is a little like being pawed at by a kitten, if the kitten was a massive hyperreactive cloud of electrons batting directly at his nervous system. On some level he gets that it can’t quite understand him, that it doesn’t know what he wants and so it’s compensating by trying to give him everything, but what’s actually happening is that he’s getting a headache which can only be described as existential.

He wanted to talk to the Iron Man suits, and lo, Motherfucker made it happen. It connected to *individual earpieces*. By the end of all this he’ll either fail the Turing test or be the smartest piece of meat ever grafted to an arm prosthetic, and if he doesn’t ride this horse it’ll ride him.

Barnes takes a deep breath and, against his better judgment, gives Motherfucker’s presence a tentative mental nudge. Diagnostic streams sprout instantly in every corner of his awareness. He spends another few minutes with his eyes clamped shut, sorting through the deluge; apparently something about being *fully biolinked* - allows the ship access its own systems in ways that were previously impossible. A lot of cycles are being run for the first time in a very long while. It’s happy there is… wave, particle… light? Sunlight? Because its primary energy source is sadly lacking on this planet. It exists but it’s localized in tiny clusters: the magnetic field is too strong and the atmosphere too dense for proper flow. Radiation. It eats radiation.

Barnes lets his head knock back against the wall with a clunk as Motherfucker carries on at breakneck speed. A lot of its information still doesn’t make any sense to him, mind-meld or no; he is cheerfully informed that both response cores have insufficient something in their something systems, no something something uplink is possible, and a whozit in the whatsis is gone. But - he can tell the optimal function criteria are not met: there’s a greater network this ship should be linked to and it’s not, but now that it’s connected with him it’s fulfilled the base premise of that directive, which means when system connect is not possible, all orders come from the analog command module. The organic component. Him.

Like before, with the anger and the breaking things, he doesn’t see his snapping point until he’s already tipped right over. Very abruptly he cannot fucking take it anymore, and it’s only the months of dealing with his little ragefits that have him stomp out of the ship with clenched fists instead of any - alternatives. How does he make this stop.

He mashes his hands to his eyes again. The ship doesn’t follow orders, it obeys how he imagines the future to be. It does not come easily or fast, but he imagines all the lights and twitches and
tingles gone, his head empty and calm. He imagines Motherfucker touching down, its full weight on the ground, flightless as a stone. He imagines the lights shutting off one by one.

Motherfucker is very confused for a moment, pinging him repeatedly for confirmation, but then all of a sudden it gets it and all of the engines cycle down. The sensors deactivate, the onboard… presence… shuts off, and Barnes eases an eye open in time to see a faint flicker of gold run over the hull as the energy fields dissipate. The noise dissolves in Barnes’ head. In less than a minute, Motherfucker is just a chunk of dull grey metal sitting in the woods.

A breeze winds through the trees. Barnes shivers, even though it can’t be below seventy out here. The forest suddenly seems unnervingly quiet despite the fact that there’s a monkey hooting enthusiastically ten yards above Barnes’ head.

He steps back to Motherfucker and presses a hand to the hull, first his flesh palm, then the metal. It’s as unresponsive as when he first found it in the cave. It’ll probably stay that way until he goes back inside and puts his hands to the console.

Just smart enough to beg for orders, when it’s malfunctioning enough to be cut off from its real purpose of having no mind at all. Of course it’s overjoyed by him. It doesn’t know any better. He tells it what to do.

Whoever built it was a sadist.

Motherfucker lies on the jungle floor, inert. He couldn’t deal with it and so he shut it off, turned out all the lights. Other people used to do the same to him.

Barnes presses his forehead to the cool metal hull. He hopes it doesn’t dream. He thinks he never did, in cryo, in chemically induced coma sleep. Oh, god, let it never have been anything else first. Let this not be the mind of some alien dog, taken from its body and given new metal parts and reprogrammed to serve. Wouldn’t that be worse? Wouldn’t it be better, to never have had anything to lose?

But you can’t go back if there is nothing to go back to. You can’t know there’s something else, anything else outside the blinders put on your existence, not unless something breaks through. Barnes never would have gotten free at all if it hadn’t been for Bucky’s ghost inside him, chewing on his brainstem and clawing at the walls.

Something in him recoils from ascribing anything good to Bucky, who taunted him so thoroughly for so long, but it’s small and foolish in its smallness. The truth is that Bucky got Barnes out, made a crack in the conditioning, laid the rails for everything that lets him fight HYDRA now. It’s like having a life raft that bites your hands as you cling to it, but it’s better than no life raft at all.

Barnes won’t wake Motherfucker now. He really couldn’t handle it, not when he’s balanced so precariously between blind rage and childish weeping. He can tell he’s overstimulated, in a sideways, clinical sort of way. The best thing he can do for himself right now is to stop fucking doing things.

He stares blankly at the jungle undergrowth for a while, then slowly, creakily lies down in the dirt and goes the fuck to sleep.

At least, in theory. His head aches and his eyelids are made of lead but some outstandingly stupid chemical inside him has decided that it’s not fucking done yet. Whatever happened to him up in the sky is still happening. His left arm feels hot at the join of his shoulder in a way that echoes infection. His entire skin is alive with some kind of phantom tingling. Barnes just hopes this is all some kind of stupid cyborg hangover and not his nervous system finally throwing up its hands and
deciding it’s had enough.

Half an hour later he’s had enough, so he shoves himself up and kicks a tree and follows the sounds of water until he finds a small, fast-moving river. A hot bath it ain’t, but he strips off and piles up his gear and drops himself in there anyway.

It’s fucking freezing, fresh mountain runoff halfway to icemelt, but the shock all over his skin is enough to wipe out the crawling, not-quite-pins-and-needles feeling and the wildness in his head too. Barnes grits his teeth and counts to five before leaping back out onto the bank. He’s okay. He’s fine. The water went nowhere near his face and nothing’s closing over his head and he’s outside in an empty forest. He’s alone. The stupid monkey is still fucking hooting.

The air warms as the sun rises higher. Barnes picks a rock to plant his naked ass on and puts his face in his knees. He feels… oversaturated, like his thoughts got their colors turned up too bright. He got hit in the face with Steve’s… everything, but all told Barnes successfully assisted a major operation against HYDRA and its affiliates, secured his allyship with Captain America, and upgraded his… relationship… with his operational gear.

Hurray.

If he wants to throw confetti and blow into a noisemaker it’ll have to wait. Between the thing with Motherfucker and retrieving the suppressed memories of the base, his whole consciousness feels like one big bruise. He really should sleep. Make it two almost sentient machines counting sheep on a jungle floor.

If he can sleep. It’s a different crawling feeling over his skin now, more in his head. He should have stuck around the ships, done his own sweep, but the dull, nervy horror of being back at those coordinates was too much on top of everything else. Steve did run through it all. If Barnes can’t destroy a Nazi stronghold himself he can absolutely rely on Steve to do so.

The offshore op was clearly being run by a different outfit now, anyway. HYDRA was better at hiding itself in plain sight; they’d steadily traded in their hunt for occult tech and better weapons for good old fashioned institutional authoritarianism, which is much less susceptible to a single targeted strike. Unless the strike is led by Widow and Captain America. Who were both on the ships. They wouldn’t have missed anything. He doesn’t have to think about it any more.

When he catches himself dozing off into his knees he drags himself off the rock and back into Motherfucker’s silent cabin. The hatch is slack and drops open at a touch, letting him into the cool darkness. He curls up on his bedroll and demands his fucking sleep.

-o-

“Ah, good old Kazakhstan,” Sam says. “It’s like we never left.”

“We never made it to Kazakhstan,” Natasha says.

“Wait, really?” Sam says. “That was all still Russia?”

“Russia’s big,” Natasha says uninterestedly, merging lanes as they steadily move towards the giant blue and yellow arch that says КАЗАКСТАН. They’d landed the quinjet at something that looked more like an abandoned parking lot than an airport runway, Natasha had produced yet another banged-up car of mysterious origin and they’d trundled on their way. At least they’re
crossing the border legally this time.

Well, “legally”. Sam has no idea what was on the papers Natasha passed through the window at the border checkpoint and he has no desire to ask.

He’s also a little concerned about, well, *leaving a quinjet on Russian soil*, even if it was in a fucking forest somewhere, but this is where selective application of emotional resources comes in and currently he has other priorities, such as googling *where to buy coconut oil in kazakhstan*. He ran out a week ago and, between all the flying he’s done recently and the Soviet weather in his present and near future, he needs to oil himself into the fifth dimension. Doing anything more than a hundred feet off the ground and faster than forty miles an hour is extremely drying and anyone growing up within ten miles of Darlene Wilson learned the gospel of moisturizing early and quick.

Besides, Natasha probably knows what she’s doing. If she wants the Russians to have this quinjet, there’s probably a good reason for it, and that’s assuming she didn’t program it to self-destruct or something the minute they clear county lines. Does Russia even have counties?

It certainly doesn’t have coconut oil, is what google’s telling him. His first result is a goddamn import-export goods database. Truly they have left civilization behind.

Maybe Kazakhstan has coconut trees. Sam’s not above making oil with his own bare hands, if pressed. He survived two tours of duty in Afghanistan, he can figure out how to get the oil out of a goddamn coconut.

“Stark’s started sending me the stuff he extracted from the AIM boats,” Natasha says, from where she’s got her phone in hand over the gearshift, texting rapid-fire with one thumb. Sam would be worried except he saw her swerve around a merging semi without once looking up from her screen. “Not sure it’ll be any help here, but we’ll see. In the meantime, we need to address the Kazakhstan target, and we need to talk to Barnes about his fake funeral.”

“He said he wanted to join us on missions,” Steve says immediately. “We should be talking to him about Kazakhstan, too.”

“Sure,” Natasha says. “We could use an extra pair of hands. Did he say he’d contact you?”

“Yes. He said he’d check in through the phone.”

“Are you gonna have to do interpretive dance again?” Sam asks.

“Hah. I doubt it.” Natasha beckons to Steve. “I can slap on some stopgaps. If he’s agreed to contact, he’ll secure his end as well. It’ll do until I can get specialized equipment. Ideally we meet up in person and hand him an encryption key, but if he doesn’t want to meet up I’m not sure we can set up a secure enough drop point in the time we have.”

Steve, with visible reluctance, gives her his Bucky phone. He’s been clutching it in his hand with the charger plugged into the car port since the minute they got into the car, and he’d been as good as his word and found a thick rubbery case at a gas station rummage bin, a garishly pink monstrosity with a poorly rendered image of a yellow cartoon kitten on the back. At least it makes the phone bulky enough so that it doesn’t look dangerously fragile in his giant super-hands.

“Ideally we have a face to face conversation about the fact that he’s not a secret supersoldier anymore,” Natasha continues. She glances at Steve. “Faking your own death is great, you know. We pull it off and Barnes becomes a free man.”

That hits Steve where he lives, Sam can see, even as it’s equally obvious that Natasha is framing all of it in the way most likely to get Steve on board. At least the glance Steve gives her makes it
clear he can see it too. “Alright,” he says. “And after? When we make sure no one’s chasing him?”

“And after that you’ll have to ask him what he wants,” Natasha says, and Steve nods meditatively and looks back down his hands.

They get to the hotel around sundown. Sam really wants to sit down with his new wing pack and take it apart, really get to know it like his brand new Colonel Rhodes-built baby deserves, but he really should first make sure his pet white boy isn’t once again in his feelings. People are more important than things, is his mom’s favorite saying - at least, after Sierra Mason WHAT are you doing and Samuel Thomas get DOWN from there - and Sam’s always found it a good one, so he has to tell himself the wing pack will still be there when he’s done unpicking the rainbow spaghetti yarn tangle of Steve’s precious little head.

He’d been quiet all throughout the trip back from Chile, which isn't really a surprise. Sam can’t deny at the beginning of all this he had pretty much expected to spend the trip accompanied by a ghost, but while Steve’s devotion is plain, he’s surprisingly tight-lipped about Barnes. He has to be asked directly, and even then he doesn’t give much, and Sam suspects if it weren’t him asking Steve wouldn’t give anything at all.

Then again, Sam has to be either flat drunk or in full counselor mode to talk about Riley, so.

It’s probably fair: right now Barnes kind of is a ghost, not dead anymore but still not really there enough to be alive. So Steve doesn’t talk about Barnes that much, but it’s like all the words he doesn’t say transmute themselves into sheer psychic pressure. It’s not quite a glow, or if it were it’d be a radioactive one: it’s the harder, more desperate version of I’m in love.

It’s not that Sam is having what could be called second thoughts, but watching Steve get a hit of Barnes after jonesing after him for several very destructive months well deserves the drug addict metaphor. On the one hand, he’s still pretty goddamn sure that any attempts to float ideas along the lines of “maybe pursuing your quasi-ex man in this manner is not the healthiest thing for you” will be met with total shutdown. On the other hand: it’s not the healthiest thing for him. If Sam looks at the general timeline, it’s basically a perfect storm of shit: Steve Rogers was talking to strangers, chatting up beautiful black airmen on the Mall, sort of obliquely and ineptly trying to socialize - and twenty minutes later Bucky Barnes is back from the dead, covered in guns and ready to party. For definitions of party that involve tears, blood and the near-collapse of American democracy, anyway.

From the way Steve talks and the stories he’s told him, Sam gets the impression that Steve’s integration into this century had been going with all the speed and exuberance of a dead sloth. Now whatever progress he may have made is irreversibly related to covert warfare (the job he clearly wanted to quit) or Nazi hunting (the job he would, all told, rather not be doing), and if there’s any bigger representative of “the past coming back to haunt you” than Bucky Barnes turning up in evil leather bondage gear, Sam doesn’t want to find it.

Having Barnes here in this century might actually be the best possible thing for Steve, but probably only if the situation doesn’t succumb to the billion and one ways it could all go to shit. If for whatever reason Barnes drops Steve entirely, or gets captured somewhere, or god forbid swan-dives off this mortal coil, then Sam will have to fucking put Steve on suicide watch. Or worse: find a way to do the reverse and stop him from saying fuck it and taking a chainsaw to anything he deems wrong with the world. Sam already got a taste of full vigilante Steve on this trip and while he certainly understood it, he’s not dying to see it again.

The thing is, Sam can’t say he’s not tempted. Working with Steve and Natasha these past months has really redefined his expectations of what a small unit of operatives can do, and that’s saying
something considering the Falcon program ran highly successful missions in two-man teams. The three of them have had frustrations and setbacks, but largely because of the difficulty in sourcing good intel; when they did have targets, they hit like a bowling ball pitched through a glass window. So why stop there? There’s plenty of people doing terrible things around the world, their crimes running unchecked because of politics or apathy or money. God knows Sam has felt sick with frustration and helplessness one too many times. It is so, so tempting say hey Steve, wanna right some wrongs? and then go and fucking do it.

Sometimes Sam has to remind himself why he chose to be a social worker, because some days that version of Sam is about as familiar as the man on the moon. But that Sam was right: violence begets violence, and he’s done his reading. He knows his history. To enact meaningful change you can’t just bust in and kill Hitler or Mussolini or Kim Jong Un, you have to kill them and then stay there. You have to overhaul the entire catastrophes they created, every single day, picking up the pieces and rebuilding from the ground up. Some so-called superhero swooping in and knocking some heads together will just create a power vacuum, and the leaders most likely to fill it are most likely not going to be peace-and-love kumbaya people - or if they are, they’ll get eaten by America or Russia or China first. Sam can’t let his meathead self get all hoorah just because he’s running with the biggest set of biceps on the block.

Besides, the conditions that would push Steve into bitter vigilantism would also make him… not much fun to be around. It’s not that Sam would ditch a friend for not being entertaining enough, but in Steve’s case “not much fun to be around” would be a very gentle euphemism for “fucking rabid”. The quiet kind of rabid, where they’re very polite and steady and nonaggressive right up until they fucking kill you. You have to give guys like Steve plenty of people to care about, because if you don’t all he’ll have left is ideals - and Sam knows there is no amount of blood that can satisfy an ideal.

Sam likes Steve. Steve’s funny, and his awkwardness and obvious discomfort with most forms of human affection stem largely from isolation and inexperience. (Sam’s started low-key training the guy to hug more; it’s not exactly a hardship, since after a startled-horse moment he tends to squeeze back like his life depends on it.) And it’s not that Sam doesn’t agree with Steve’s core, that injustice should never be papered over and defended with phrases like now’s not the time or it would upset the delicate balance of the area. But he wants them to go after bad guys because it helps people and because it’s the right thing to do, not because it’s all Steve has left.

So Sam’s on board with getting Steve and JB back together, in whatever way that looks like, because Steve’s past the point of no return on that guy and reuniting those pasty white lovebirds will save the entire world a lot of grief and blood and screaming. He also has to figure out a way to get Steve to find some chill, which should be fun considering Steve didn’t find any even after seventy years in the world’s biggest refrigerator. If any of Sam’s buddies were coming on that strong to anyone he’d take them aside for a nice chat about how to tone it down a little; Steve should get a couple of nudges in a similar direction. That’s gonna be like scaling a cliff with gelatin for climbing equipment, but hey, it’s not like he expected running with Captain America to be easy.

Also, he wasn’t lying when he drunkenly told Steve he’d have liked to have met Bucky Barnes. Present tense, even. Now that the guy’s proved himself relatively stable and adrenaline isn’t turning Sam’s system into a high-speed hamster wheel, the whole thing where Barnes showed up in the middle of the night to give him mac n cheese is hilarious. Hell, the way the guy fucking ripped out Sam’s steering wheel is now a story that Sam’s gonna tell at parties. (Certain kinds of parties.) It’s the kind of story that’s essentially just I almost died and here’s how, but Sam would never have made it through pararescue if he couldn’t turn that kind of bloody insanity into a joke he can tell to his friends. Hell, he’d never have made it as a counselor. It probably says something about the kinds of personalities that end up in those professions, but fuck it, Sam’s proud.
With all that in mind, he corners Steve for some feelings time - or at least he sets out to, except Natasha corners him first. “Gonna talk to Steve about Barnes?” she asks, stepping out into the hotel hallway between their rooms just as Sam does.

Sam looks at her, then down at his hand on the doorknob, then back to her. “Some days I really wonder if you’re psychic.”

“You were heading to Steve’s room with your problem-solving face on,” Natasha says. “It wasn’t rocket science. You want a consult?”

“A consult?”

“Some of our professional skill sets are very similar,” Natasha points out. “Except when you uncover people’s pain points you don’t grab and twist.”

“Is this you grabbing and twisting?”

“No, this is us addressing a mutual interpersonal concern. Come on, let’s go sit on my balcony.”

They go sit on her balcony. Dusk isn’t kind in this area, turning the buildings around them a smoggy, dirty bluish grey. Natasha’s stubble glints chemically orange under the cheap balcony light, and Sam knows he himself will be washed out, purpled as a bruise. Natasha leans her elbows on the railing and turns to him. “Tell me,” she says.

Sam opens his mouth, stops and sighs. “Okay,” he says. “So the thing is, I don’t know if we’re doing enough here. I know, I know this is a whole thing, with the Winter Soldier and HYDRA and all, but this is also - Steve’s, like, boyfriend, right? But Steve - and I love him, you know I do - Steve is a fucking TKO. And Barnes’ got nothing. No support network, nothing. Steve might get him and they might have their happy reunion, yeah, but what comes after? Because my whole job at the VA was the after, Natasha. The after’s the hardest part. And I don’t wanna be that guy, telling everybody how to live their lives and going all therapist on them, but if I see my friend’s got a problem, I have to help, right? I’m not gonna say nothing.”

Natasha mulls this over, nodding slowly. “I mean - ugh.” Sam knuckles between his eyes. “This is so easy for it to become this… power imbalance codependency nightmare.”

“Codependency is relative,” Natasha says. “So is normal. I think you’re thinking a good thing here, but frankly, it’s not Barnes you should be worried about.”

Sam looks at her sidelong. “Steve’s hard to say no to,” he says.

Natasha’s mouth ticks up. “Not as hard as it is to say no to a handler,” she says. “And Soldier’s done that before, more than once.”

“Alright, you tell me,” Sam says. “You knew him last. Is the Winter Soldier the type to put his own life jacket on first?”

A hair-thin line appears between Natasha’s brows. “Not even slightly.”

“Yeah,” Sam says. “So you see where I’m coming from, with my touchy feely emotions bullshit.”
“It’s not bullshit,” Natasha says absently. Her eyes refocus on Sam. “But if anything, that’s where you have to worry about Steve. Soldier won’t be scared off by intensity. If Steve starts looking too much like a trap he’s going to get a lot worse than hurt feelings, but just being a huge overcommitted weirdo won’t sink that boat. The opposite, actually.”

“Really,” Sam says.

Natasha grins. “We’re not for the faint-hearted, Wilson,” she says. “Yes, Steve shouldn’t try to corner Barnes, but trust me, the intensity’s a good thing. Anyone who isn’t as committed as Steve isn’t going to survive Barnes.”

“That is not as reassuring as you think it is,” Sam tells her.

“That’s the big leagues,” Natasha says, shrugging. “Everything’s a crisis and for lower-stakes stuff you can look elsewhere. We’re here for a reason. Think about what you look for in your partners: do you go chasing after nice normal civilians whose biggest problem is whether or not they’ll get that work promotion?”

Sam opens his mouth to talk about how that’s a terrible way to live, but the thing about Natasha is that she’s not fucking wrong. He’s dated precisely one person with no military or emergency response experience, and that was back in high school when he didn’t have any either. None of his friends are civilians. He knows he doesn’t want to spend every waking minute strapped to a roller coaster, but he does know he’s the kind of person to help a pretty white boy upend the government twenty minutes after meeting each other.

Sam blows out a breath. “We all need so much therapy.”

“They should give us group discounts,” Natasha agrees. “I propose tax breaks for showing up.”

“Wait, you - you pay taxes?” Sam says.

“In eight countries,” Natasha agrees, arching an eyebrow. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“I mean,” Sam says, distracted by bemusement, “How do you even file them? What does it say you do?”


Natasha waggles a hand in an eh gesture. “Software developer isn’t just a cover. I automate a lot of my processes.”

“Life… processes?”

Natasha shrugs. “Web traffic, social media posts, credit history, bank account usage.” She frowns minutely. “Last month one of my Australia lifestyle algorithms had me spending seven hundred dollars on shoes. Not sure if it’s gone rogue or just learning.”

“I genuinely can not tell if you are fucking with me,” Sam says honestly.

“Good,” Natasha says, by all appearances equally honest. “Means I haven’t lost my touch. Paying
taxes is a good thing, you know,” she says. “Very handy for looking like a real and more or less law-abiding person.”

Sam can’t judge: ninety percent of counselor time is explaining life hacks for being a real and more or less law-abiding person. “Anyway,” Natasha says. “The more of a desperate nutcase Steve acts, the less he looks like an elaborately planned trap, but the problem with that is - ”

“- letting Steve get in too deep is like arming a bomb?”

Natasha seesaws her hand. “I’d say more like sawing the safety off a gun,” she says, presumably because she is biologically incapable of fear. “We need Steve being genuinely crazy about his genuine feelings just enough to convince Barnes’ paranoia this isn’t a scam, without having it all go completely operatic on us. It’s a fine line,” Natasha admits. “But I have faith in Steve.”

Sam rolls his forehead back and forth against his fist again. “I mean, I got faith in Steve too,” he says. “But… Barnes fakes his death, okay, but what about Steve? What’s stopping him from following Barnes and… I dunno, running away to start an alpaca farm together. Whatever they end up settling as, who cares - point is, I don’t think Steve would hesitate to burn his entire social sphere, including us, if he sees an opportunity to hole up somewhere with Barnes.” And Steve wouldn’t even see it as burning them, Sam knows.

“Well, I don’t know about the alpacas,” Natasha says. “But Steve’s not going to settle.”

“You sure? You know he came to me, looking for a way out,” Sam says, looking at her. “Right before the helicarriers. He came down to the VA and talked about leaving SHIELD. Talked around it, really. And then HYDRA happened, and, well. I really don’t think we’re getting Captain America back. At least not like before.”

Natasha flaps a hand in a way that somehow manages not to come across as condescending. “Steve can’t retire from being Steve, which means wherever he is he’s going to be neck deep in the worst conflict available. If they do end up alpaca farming it’ll be less than eight months before Steve is taking on, I don’t know, the working conditions of the entire global livestock industry. Whatever it is alpacas are used for. And all that’s apart from the fact that he’s an incredibly valuable piece of bioengineering,” Natasha adds thoughtfully. “Throw in Barnes and you’ve got the two most expensive man-steaks on the planet wrapped up in a nice coupley package.”

“So we make sure he knows he’d make it a liability if he goes with Barnes after we disappear him,” Sam says, trying to forget that Natasha just said man-steaks.

“That too,” Natasha agrees. “If Steve were even remotely capable of keeping a low profile I’d burn him too and set them up somewhere in South Africa, or whatever, but since he’s not we just have to lean into it and make it an advantage. He will go before Congress after this. Once he gets the summons you know he’ll go, and I know he’ll get it. And then I expect national politics are going to get very hairy. That’ll work in our favor. Capitol Hill will be begging for Steve to hole up with his huggy boo six months after we touch down in LaGuardia.”

Sam, still reeling from man steaks and now huggy boo, takes a second to formulate an answer. “So you see Barnes back in America,” he ventures. “Eventually.”

“It’s a definite possibility,” Natasha says matter-of-factly. “It all depends on how these next couple of weeks go, now that Barnes has agreed to two-way communication. It’ll take a lot to pry Steve out of his perceived responsibilities permanently, and after Barnes finishes lying low… well, it depends on how much they’ll want to go home.”

“Do you ever think about retiring?” Sam asks, on impulse.
Natasha glances at him, then sighs. “You know I started my career at age four, right? I’ve had therapists try to find a ‘normal’ for me to get back to. There isn’t one. This is my normal.”

Sam sucks in a slow breath through his teeth as he tries to figure out where to even start with that. “Doesn’t mean you can’t retire,” he says. “Maybe your retirement is alligator wrangling in the Amazon, I dunno. But in general, reducing the violence in one’s life improves everyone’s mental health, regardless of their starting point. It’s one of those built-in mammal brain things.”

Natasha shrugs. “I get plenty of time without violence. I’m stable, I’m functional, my quality of life is not significantly affected by any mental illness I may or may not have. That ticks the box for ‘healthy’ in my book.”

Your ‘quality of life’ baseline is probably fucked to kingdom come, Sam doesn’t say. He did just have his whole deep think about how he himself is a thrill-seeking adrenaline junkie. People in jet-powered combat-optimized wing packs don’t get to throw stones. “Fair enough,” he says instead. He sighs. “You right. I do want those tax breaks. Maybe some kind of cash back program every time I gotta buy some Ativan.”

“Free donut with every panic attack,” Natasha agrees. “You going back to the VA after?”

“Maybe,” Sam says meditatively. He feels greyed out, all of a sudden; the worry’s gone, but all that means is the chemical process just wore itself out for now. “Should probably do my master’s and become an actual therapist.”

He needs to figure out his own after, too. He’d tendered his resignation at the VA knowing full well how hard it’d be to get back on a federal payroll, but Steve and Natasha are the ones bankrolling this field trip and he has some savings, so he’s got money, at least for a little while. He’d emailed his parents asking to put his house up for rent, too, when it became obvious they’d be in this for the long haul. He’ll deal with it when it comes.

And in the meantime, just being friends with Steve will probably take care of injecting all the emergencies he can handle into his life. And if it doesn’t - well. He can’t deny Natasha’s method of leaning into it isn’t unappealing. He’ll become a volunteer firefighter or take up an extreme sport or two. He and Steve could probably both benefit from turbo-bungee or mountain mud humping or whatever it is normal bored white people with a deathwish do.

Hell, he has bona-fide private property Stark Industries wings now. Those should be good for a couple of covert flights, if he goes somewhere remote enough. If Stark wants them back he’ll have to fistfight Sam in a parking lot first.

“Don’t worry about Barnes,” Natasha says. “He’s been doing pretty good handling Steve so far. And Steve will back off when he has to. He did on the ships, didn’t he? And we’ll be there to help.”

“Yeah,” Sam says, subdued but willing to believe her. “We will. You’re right.”

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When Sam knocks on Steve’s door he opens it with the pink phone in his other hand. Sam’s not sure he’s put it down at all. “Hey man,” he says. “You text him already?”

“No,” Steve says, hovering for a second before padding over to the bed and sitting down on the
“Natasha said wait until he makes contact.”

“Good plan,” Sam says. “Better not to push.”

“Yeah.” Steve looks down at his hands, turning the phone over. “You know how we had that talk about my superpowers?”

“A couple of seconds of it,” Steve admits. He doesn’t look upset to hear them talking about him, at least. “Just the part about not being worried about Bucky. And being more worried for me.”

“Yeah?” Sam says, then stops. “Oh. You heard that, huh.”

“Yeah.” Steve says, then stops. “Oh. You heard that, huh.”

“A couple of seconds of it,” Steve admits. He doesn’t look upset to hear them talking about him, at least. “Just the part about not being worried about Bucky. And being more worried for me.”

“Yeah.” Sam says, then stops. “Oh. You heard that, huh.”

“Yeah.” Steve says, then stops. “Oh. You heard that, huh.”

Sam exhales. He did come in here to talk about it. “Okay. So. You know I’m on board with getting you back on the Buck truck.”

Steve’s mouth twitches. “...But?”

“But I wanna make sure we do this right, man. What’s the plan for talking to him? What are you gonna say?”

“I want to help him,” Steve says firmly, which doesn’t exactly answer Sam’s question. “Whatever help he needs.”

“What if he wants something you... don’t want to do?” Sam asks.

“Then we’ll talk it out,” Steve says, resolute. “He’s talking to me now. To us. He’ll listen.”

“What if he doesn’t?” Sam asks. “I don’t - look, I hate to be this guy, but really, Steve. You’re clearly an emotionally charged situation for him, and he’s not exactly harmless. You know he isn’t. And Natasha thinks if anything you do starts looking a little like HYDRA...”

Steve looks back down at his hands in his lap, then up at Sam. “Natasha’s smart,” he says. “But Buck didn’t kill me when he was out of his mind, or after I broke his shoulder and dropped ten tons of girder on him. He didn’t leave me to drown. And if he hasn’t, he’s not going to. And I don’t mean - if he doesn’t want to be - with me, that’s fine. But if he wants anything from me, he’s going to get it.”

“See, that’s the other thing. You gotta be careful, okay? We still don’t know much about Barnes’ situation. We don’t wanna put pressure on him when he’s dealing with everything else. And - look, I want the happy ending for y’all, aright? I really do. But sometimes you can’t - you can’t predict what’s going to happen, and you do get the worst case scenario, and...” and I don’t want to watch this happen to you, Sam doesn’t say, already feeling incoherent. It was bad enough when it happened to me.

He thought he’d been doing so well, distancing himself from this. He hasn’t lain awake thinking what if it were Riley since the week after the cave thing. And Sam’s good, he knows he’s good at taking care of his brain and stability and emotional health, but apparently god likes to smack him back down into humility every once in a while.

It must be all over his face, though, because Steve gets up and immediately wraps Sam in both arms. Sam hug back on automatic, still caught in his brain’s loop of yup, you sure did lose your shit just now. Jesus. At least it looks like the hug training has taken.

“We’re not gonna fuck up,” Steve murmurs into Sam’s temple. “The worst case scenario already happened, and we’re alive. And I’ll be careful. I promise. I’m sorry.”
“No, man, it’s just - ugh.” Sam knocks his forehead against Steve’s shoulder. “Shit. I’m pouring all my issues on this, don’t listen to me.”

“I am listening to you,” Steve says, still in that gentle voice. “Issues or not, I don’t think you’re wrong.”

Sam laughs a little, eyes squeezed shut. “I’m probably not.”

“I know what it looks like. Believe me, I know. Buck knows I’m like this, but I won’t - I hear you, I won’t push him for anything he doesn’t want.”

“I just,” Sam says, and has to swallow. “This is hitting me harder than I thought. And I’m not - you gotta believe me, I’m not jealous. That’s not it. This is just - a second chance, you know? I don’t wanna mess this up.”

“We won’t,” Steve says quietly, resting a warm hand at the base of Sam’s skull. “We won’t, I promise. I hear you. We’ll do it right. You’ve never steered me wrong, okay? And I’m listening to you. We’ll get it right.”

“We’ll all go home,” Sam says.

“All of us,” Steve agrees. “And - Sam. You know whatever you need, you get from me too, right? If you have to go - ”

That rouses Sam a little. “You trying to get rid of me, white man?”

“No! Just - ”

“You tryna talk me out of this? Now?”

“Well - ”

“White man, if you make me admit I’m enjoying our stupid field trip, I am dyeing your shampoo.”

Steve cackles a laugh that’s only a little wet. “I won’t admit it if you won’t.”

“Jesus God,” Sam says, wiping his eyes with the back of his wrist without letting go of Steve. “What’ll I do at home, huh? Text you memes neither of us understands and watch another goddamn rerun of Friends? No, man. I’m in this. Don’t start thinking I’m not a hundred percent just because I get a little soppy sometimes.”

“I’d never,” Steve says. “I never think you’re anything but a hundred percent.”

“That’s pretty queer, Rogers.”

“Oh yeah? Who told you that?”

“You did.”

“You sure? But I’m a big strong man,” Steve says. “A big red-blooded American man who just admitted he won’t admit he likes punching things, which sounds pretty manly to me - ”

Sam cracks up, rolling his forehead on Steve’s shoulder. “Well I guess if it’s Captain America telling me,” he says.

“That’s right. I’m the highest-ranking queer in America and I get to say what goes.”
“You’re a captain, Rogers. You think there’s no gay majors in the Army? No generals with some finer tastes in life?”

“I guess you’re right. And not even a captain anymore, now.” Steve exhales, settling a little further against Sam. He tips their heads together and they stand for a moment. “I never once thought you were jealous, Sam,” he says quietly. “And it’s fucking unfair. I just wish I could have been there to help you.”

Sam squeezes him, closing his eyes on Steve’s shirt again. “It is unfair,” he manages.

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

“Can’t be making it any easier on you.”

Sam chokes out a laugh. “Steve, Riley’s looking at me right now, laughing his fool head off watching me get overinvested in another goddamn white boy. He is gonna have miles of jokes. My ass is gonna get read left to right and I will not have a single moment of peace, and if nothing else it’s worth it just to give him the joke material.”

Steve’s laughing too, now, chest shaking against Sam’s. “I’d still be here if this wasn’t about Barnes,” Sam continues. “And - I don’t know, you can’t predict brains all the way, but I think this might help. Bringing him home.”

“I hope so,” Steve says, pressing his forehead to Sam’s temple, smiling but serious. “And if it doesn’t, we’ll find something else. You’re my best friend, Sam. I want you happy too.”

“Yeah,” Sam says, leaning into Steve some more. “You’re my best friend too. Shit. This is so fucking gay, Rogers.”

“Exactly as advertised.”

“Fuck.” Sam giggles.

“I mean, it’s nice too,” Steve says, in tones of elaborate allowance. “If you’re into that sort of thing. Hugs, violence…”

“We’re men of depth and versatility,” Sam agrees, pulling himself together. “We kick ass, we cry, it’s the whole empanada.”

“We’re paragons, Wilson, and don’t you forget it.” Steve sighs. “And it’s not all bad. The violence. It gets things done.”

“But do we do it because we genuinely need to or because we’re so traumatized that it’s the only context in which our brains can process satisfaction,” Sam says, mostly on automatic.

Steve puts his chin on Sam’s shoulder. “That sounds pretty philosophical.”

“A lot of psych shit gets pretty philosophical. You’d love it.”

“Well,” Steve temporizes. “I mean, as long as we’re not hurting anybody - ”

Sam loses it again, banging his forehead into Steve’s neck. “Oh yeah, ” he manages. “Violence is fine, as long as we don’t hurt anybody - ”

“You know what I mean!” Steve whacks at him halfheartedly with the back of his hand. “Hurti
people isn’t the point.”

“You know what I mean!” Steve whacks at him halfheartedly with the back of his hand. “Hurting people isn’t the point.”

“And I don’t use shampoo.”

Sam draws back to look at Steve’s face. “What?”

“If you want to dye me you’ll have to try a different way. I just use soap.”

“White man, I have been living in your asscrack for the past half year, how did I not know this about you?”

“Guess you haven’t actually been as close to my ass as you think you have,” Steve says. “Nothing can actually live in your ass, Steve, you have no ass,” Sam tells him. “The zone is uninhabitable. The square footage is zero.”

“Maybe that’s what peak human condition is supposed to be, huh,” Steve shoots back. “This ass isn’t an accident, it was engineered.”

“I have seen peak human condition, and her name is Beyoncé,” Sam tells him. “You can have second place. Maybe third.”

“Well, I can’t argue with that,” Steve says.

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The dreams are insane. He is gasping under Stevie. He is drifting in deep space. He brings his knife to his wrist and slits his skin but it doesn’t hurt and it’s metal inside, the blood sluicing off the alien silver. Steve is telling him there’s dinner on the table but he’s busy, he’s categorizing ion streams in the heart of a dying star. He’ll be there in a minute. It’ll all resolve itself in a minute. He is looking in the mirror and returning null set null set null set.

Barnes gasps awake with an unidentifiable noise caught in his throat, and for a long moment he doesn’t understand whether he’s woken at all. An understanding of three-dimensional space unrolls around him in every direction, more than a map. On the horizon, there is an echo of familiarity, a signal that slapped itself onto his windshield and gave him everything, identified and matched.

He can find Steve blind, now, however many thousands of miles away. Anywhere on Earth.

This is more than memory. The Steve in his head now is practically crackling with clarity, not fogged over or confused at all. He is not a fragment or a dream. Barnes knows Steve. Whether it’s Motherfucker or his own head or the way Steve spoke to him, easy and familiar, it’s a real feeling now, maybe the realest one he’s ever had.

And it barely hurts to think of him. Or rather it hurts in a different way, the stabbing manufactured headaches switched out for a tight, uncertain ache under his breastbone. Maybe Motherfucker’s data overrode the migraine protocol, since it seems to be permeating everything else. Steve’s biosignal sure slotted in neatly with all the other Steve data like there was a space waiting for it.
Barnes has a suspicion that the new pain might be all him.

Then his left side jerks, and he realizes what he really got slapped awake by was a muscle spasm. Another muscle twitches, this time in his trapezius, going into his neck. Disoriented, he registers that the weird tingling is back and then he… suddenly regains feeling in his left nipple.

This comes as a surprise, primarily because he hadn’t been aware that feeling needed to be regained in the first place. Now sensation is there and spreading, and it makes him realize there must be nerve damage - correction, there had been nerve damage numbing a significant chunk of his left pectoral, right around the arm.

There’s no going back to sleep after that. Another side effect of getting extra personal with Motherfucker, probably. The tingling’s already fading, at least; after some awkward, hesitant groping around his upper back it turns out that he still can’t feel most of his left shoulderblade. He had no idea. Under his flesh hand it feels more or less like his other shoulder, but he can’t feel his own touch.

It’s probably because his left shoulder is just a surface meat coating over all the alien space metal right underneath. He cautiously prods around the body, but if there’s any other numb areas they don’t make themselves readily apparent. Then again, he hadn’t noticed his goddamn nipple was out of commission, nor his back shoulder, so what the hell could he know. He can barely identify hunger, and he’s pretty sure that’s not because of his arm. If his nervous system has a couple of screws loose it might’ve happened at any point in the past seventy years and had nothing to do with any aliens or spaceships or extraterrestrial anything.

But connecting to Motherfucker definitely crossed some wires, and as he gets up for the day it becomes apparent it’s not just the dreams, either. Jailbreaking his memories yesterday seems to have knocked a few other things loose, because random associations start sprouting as he realizes he’s still naked and starts hunting around for his pants. He catches a glimpse of the sharpied numbers on his calf, flinches, flinches again when it somehow comes with the raw, sharp smell of permanent marker, chemical ink, Steve’s pens and pencils and paintbrushes -

He looks away hastily from his body and finishes zipping up his pants with his eyes shut, just in case. It doesn’t help with the - side effects. The memories. His hands, washing paintbrushes in a bucket, pungent and thick. Steve fell asleep at the table again and he swears black and blue when the paints dry out. Ruins the brushes. Gotta wash ‘em in turpentine. They need a place with bigger windows, better light. Better ventilation. Bucky can barely stand to breathe this shit, let alone - Steve -

Barnes finds his hands moving, contracting around nothing, the motions of washing the ghost of a brush that’s been rotting in some landfill for years. Steve had drawn - Steve had drawn. Signs, advertisements, little cartoons. A Barnes family portrait. A gift, for Christmas, for everything, for the year Aunt Sarah died and Ma fed him and Da arranged the funeral. And for Bucky he’d taken a brand new card deck and painted over the backs, illustrated and labeled the entire thing in planets, moons. Constellations. Bucky’s year of trying to stargaze in Prospect Park, spending whole afternoons at the planetarium even though he knew he was really too old for this sort of thing. One card had a little red spaceship on it, and another one a little spaceman, his brown hair neatly coiffed inside his fishbowl helmet, and he hadn’t packed the deck to go to Basic with him, or Italy, because he knew how much mud was in his future and like hell was he risking his present getting torn or dirty or soaked -

Barnes startles himself out of his skin by laughing, big harsh hah hah hahs that come from the belly up. It’s not very funny but the irony alone - Stevie drew Bucky as a moon man and here he is. His spaceship ain’t red and his hair might never be that neat again, but he’s certainly living in the future alright. Possibly more in the future than anyone else, between the ship and the arm.
He stops laughing as he flexes his metal hand, sobering. His mother, his sisters, his card deck, his mind - for a given value of his. Unease lies over all of it even as it gets harder and harder to think through the delineation: everything’s leaking at the seams and it’s all pouring into Barnes. He was Bucky but now he isn’t, but… then what? What comes after that?

There is a difference. There must be, if only because has no idea what to even do with the idea that someone, somewhere painted him the stars.

He wonders where the deck is now.

Maybe he’ll ask Steve.

That’s the same Steve, painting Bucky the night sky and plastering himself to Barnes’ windshield. Little painting guy, big punching guy. Of course he’s the same. And he probably knows, and he’ll certainly answer Barnes. Steve was - worried about him.

Well, Barnes did promise to check in. And he will. But not without clothes on.

He gets another flash of ink as he hunts down his undershirt; the URLs he’d written onto his forearm are splotchy and faded, the letters unreadable. He feels a faint pang at that. Wilson had been - kind. It feels a little like he’s tossed aside a very politely worded condolence card. Sorry to hear that your brain is an angry hedgehog. Get well soon!

The associations do not stop. He feeds himself some more of the emergency protein bars, and realizes in amazement that he hates the taste of strawberry. Before today it hadn’t even registered. Tying his shoelaces brings about whole chunks of mundane childhood school memories, which are objectively boring as bricks but which Barnes still turns over like rocks with bugs underneath, abrim with fascination and disgust. There are multiple occasions of crying at the movies. Bucky had been a real snot-nosed little mess.

Barnes did completely lose the plot over an ipod, but Barnes has PTSD coming out his ears. What’s Bucky’s excuse.

So the memories aren’t flashbacks but they are all-consuming, pulling him out of the present with the sheer amount of information presented. Maybe this is just what it’s like to experience a memory for the first time. The alien uplink definitely fucked around in there, though, because the feeling of Steve plastering himself to Motherfucker’s hull somehow inserted itself neatly into his florid homosexual sex corner and now every once in a while he gets a full, comprehensive understanding of Steve as a complete organic lifeform accompanying the occasional stray memory surrounding his dick. This is unfair. No one should have to experience any kind of sex while having a molecular understanding of their - their partner’s biosignature. It’s just not something that’s meant to happen.

But it also feels - reciprocal, somehow. It seems like Steve knows so much about Barnes that Barnes doesn’t know himself. The very least Barnes can get in return is the specific density of Steve’s tissues and his exact core temperature. It’s not much, but Barnes is used to not much. Not much is all he’s got.

But he is going to have more.

Barnes digs out the unnetworked laptop he uses to store bits of useful software and hooks it up the phone. It’s pretty unlikely that anybody has managed to identify this line as one to listen in on, but better paranoid than fucked. He sends an empty text message to the only contact as a heads up and starts securing the phone.
It dings just as he pushes the last bit of code. *Line secure?*

15 min, he texts back, one eye on the download progress bar on the laptop screen. He can tell it’s Widow talking to him, though he has no idea how: he’s fairly sure there had been no cell phones around when they had worked together, and Bucky and Steve had *definitely* never texted each other back in nineteen fucking thirty. The download finishes and the phone reboots and starts up. *Ok,* he texts, pressing send. Widow or not, Steve’s definitely reading these. *Go.*

The text-in-progress bubble bounces around for some time. They better not be composing a goddamn novel over there. Barnes drums his fingers on his thigh, feels stupid, stands up, feels stupid some more. They’re still typing. Barnes drops down angrily and starts pounding out push-ups until *finally* the phone dings.

It’s a mission briefing. The coordinates are unfamiliar and none of the information is ringing any bells, which is frankly a blessing and probably means this is one of the newer HYDRA splinter cells. The location is Kazakhstan and the mission start is tomorrow at sundown. They’ll make contact to create an action plan and discuss op details tomorrow afternoon.

The text bubbles start up again. *Need anything?*

That’s Steve. Barnes’ thumb hovers over the keyboard, but eventually he types *no. all ok* and shuts off the phone.

It is appallingly stupid to have his heart pounding like this, so he immediately returns to the mission briefing and dives in.

The target is a mining operation, located at the foot of a mountain the next town over. The objective is half investigation, half sabotage: Widow knows there’s HYDRA money at play here, but she doesn’t know exactly what they’re doing, whether this is a front or the cell just wants control of a rare metal mine. The intel is not as detailed as it could be, which means Widow doesn’t have as much information as she likes; Barnes is sure, at least, that she and Steve would have given him everything.

He could scout. All he did on the last mission was show up and try not to have a migraine. He’ll do better this time. And he has capabilities that they don’t. They don’t need another soldier or another spy; who else could they need, between Widow and Captain America? And Wilson can fly, but he can’t fly invisible. And he has all day. Barnes could fill in the gaps.

He looks over at the console, still dark. After food and sleep he’s a lot more clear-headed, but the underlying realization didn’t change. It doesn’t feel good to have just shut Motherfucker off last night, but there was no way he could have handled leaving it awake. What would he have done, anyway? “Fix” it? It’s happy, for whatever value of happy is coded in. Shouldn’t that be what matters? It’s his own inability to deal that’s causing the problem. And it’s not like he knows how to help it. Or if there’s even anything to help.

It boots up under his hands like it nothing happened, rapid-fire cycling through processes and arriving at all systems ready with a sparkling !!!!!. “Back at you,” Barnes mumbles, patting vaguely at the console, and takes them up on a course for Kazakhstan.

That’s most of the morning, flying across most of Asia, and when he arrives at the right coordinates he starts scouting right away. He starts with a series of slow concentric circles that sweep over the entirety of the site; it’s late afternoon, high summer, and the mountain valley light turns everything it touches to blazing gold. It’s very beautiful, though it would probably be more beautiful if Barnes knew he wasn’t staring at a terrorist front.
It does look like a standard mining operation: ore is being extracted from the mountainside and put through the rudimentary processing of the attached refinery. The work has carved a pit into the landscape, and after some trial and error Barnes gets Motherfucker to give him a bunch of flickers and tingles that indicate that whatever evil is going on down there, it’s hasn’t got much on the energy front. Maybe they do have more fucking… Tesseract lasers here, but if they do it must all be turned off.

There are warehouses, and a couple trailers that look to be serving as office buildings. Floodlights are set up throughout the site, though most of them are concentrated around the main cluster of buildings and the main road to the quarry pit. The town is right on the other side of the mountain, so as far as Barnes can tell there are no barracks or residential quarters set up at the compound.

That’ll either make it harder or easier, depending on the personnel. Widow will know. She’s probably doing her own scouting right now, maybe even in the town itself. He can trust her to identify the correct targets and order the execution, if she won’t go ahead and carry it out herself. It’s possible none will even happen: the primary objective might turn out to be simply sabotaging the compound and interrupting the supply of whatever it is they’re scraping out of the mountainside.

Barnes retreats back into the mountains, deciding it’s not worth it to dip into town for supplies given his mission timeframe. A nice, quiet evening holed up doing nothing but sorting music instead sounds like perfect bliss. Usually his mission prep has consisted of either crouching motionless in varied unpleasant locations or grimly marching through another chapter of WEREWOLF COWBOY: MIDNIGHT RODEO to stave off the latest in PTSD symptom roulette, but that isn’t enjoyable so much as it is distracting. Tonight he’s going to make his playlists and download all the dubstep he can find.

At sundown he straps on his usual small arms, leaving his rifle. He’s unlikely to encounter anything scouting that’ll require even his handguns, but it’s habit to gear up. He wrinkles his nose as he puts on the knockoff paintball mask, but it’s better than nothing. Going on any kind of mission with his face bare feels unnatural and kind of silly, like donning his jacket and boots but failing to put on pants. His hair is uncooperative; it’s all snarled up by the interruption in regular bathtimes, but liberal application of detangler lets him manage a clumpy braid to tuck under his collar, even if it does make his entire head stink vaguely of vanilla.

The terrain here is mostly scrubland, bare of cover save for the occasional stony outcrop or bedraggled evergreen. He touches down half a mile from the quarry itself, jumping down from Motherfucker’s hatch and leaving it to hover with an absent pat to its underside. It pings him with a couple of queries as he walks away, but it stays where it’s put and doesn’t try flooding his awareness with whatever it deems helpful.

It’s cold. Frost rimes the ground and the sting of the air on his face is a sharp contrast to the humidity inside his makeshift mask. The compound is the only structure on the valley plain and so with its floodlights lit it can be seen for miles, a squat halogen glow defining the landscape. There are small moving lights, too: trucks going in and out of the compound.

Barnes circles the entire base twice on foot, padding through the scrub and letting his senses drink in the dark. He finds motion detectors, the serious ones that can be calibrated to ignore animals and even most big game, and barbed wire strung along the top of the perimeter chainlink fence. There’s clusters of recessed floodlights facing outward at key points around the compound, kept dark but presumably operational at a moment’s notice; they’re well-hidden, and Barnes only notices them at the end of his second pass. It’s a kind of lure: the obvious compound floodlights make any intruders think they’re not as deep as they are inside the security perimeter, and when they hit the threshold you use the other set of lights, blinding them and painting a target for your
It’s been quite a while since he hit a HYDRA base with a security head that’s actually competent, but it had to happen sooner or later. The remote cells have had time to regroup, and for his last dozen forays he’d actively advertised that it was the Winter Soldier ripping through bases. Sooner or later someone would have been prepared.

Not prepared enough, of course. He’s dealt with much worse than floodlights and motion detectors. He could probably use Motherfucker to turn this place into a steaming puddle of glass and mineral impurities, but that’s not what he’s here for. Steve needs intel. He is scouting.

Besides, there might be prisoners in there. It’s why he always goes in before laying any charges.

The few times he’s found captives his recall seems even more compromised than the usual. He doesn’t like - prisoners. His brain doesn’t want anything to do with any of that. He knows he gets them out, shears the locks off the doors, destroys the security systems; there’s a half-recorded memory of him hauling a body out over his shoulders, still breathing, a woman running ahead of him with her hospital gown flapping. Another woman running, a limp child in her arms. He doesn’t know what happened before that, or after. He doesn’t know where he set the breathing body down or when it happened or if they were the only ones.

He thinks it was a very early mission, very soon after the helicarriers. He only ever found captives in the early days after Insight. The longer he went the better his memory got and the more time HYDRA had to move anyone valuable and kill anyone not. Sometimes all he found was an in-house crematorium.

He hopes he took the breathing body to a hospital. He hopes the running woman ran as far as she had to. He knows he did what he could, because he knows he never left a base unburned. The mission is thorough when it comes to things like that.

There probably aren’t any prisoners here. This is the biggest compound he’s hit since leaving the USA, but most facilities meant to deal with people look like office complexes, not remote manufacturing outposts.

He’s still going to check.

He finishes his third loop around the base, ending up at the point furthest from the main entrance, at the far end of the quarry. He considers the landscape; there’s no real way to get past the motion detectors unless he jumps right over, which isn’t impossible but would require him to basically do a pole vault at this distance. There’s nothing around he could use as a pole even if he did decide to go that route.

He turns his back on the quarry and looks up. If he concentrates and closes his eyes, he can more or less tell where Motherfucker is.

It’s possibly the worst time to experiment, but nothing ventured, nothing gained. Here, boy, Barnes thinks nonsensically, then NO nonono shitshishit as Motherfucker zips towards him, uncloaked, on a trajectory that would take it directly over the base. It rolls, confused, and the next ten minutes involve Barnes shuffling around with his eyes shut, waving his arms like an air traffic controller as he tries to get the spatial reasoning right enough to direct Motherfucker to him without having it buzz over the base.

“You are very stupid.” he whispers to it as it finally zooms up, vibrating as it dips towards him. He bypasses the hatch to climb up onto its hull. “A fucking dumbass. Okay. C’mon. Mush.”
It’s no less wobbly directing it from up close, flying them clumsily over the motion sensor perimeter while crouched on Motherfucker’s hull like an animatronic gargoyle. He jumps off once they’re well inside, then sends it back to where it came from, zipping off in erratic curves as Barnes tries to at least direct it to fly over the perimeter.

When it’s back to where it started, humming to itself, he slithers down the bank of the quarry and trots along the sunken access roads. They won’t be expecting anyone to come out of the mine, and this way he’ll be able to sneak in and map all the guards and cameras and access points.

If there are prisoners here, he’s going to do better this time. He can’t give them anything like papers, but he can give them cash, and explain things, and take them to a hospital if they need it. Hell, he can make Steve explain things. They’d probably like that a lot better than having a masked nightmare stomp in, shoot everybody, drag them out of the building and then stagger off without a word, or possibly with lots of words but none that make sense since at the time all the talking he did was yelling at his own hallucinations.

Barnes can probably do better than that now, but he knows Steve would be preferable nonetheless. Steve’s good with prisoners. Barnes might not have to deal with any of them at all, assuming there even are any.

Cheered by this realization, he sidles into the compound and finds a roof to climb.

The office trailers are sealed, lights off, with all the activity centered around the warehouses. They’re just big shells for sealed containers and a couple of piles of dirt - there’s a couple of men with clipboards going through and making checkmarks about things, but since they seem to be taking inventory and he can’t just yank a clipboard out of their hands he leaves them to it.

He has more luck at the refinery. A lot of the trucks are emerging from there, driving away down the main road and leaving the compound through the front gate. Barnes circles the main loading dock before finding a back door; most of the corridors are empty. He follows the clanks and human voices until he finds the door to a catwalk, stretching out over a large open floor.

There’s a lot of complicated equipment in here, and it looks like it’s being packed up. There are techs in coveralls dismantling what looks like a high-tech woodchipper, and two others with forklifts loading up the parts. There’s a row of trucks parked along the equipment line, ready to go.

There are a pairs of guards around the room and at the loading dock entrance, but they’re holding their rifles loose and down low, calling jokingly to each other. He didn’t see or hear any patrols on his way through the building. The whole operation is hurried but not frantic - they’re not panicking here, but there’s a definite air of urgency throughout.

Barnes can’t make heads or tails out of what the equipment is, so he settles for memorizing the number and positions of the guards. He’ll break into some offices on the way out and see if he can find any relevant paperwork. If HYDRA’s packing things up that means all of this is going somewhere, and they should really know why.

Then a guard runs in yelling something in Kazakh - which, shockingly, is not a language available to Barnes, considering he has Uzbek - and before he has time to bug out everyone else bugs out for him.

For a second Barnes thinks Steve somehow found out he was here, mistook scouting for capture and barged in with shield a-swingin’, but then he hears Солдат! Солдат сол жерде! and his blood goes cold. He knows what soldat means, and he knows the guy isn’t talking about their own security forces.
He doesn’t waste time on subtlety: somehow they already know he’s here. He drops out of the catwalk and lands directly between the nearest guard pair, breaking the first one’s neck and snapping the strap of his rifle. *How* did they *find* him. Did he miss a security cam? A sensor? Kalashnikov in hand, he turns already aiming, then -

The other guard shouts - something. The asset can’t quite hear it. It’s - a word? Something. The asset stumbles, drops to one knee. Sudden muscle weakness. The rifle starts to slide out of its hands. What is the - mission. Where the hell is - Why is it -

Electrical current courses through its body and for five white hot seconds that’s it, that’s all there is. The pain lets up but then another sunburst of agony, another, stun batons, the special ones - calibrated just for him -

Something connects, or resets, or just fucking breaks in the scrawling whiteout malfunction of his mind. The next time the baton comes down it gets snapped in half.

The guard might’ve learned how to push the button on a shock stick but clearly nobody ever taught him not to get too close. The thing that is not the asset is a mad dog. Rabid. And the target is within arm’s reach.

The thing that is *not* the asset claws at the guard’s face with his metal hand, crushing through his zygomatic arch and pulping half his skull. Bullets fill the room before the guard’s body even hits the ground, chips of concrete spraying into the air, but he doesn’t care, he’s up and he is moving.

He makes it behind the trucks but there’s more men there, guns, so he jumps up and vaults onto the truck cabs, running across the room on their roofs. There’s another shout, another word he can’t quite hear, and through his consequent stagger and the roar in his ears he can hear a fireteam getting into position. He fumbles a handgun off his belt and empties the clip in their direction, just barely staying upright, then gives up and drops off the next cab, rolling badly to hit the ground and get up running.

The handlers. He should’ve hunted them harder, gotten them all before they could do - this. Working his brain from the inside is something only they could do. Words he can’t quite hear. Someone must have gotten smart. If you know a kill code for the Winter Soldier you give it to *all* your guards, on the off chance someone gets in a lucky strike, and even if you don’t get him you can get him - disoriented -

He’s running away from the main entrance, the only thing ahead of him a personnel-sized door but he can’t *not* take it, bursting into the maintenance hallway beyond. Cabling runs along the walls, emergency lighting every ten feet, the door banging open again behind him -

There’s a sudden searing shock on his side that spins him around and slams him into the wall. The high-caliber round goes through his armor like it’s made of cardboard. The next shot punches a hole where his head would have been, as he drops to the floor and kicks himself around the corner.

Blood is pumping out under his armor, his right side going numb. He tries to jerk on the straps across his tac jacket to create a makeshift compression seal but the straps aren’t there. This isn’t his jacket. The mask isn’t right either. He isn’t - he’s not -

Someone shouts something *again* and he nearly blacks out, slumping further against the ground. Blood spatters the floor in front of him as his nose begins to bleed. This time the disorientation barely clears: there’s something like a high-pitched whine in his head, making it difficult to - see? Lights are cropping up in his vision. He doesn’t know when he hit his head but right now he can’t know up from down. He can hear the thunder of collapsing infrastructure. It’s coming closer. He
needs to get out of here.

The ceiling doesn’t cave in so much as explode downward. Something punches through, crashing halfway through the floor and reversing like a jackhammer before spinning to a halt right in front of him. Chunks of masonry spray past, blown by its momentum, and the !!!!! is a siren shriek in his skull, and that’s - his spaceship. His spaceship. That's Motherfucker in front of him, and it’s here, and that means he is not going to die in this pit with the slurry of his mind circling the drain.

Barnes doesn’t fall into the ship so much as it scoops him up, the hatch slamming shut practically on his toes. All outside noises cut right off. His getaway ride is a fortress and the fortress came to him, and he hits the floor on his knees and the world swims in his vision and he is - bleeding out.

He sprawls against the wall. Damage assessment. Bullet in his gut. Didn’t get his lungs. Maybe didn’t get intestines. Who knows if he even has a kidney on that side. Blood. He needs to stop the bleeding.

The cabin is small enough that here on the ground more or less everything is within arms’ reach. He rips off part of his sleeping bag, wads up a chunk, yanks his body armor up and starts shoving it in. Tightening those straps back over the makeshift pressure bandage is an agony that has to happen. The constant query query query from the ship at least distracts him from the sharp animal wail that makes its way out through his teeth.

A series of fast pinging noises echo from the outside, and he realizes they are being shot at. They are still in the hole. He staggered up against the console and once his bloody palm stops skidding across the surface the full infostream connects. He can’t think, can’t pick a target, just hunches over and gasps and shoves something like a scream out through his hands and it’s like the ship was just waiting.

He feels the vibration of… whatever he did… even through the shields. There’s the distant understanding that he and Motherfucker are now standing still in the middle of an explosive fireball, but the shields are strong and inside the ship they are untouchable.

The exothermal energy readings go on for some time. Barnes focuses on trying to breathe. He tells Motherfucker to go.

He doesn’t look out the windshield. It’s all he can do to handle the other data and still keep them airborne. He stays propped against the console, panting so hard he gags, blood seeping down his side. They go up and up and up, until there’s nothing around them, until he can feel the pressure that means gravity start to fade away.

When he can’t stand anymore he slides down, trembling, and claws his way over to his medical kit.

His vision starts to swim again as he fumbles the supplies out. He tugs out the sleeping bag fabric with a squelch, gets the tac top and armor just enough out of the way to get at the wound, then wads the collar of his jacket in his mouth. Query, query, query. Shut up. He gets the long tweezers in his steady metal hand and bites down as he goes fishing for the bullet.

He only greys out twice. The bullet gets dropped to the floor somewhere along with the tweezers, his gasping loud over the wet clink-clink. He lies panting on the floor for… too long… but he gets himself up enough to get a new pressure bandage on. He can’t do anything fancy but the worst physical danger is over: stop the bleeding fast enough and he can still be field-functional. He presses the gauze pad to the torn flesh of the bullet hole, gets out his duct tape and starts strapping.

It’s awful. He must have blanked out completely at some point because the next thing he knows
he’s flat on his back and his armor is in place, buckled up over the dressing. Combat ready. He did not complete the mission.

He has to report.

He does not have to report. He fucking killed his way across six continents not to report. Never again. He is miles away from any of their hands, they can’t touch him, they can’t find him, he is in stratospheric orbit.

He did not complete the mission.

He has to report.

The ship wants to know what to do. It wants inside him even as it knows it can’t help him, no bio support onboard, nothing for him but its ping, ping, pings. He wants to turn it off again but he can’t. It’s what’s keeping him safe. All he needs to do is stay down.

He manages for maybe forty seconds. There’s nothing to focus on, nothing to keep him here, just pain and pressure and desperation. The urge to get up get up return to base return to base RETURN TO THE VAULT is so strong it’s like a physical pounding in his skull.

Barnes snarls aloud and fumbles out the ipod, leaving sticky red smears on the screen. He shoves the headphones in his ears and manages to stab the playlist labeled EVERYTHING STOP on the third try.

Fight one compulsion with another. Dubstep crashes out of the tiny speakers, and Barnes lets it take over and carry him away.

He doesn’t know how long it’s been when he opens his eyes again, only that his brain has gone numb with overstimulation and his body has gone overstimulated with pain. It hurts. He knows he’s dealt with pain worse than this before, magnitudes worse, but it hurts and his heart hammers and he can still taste metal and it feels like a black hole has opened up inside his chest.

He hauls himself over to the medkit again. There are painkillers in there, special ones, scrounged from HYDRA bases and a few of the early Asset caches. He hasn’t used any before. There was no real need to and he couldn’t afford to be drugged, especially not with this. The only vials he’d managed to find were the clear glass bottles labeled Formula WS-3 and he knows Formula 3 turns his brain to warm spaghetti. As painkillers go it’s very effective, but in his case no pain means no great grip on reality, either.

He’s past caring about his grip on reality. It takes him three tries to load the syringe properly, with the tremor: his metal hand doesn’t shake but it doesn’t do well gripping small, smooth objects. He clumsily tries to roll up his sleeve before remembering the techs gave up using his arm in the seventies, the veins too hardened from overuse to properly take a needle. He pushes his pants down instead.

He barely feels the injection in his inner thigh, but he definitely feels it when the drug starts to kick in, oozing through his body like molasses. He fumbles his pants back up with increasingly unsure hands, until he’s just lying there staring at Motherfucker’s dark ceiling, wondering at the absence of pain.

The dubstep playlist has long since ended. The songs change from one to another, background noise, until - clarinet. Alto sax, tenor, piano, trombone: the whole swing band, suddenly right there in his ipod. It’s soft and fuzzy like an old record, then - sharpening all at once somehow, new, an electronic backbeat kicking in, reverberating through him. A woman’s voice joins in: fast, low,
sweet. *Hey brother, what you thinking.* Barnes blinks up at the ceiling in amazement. *Let’s end your time to lay low.* His body wants to move, despite everything, despite the fact that it should never want to move again. *You’re gonna come undone.*

He is upright and taking slow, weaving steps to the console before he’s aware of what he’s doing. He is going somewhere he should not go. Big band swing plays in his ears, a saxophone screaming in crescendo over the vocals. *Your body’s shaking, you know. Your head has no right to say no.* He has to report.

Motherfucker will take him anywhere he wants to go. That’s only good when his wants are his own. He just punted his own decision-making skills out of his skull and self control doesn’t mean shit when you can barely understand what you’re doing. What is he doing. He has to report.

He slumps over the console and thinks, *Steve.*

The horizon goes all slanty for a while, and he gets the impression they’re moving kind of sideways. The cheery music keeps bopping along. It’s pretty funny. He thinks maybe he could laugh but even the suggestion of it has unpleasant spasms traveling up from his core. He shouldn’t move too much. He just got shot.

He got shot, and he was in a HYDRA base, and now he’s not in a HYDRA base and trying to keep it that way. He must not return to base. He must *not* go to the vault.

The song ends, the bright swing beat fuzzing out into nothing. Barnes turns the music off before the song can change, fumbling with the ipod until he gives up pocketing it and just drops it onto his torn sleeping bag. He needs to focus.

Motherfucker is hanging over a building, big and grey with lots of identically curtained windows. A hotel. And the ship, matching to pattern to pattern, showing him: *Steve.* Steve is in there.

He makes it to the hatch and curls up against the inside for what feels like a long time. The ship’s signals are fogged by the sedatives in his brain, but he can tell it doesn’t seem particularly eager to spit him back into the outside world. Inside the fortress he is untouchable. But he can’t stay here.

“S’fine,” he mutters, patting vaguely at the floor and pressing his forehead against the metal. “S’just. Steve.”

He’s not really sure what manages to get across, but it works. The hatch reluctantly slides open and he puddles out, landing on the roof.

He props himself up and tries to get going, but even though it let him out Motherfucker doesn’t seem to want to stay put. It floats after him, nudging forward for every step he takes until it bumps into his back, knocks him forward and makes him roll clumsily to avoid breaking his own nose. More things twinge uncomfortably in his gut. “*Fucker,*” Barnes complains, squinting up at the sky, more petulant than upset. Motherfucker pulls up directly above him, query, query, query. “Stop. You… sleep. Go t’sleep.”

The ship doesn’t want to, but he determinedly thinks sleep thoughts at it until it relents. Darkness. Quiet. Bouncing sheep, for some reason. He’s laboriously thinking his way through the concept of singing a lullaby when the systems start shutting off, the ship sinking to the ground a few inches away from his boot.

That’s good, because a few more minutes of that and he would’ve conked out too. He thinks there might have been a reason why he didn’t want the ship to sleep before, but he can’t quite think of it now. He has to get to Steve.
It’s a few false starts before he can get going again, but he staggers upright and automatically shuffles to the best cover, a dark corner created by a hulking HVAC unit and the border wall of the roof. At one point he trips and slams sideways into the unit, and the sudden jolt of adrenaline is just enough to wake him up a little. He must not report. He must make sure of it.

He pulls his phone out of his pants and is only saved from dropping it through the tackiness of blood still drying on his hand. It’s several false starts before he can unlock it and find the messenger screen. Clumsily, with slow fingers, he goes to the only contact and types out come to the roof.

Barely a minute later there’s a muted crunch as the lock on the rooftop access door gives in under supersoldier attention. Steve edges out, massive and kind of ghostly in a white t-shirt and soft grey pants. His hair is mussed. He’d been sleeping.

But his whole body is alert as he scans the roof, eyes sharp and awake. Maybe not sleeping at all. Barnes knows the way he’s lurking makes him invisible, but he also knows for supersoldier senses that doesn’t mean shit. Steve’s gaze lands directly on his patch of darkness, and while his eyes remain unfocused Barnes can tell the exact second Steve pinpoints him and knows he’s right.

He feels the weight of it, all Steve’s attention coming to bear like a laser. It’s like an anvil on his chest, and he remembers it, the heady thrill of being in those crosshairs. Steve is intense, dialed up to eleven at every moment of every day, and for the first time Barnes can feel firsthand how much Bucky liked it.

And Barnes, muzzy, faintly disbelieving, can’t say that he himself doesn’t. It’s like holding the biggest rifle in the world and simultaneously standing in its crosshairs, the deadliest weapon and the most valuable target. Steve was always distracted with something, a cause, a painting, a fight, an injustice in the world, all his energy going nine ways at once, but sometimes he would focus all on Bucky and it would light his goddamn spine on fire. Bucky and bar fights: that’s what got Stevie’s full attention. Blood and violence and Bucky.

And now it’s all for him. For Barnes. And he’s learning he can take the weight, he can stand under that and not be obliterated. Steve called and cajoled and ordered and Barnes told him no, no, no and it held.

And now he’s here. He feels soft and malleable and watery around the edges, like whatever scaffolding Barnes consists of is starting to give out. He is folding over into the bomb crater that was Bucky. The lines are blurring along with his vision and memory seems realer than ever before, live as the pulse in his throat, and Steve is right - here.

The thing that is Barnes is not Bucky, but he’s hurting, he’s floating and he’s got enough of the right parts to pass for him in bad light. Right now it’s pretty fucking dark. And so what? He’s weak. He’s a mess. He’s undead. He’s a ghost. He can feel bad about it in the morning.

Nobody has ever looked at him the way Steve does.

Barnes steps forward.

-o-

Steve feels his whole body jerk when a single familiar shadow melts out of the darkness. It’s barely anything, just enough for Steve to know he’s there, but given the givens it’s basically
Bucky running towards him with open arms. Bucky let Steve see him. Steve wouldn’t notice a Chitauri right now if it dropped out of the sky next to him and started doing the can-can.

*What are you afraid of,* Steve asked, and Bucky said *you.*

Steve, for all that many, many people would claim otherwise, knows about fear. He’s pretty goddamn familiar with it. It’s just he’s lucky or stubborn or cursed enough to have something in him that lets him override it. Mostly. Not all the time. He knows he blanks out sometimes when he hears a loud noise or touches water unexpectedly.

It doesn’t matter that Bucky has no reason to be afraid of Steve. Sometimes you can’t override fear. Steve’s not going to make Bucky even try. He’ll pave over everything so Bucky can walk forward.

Steve sits down, slow, crosslegged, making himself smaller and unlikely to jump up. He rests his elbows on his knees to bend over further. He’s going off guesswork and a half-remembered model of how Bucky used to coax stray animals behind Steve’s tenement building, but it’s not like he’s got better options. “Hey,” he says softly. “Hey, Buck. How’re you doing, pal?”

Bucky doesn’t answer, but Steve can feel his attention now. The shadow shifts again. It’s like one of those trick pictures where the two women’s faces turn into a vase: the low roof wall and the HVAC unit and the drainspout turn into Bucky, a little hunched over, eyes just a faint glint in the darkness.

Bucky takes a step forward, out of the dark, and the moonlight gilds his face. He’s got a beard, hair wild and loose, his shape blocky with body armor, and Steve can tell at a glance he’s unwell.

Then the wind changes, and Steve has to dig his fingers into his legs to keep from leaping up. Bucky reeks of blood and sweat and ozone, muzzle flash and singed flesh: fresh from a close-up firefight. “Hey,” Steve says, managing to control the panic in his voice by the barest margin. “Hey, Buck. You okay? What happened?”

Bucky doesn’t really seem like he hears him. He’s staring at Steve with eyes that are just slightly too wide and his breathing sounds labored as he moves forward, weaving slightly. He’s upright and walking, so whatever happened can’t have been too bad, but Steve doesn’t like the jerky way he moves. Fighting the Winter Soldier had been like trying to get ahold of a greased eel in a cold bathtub; right now Bucky looks about ten seconds from falling on his own face. It seems like he’s just going to bowl Steve over right up until he whacks to his knees barely a foot away.

It takes all of Steve’s rapidly fraying willpower not to just reach out and steady him. He tries not to even *think* loudly. Bucky just keeps staring at him, his whole body slanting to the side, his right arm half-curled around his middle, shoulders up to his ears. The last time Steve was on the receiving end of this kind of look it was coming from a feral cat half stuck in a drainpipe.

He can’t just sit here saying *nothing.* “Buck?” he tries. “Are you hurt?”

Bucky sways in, practically to Steve’s face, and Steve stops thinking at all. Bucky sniffs and his face spasms; he shuffles a little closer on his knees. Steve is probably going to sprain something by keeping himself from reaching out. He’s rewarded when Bucky leans in further, snuffling briefly near Steve’s temple until a tremor runs through him and he jerks away.

“Hey,” Steve tries again, when it looks like Bucky’s just going to stare some more. “You gotta focus, Buck. You okay?” His eyes keep jerking to the arm Bucky’s got curled around his middle.

“Muh-huh,” Bucky says, which is the exact noise he used to make when he was eyebrow deep in
a new book but had vaguely registered someone he cared about talking to him. His hand comes up - his metal one, Steve realizes, a second before it ghosts over his hair and Bucky jerks it back.

“It’s okay,” Steve says, mouth dry. Bucky really seems to have his priorities out of order here but it’s not in Steve to deny him. “Go ahead.”

Bucky eyes him warily for a moment, but apparently the thrill of Steve’s unwashed hair is too great to resist. He gives an awkward pat, then a stiff approximation of a stroke over Steve’s skull. His eyes are round and fascinated as he stares at Steve’s forehead. He looks at his own hand, flexing the fingers a little. “Never tried people before,” he says nonsensically.

“That so,” Steve says, equally nonsensically. “You sure you’re fine, Buck?”

Bucky sighs and slowly topples over.

“Shit,” Steve says, startled, spasming as the reflex to catch Bucky runs headfirst into all his careful deliberations not to grab. He gets to his knees as alarm builds in a rapid but steady climb; Bucky’s metal hand drifts into the air and he stares at it in apparent fascination, and now that he’s face-up towards the light Steve can see the size of his pupils.

“Bucky,” Steve says, leaning over him. “Bucky - Buck, are you high?”

“Painkillers,” Bucky says absently. He’s still staring at his hand. “Lots.”

“Where does it hurt?”

“Nowhere,” Bucky says, but his flesh hand goes to his side, landing just below his ribcage, and Steve goes for the catches on Buck’s body armor before either of them can register it as a bad idea.

But Bucky doesn’t even peep when Steve strips his gear off, just keeps turning his metal hand in the dim light and watching it like it’s tomorrow’s winning lottery numbers. His flesh hand drifts into the air at some point and waves around for a bit before settling on Steve’s knee. Steve bites his cheek and focuses on opening Buck’s jacket without jostling him too much.

At first he’s not sure what he’s looking at, because it’s dark and the lumpy shapes in front of him aren’t making sense. Then it registers that the thin black shirt under Bucky’s armor is shredded, sticky with more than just sweat, and the lumpy thing is a pressure bandage held on with layers of duct tape.

“You got shot,” Steve says stupidly. It could be a stab wound, but the bandage is too big and he can smell too much blood. Bucky’s blood. “You got shot?”

“Uh,” Bucky says, without any apparent concern, still watching his metal hand.

It feels like the whole night sharpens around Steve as his brain turns over and finally kicks into high gear. Bucky just came out of a gunfight, wounded, and he’s not exactly lucid. “Are you expecting pursuit?”

“Mm?”

“Is anybody chasing you? Right now. Should we be suiting up?”

“No,” Bucky says, hazy but not uncertain. “Too… too far away.”

“You got out?”
“We ran. *All* the way around the world.”

“We?” Steve leans closer to Bucky’s hip, trying to get a better look at his tape job. “Who’s we, buddy?”

Bucky, somewhat alarmingly, points an unsteady finger out at the darkness. “That,” he says unhelpfully. Steve glances up but can’t see anything. “Me. And the ship. We talk now. Better than before.”

Right. Bucky has his… spaceship. Best to keep Bucky distracted with talking so that he doesn’t notice Steve pawing at him. “How d’you do that, buddy?”

This seems to strike Bucky as *hilarious*. He grins, dazed but wide and genuine. “With *this,*” he says, wiggling his metal fingers at Steve.

“Oh,” Steve says. He wants to keep looking at that smile but he can’t, gently thumbing at the too-hot skin around the bandage. Nothing seems to be bleeding through. “Wow. That’s - great, pal.”

“It talks to me,” Bucky says confidingly. “It tells me things.”

That is...probably not good. Steve will have to check for head wounds. The bandage is tight, at least. “That’s swell, buddy. Let’s get you up, okay? We need to find you a doctor -”

“No,” Bucky says too loudly, his hand suddenly back in Steve’s hair. This time it’s in a fist. “No doctors. *No,*” he stresses. He shakes Steve by his fringe, rough, but there’s genuine panic in his eyes. “Don’t. *Don’t.*”

“Okay, okay,” Steve soothes. “No doctors, shh. I hear you.” Alright, no doctors. He’s not even sure if a doctor would even have been feasible in the first place: he’s sure Natasha would have dug up somebody out here, but even that’s not a guarantee. But Steve’s got their first aid kit inside, the one from his go bag, developed by SHIELD and supplemented by Natasha, and it includes a lot of dissolving stitches, fast wound-sealing stuff and supersoldier painkillers. Steve’s treated his own gunshots in the field before, even if only in the shoulder and leg. He’s stitched up Bucky plenty of times, back home and in the war. This can work.

“No doctors,” Steve repeats, and Bucky’s hand slips from his hair and flops back to the ground. “No doctors, that’s fine. But I’m gonna bring us inside, okay buddy?” Steve puts a hand on Bucky’s shoulder and hip, and when Bucky doesn’t react Steve tries to work his arms under him as carefully as possible. “Let’s get you on a bed, where it’s warm. You can rest up for a bit and I can keep watch.”

Bucky, having glazed over after Steve started to pick him up, seems to realize something is happening. His metal hand is suddenly around Steve’s throat. “Steve? Steve?”

“Yeah buddy,” Steve says, holding still. It’s not that he thinks Bucky will squeeze, it’s just he’d rather the question of it didn’t come up entirely. “It’s me, Buck. It’s just me.”

Bucky blinks hard but his eyes won’t focus. “Steve? Wha’ you doin?”

“Getting us inside, honey. Just getting us under cover.”

“...’kay,” Bucky agrees, like he’s uncertain but willing to indulge this wild behavior. His hand slips from Steve’s throat. “Okay,” Steve echoes under his breath, and sets his grip. “C’mon big guy. Up we go.”

Bucky *is* big. The last time Steve carried him it was 1943 and Buck was maybe a hundred and
seventy pounds with his boots and rifle, back when Steve thought he was thinning just from stress.
Now Buck feels nearly twice that, and it doesn’t feel like it’s all his gear either. Thank god. Thank
god he’s eating.

Bucky grunts a little but doesn’t fight, and after a minute of maybe being a little more careful than
necessary Steve has him gathered up in his arms. He stands, slowly, and as he straightens up
Bucky heaves a sigh and lays his head on Steve’s shoulder.

Steve tries very hard not to have some kind of emotional aneurysm. It’s a little difficult,
considering his heart currently feels like it’s being repeatedly backed over by a garbage truck. He
blinks a lot, fast and stinging, and focuses on putting one foot in front of the other to get to the
stairwell door.

He softens his footsteps as he goes down the stairs and hallway, walking as quietly as he can.
They’d all got their own rooms for the night, and everybody crashed hard in preparation for
tomorrow’s op: Steve only woke up because he sleeps with the pink phone directly under his chin,
the sound set to maximum volume. It’s nearly dawn, too - no point waking Sam or Natasha now,
not when they’ll be up in a few hours anyway.

And if he does get them, it’ll turn into a whole circus, and Bucky said no doctors. It’s not like
Natasha and Sam are going to burst in brandishing scalpels and wearing lab coats, but Steve
probably has a better chance of getting Bucky to agree to real medical care if they don’t crowd
him while he’s out of his mind on drugs. Once Bucky’s settled Steve can text Sam to come to his
room.

First things first. Bucky’s head starts to loll on Steve’s shoulder, and he doesn’t open his eyes
when Steve gets them into the room and carefully lays him out on the bed. Steve gets the medkit
out of his duffel and digs out the emergency blood transfusion packet; he’s A and Bucky’s AB -
or at least he was, and Steve’s serum didn’t change his blood type so hopefully Bucky’s didn’t
either - so he should be fine to transfer. Steve uncaps the syringe end, kinks the tubing by pinching
it in his teeth and gets the needle in his left cephalic vein. The blood immediately snakes down the
tube, the plastic in his mouth starting to warm as he uncaps the needle on the other end and goes
hunting for a matching vein on Bucky.

Bucky does nothing to help this. “Muh,” he says, then, “What,” then starts pawing uncertainly at
Steve’s arm. “Steve. What.”

“Just finding a vein, Buck,” Steve says around the tubing, trying to ease Bucky’s jacket off
further. “You need blood, I’m giving you some of mine.”

“Blood?”

“Yeah, buddy. You lost a lot, I bet.” Steve presses gently into Bucky’s elbow with his thumb,
searching for a vein. “This won’t hurt, I promise. Just gotta find a vein.”

“Vein,” Bucky repeats, then starts groping his own crotch. No: he’s trying to undo his pants.
Steve stares in bewilderment for a second before all of a sudden he gets it and takes over for him.
Bucky’s not wearing underwear, which makes Steve wince - c’mon Buck, the chafing - but gets
the pants down enough to expose the bluish-white skin of Bucky’s thigh.

There’s a needle mark already there, half an inch away from where Steve isolates the vein. Buck
must have injected something himself, considering he’s showing him how to do it. Probably
whatever’s got him rubbing his cheek against the bedspread with his mouth open like he’s never
felt cotton before. Steve lets the tubing drop from his mouth so the blood can run through, pushing
the air out, before carefully inserting the needle.
Luckily Buck doesn’t even seem to feel it. Steve flexes his fist, watching his blood flow into Bucky; it all seems to be working fine, so he leans back to dig in the kit and slap some tape over the two injection sites.

That’s when Bucky starts noticing there's a needle in him. He nearly gets his hand around the tubing before Steve grabs him. “No, Buck, you need that,” Steve says, gently peeling his fingers off. Bucky, blinking slowly, follows the tubing with his eyes until its terminus in Steve’s elbow, whereupon he reaches over to try and take Steve’s needle out.

“Aw, come on, Buck. Tell me about your spaceship, huh?” Steve tries, guiding Bucky’s groping hand away from his arm. “You said - you said you talk?”

“Talk,” Bucky says thoughtfully. He seems to have forgotten about the transfusion, which means Steve can try getting a look at the actual bullet wound; he gets as far as touching Bucky’s shirt before Bucky grabs him by the arm, his eyes unfocused but his grip feverishly tight. “Steve,” he says. “I can hear you. See?”

“See what, Buck?”

“Like this,” Bucky says. He turns his attention fully to Steve, then, who tries not to jump out of his skin when Bucky clumsily presses his metal palm to Steve’s face. “Can you hear it?”

Steve hear it, the soft hum of live machinery, but somehow he’s not sure that’s what Bucky means. “The - electronics? I can hear ‘em moving, yeah, Buck.”

Bucky draws his hand back and frowns at it. “It only talks to me,” he says doubtfully. “Maybe it has to be connected to your brain. I don’t think we can do that.” He frowns at his hand some more. “No, it won’t go. It’s mine.”

“Sure is,” Steve says, giving up on the bandage for now and gently lifting Buck up a little so he can check for an exit wound instead. “All yours. Attached to you and everything. How does it talk to you, huh?”

“It tells me things,” Bucky says vaguely. “It knows when there’s a battery, or signals. It knows when things are dead or alive.”


“Mmm?”

“The bullet, Buck - is it still inside? There’s no exit wound.”

“No,” Bucky sighs. “No bullet.”

“You got it out?” Steve carefully takes Bucky’s chin in his hand, tilting his face up to look in his eyes. “Please, honey, I need to know. Was the bullet removed?”

Bucky still looks like he’s radioing in from another planet, but he nods, looking a little surprised, and that’s good enough for Steve. “Thank you,” Steve breathes. He wants to dig a bullet out of Buck about as much as he wants to pour acid down his pants. “Thank god.”

He leans in and kisses Bucky’s forehead before he can even identify the impulse, let alone stop it, but Bucky just blinks up at him with big, wide-blown eyes. “You’re a nice handler,” Bucky says muzzily, almost to himself. “Nice.”


Steve can’t help but put a palm to Bucky’s cheek, cup his face, feel the clammy skin. “Never had the breath for it,” he manages, as Bucky blinks blearily up at him. “You were always the shouty one, remember? You couldn’t go a week without bawling me out for something.”


That’s… a little alarming, but Steve’s not about to make a fuss over some third-person wording when Bucky’s high as a kite and starting to slur. “You sure did,” Steve says. “Did you hit your head at all, buddy? You’re a little…”

Bucky blinks a few times in a row, frowning in concentration. “Formula three,” he says after a moment, as if that explains everything.

“What’s that, pal?”

Bucky gestures vaguely at nothing, his eyes unfocusing further. “Intravenous… delivery,” he says, then trails off into something that definitely isn’t English. It sounds like Russian, and while Steve taught himself to read Russian in the past couple months, he’s still nowhere near being able to speak it. “Can you say that in English, buddy?”

“What?”

“I don’t speak Russian, Buck. Can you do English?”

Bucky considers this for a long moment. “English,” he agrees.

Steve gives up on that and slides his hand up to start probing at Bucky’s scalp instead. “Does your head hurt anywhere?” He can’t really feel anything that might be damage, but that might be because Bucky’s hair is crispy with sweat and so dense it feels like it’s trying to eat his hand. It’s a lot curlier than Steve remembers, even from DC, but there’s also a hell of a lot more of it, so. Maybe this is just what Bucky’s hair looks like grown out. “Have you got a headache, buddy? Can you see okay?”

Bucky’s drifting hand comes back up to bat Steve’s wrist. “Steve? Wha’ you doin’?”

“Checking your head, sweetheart. I need to know where you’re hurt.”

“Hurt?”

“Yeah, buddy. You got shot, and I’m pretty sure some other things. Can you tell me where you - ”

“Steve? Did I die?”

Steve’s hand spasms and it’s all he can do to keep from accidentally yanking on Bucky’s hair. “No, sweetheart,” he says after a second. He can’t quite keep his voice steady. “You went missing in action. You were - you were captured. But you made it. You’re alive.”

Bucky stares straight up for a long second before his gaze snaps to Steve, wet and shockingly direct. He looks, in that moment, completely stone cold sober. “Did he die?”

“Who did?” Steve asks, even as he’s deeply, impossibly certain he knows what he means.
“The real one,” Bucky says, and his metal hand goes up to grab a handful of his own cheek. He gives it a little shake, the way you’d give to a puppy’s scruff or a shirt collar. “Dead. I got left.”

“No,” Steve says immediately, his voice shaking a little, with fear or anger or guilt or some awful vortex of all three. “No, you’re just banged up a little. You’re hurt. That’s all. You’re alive, Buck. You made it.”

“Made it,” Bucky repeats doubtfully.

“Yes. You’re here, you’ll be just fine.”

Bucky frowns, but his eyes are unfocusing again and his blinks are getting slower and longer. His metal palm gropes at the air before landing against Steve’s face again. “I can hear you,” he mumbles, his thumb nearly going up Steve’s nose. “You’re alive.”

“That’s right,” Steve says. The movement of his mouth shifts Bucky’s hand up and down, the warm metal brushing his lips. “We’re both alive. Let’s keep it that way.”

Bucky doesn’t reply, just stares up at the ceiling again with the duration of his blinks getting longer and longer. The blood transfusion is all well and good, but they can’t just sit here arguing over whether Bucky is dead or not. Duct tape isn’t exactly an ideal medical adhesive. Steve knows you’re not really supposed to remove a pressure bandage unless and until you’re in a surgical setting, but he’s done it to himself before and he figures Buck’s in the same boat, what with the serum. He slits the duct tape with the shears from his kit and carefully peels it up.

The flesh underneath is a mess, fibers from the bottom layer of the gauze sticking to the bloody edges, but it’s a relatively small mess. Steve knows the real damage is inside, but it’s otherwise a familiar sight: gunshot entry wound, bullet punched through the armor. If he measures using his own healing rates, it’s only hours old.

They’ll have to get some kind of imaging to make sure there’s no internal bleeding. Sam will know. Bucky seems stable now, at least. His breathing is a little fast but unobstructed, the clamminess slowly leaching out of his skin. His face isn’t sheet-white anymore under the beard, which hopefully means at least some of Steve’s blood is doing its job.

Steve feels his chest loosen a little. It’s never great being shot, but Bucky will be fine.

Steve eases the needle out of his own vein, then Bucky’s, letting it drain and setting the stained tubing aside. Bucky doesn’t react; when Steve glances over he sees his eyes are closed. “Buck?”

No answer. “Alright then,” Steve says under his breath, when Steve glances over he sees his eyes are closed. “Buck?”

On to the rest of it. This hotel’s on the nicer end of the types of places they usually stay, so there’s towels and toiletries and two mugs next to a little electric kettle on the bathroom shelf. Steve fills a cup, soaks a hand towel in hot water and gets to cleaning the rest of the blood and sweat and gun residue off of Bucky.

It’s slow going: Steve doesn’t want to jostle him, and it’s also his first chance to check for other injuries up close and in decent light. His pants are already down and he doesn’t so much as twitch when Steve eases his boots off, so Steve takes that as a green light to start on the rest of him. Buck’s got a Sig Sauer on his thigh that Steve checks; he removes the chambered round and decocks it, then sets it by Bucky’s hip, in easy reach. A brief patdown yields two more pistols and
a bouquet of knives that he ends up putting on the nightstand.

He doesn’t know at all what to expect when he cuts Bucky’s undershirt off and frankly he isn’t really thinking about it. He hadn’t known how the bionic arm worked, because the Winter Soldier files Natasha got were thin and nearly silent on the arm entirely; it’s possible that was an entire separate file, or it was all redacted or destroyed to protect the secrets of what’s clearly some highly advanced engineering. There had been a few notes about the “remarkable integration”. No description, though looking down, Steve thinks it’s possible no one had found the words to describe it.

It’s not that the scarring is particularly gruesome, it’s that it doesn’t look right: it’s like the metal of the arm bit directly into Bucky’s shoulder, burrowing in under the flesh, and the skin at the join somehow got… corrupted. The starburst rays of scarring are greyish-pink and somehow pearlescent, and when Steve looks closer he sees the rumpled lesions are strangely regular, almost like a pattern. The scarring itself is a randomized sprawl, but the tissues look - printed. Bucky’s cousin had a scar on his forearm from falling against a hot engine block and half the logo on the metal casing had branded itself against his skin, but this doesn’t look like that. This looks like something coming from the inside out.

Steve leaves it alone. It’s not actively bleeding, so it’s not his concern right now. It hadn’t seemed to bother Bucky at all anyway. He digs a pair of clean briefs out of his duffel and gets them over Bucky’s hips, then shucks off his only pair of sweatpants and does the same; they’re the warmest pants he’s got. After some consideration he gets his thickest socks out too, because as long as Steve’s known him Bucky’s had a chronic case of icicle toes.

He dithers over giving Buck an extra dose of his own painkillers while he’s out of it, then bites his lip and sticks him with a local near the gunshot wound. He doesn’t want Bucky waking up from pain, in pain, and the hollows of his eyes look like fading bruises. He needs the sleep.

Then Steve settles on the bed beside Bucky, sitting with his back to the headboard and pressing two fingers under Bucky’s jaw for another check of his pulse. His skin’s a little cold; getting a shirt on Buck would be counterproductive at this point, so instead Steve makes sure the hotel comforter is covering him to the waist, just clear of the bandage.

He means to just get Buck comfortable, but he sits there a long time, just - looking. Steve can’t stop staring at him, his pores, his freckles, the little creases of skin in the inner corners of his eyes. He can’t believe he ever used to take this for granted: Buck’s presence, his existence, his living skin under Steve’s hands.

Steve strokes his thumbs carefully down Bucky’s temples. His cheeks are a little rough where they’re not covered in beard, a little windburned, but the skin under his eyes is still butter-soft. Bucky’s lips are rough too, cracking a little; his mustache and beard are bristly and stiff. Steve makes a note to stick some of Sam’s endless chapsticks in one of Buck’s pockets as soon as possible. Bucky used to damn near slather his face in Vaseline during the winter, vain as a popinjay, trying to stave off perpetually chapped skin.

There’s a couple of new scars bisecting his upper lip and right eyebrow. Steve’s sure they weren’t there on the helicarriers; sometimes he’s afraid that mental picture of Bucky’s face will always be the clearest he has, immortalized in horror and adrenaline, but he knows that’s not true now, looking down at him. The new scars are from shrapnel, maybe. Steve thumbs over them and strokes back into Bucky’s hair. It’s so long now, longer even than when he’d first appeared on the DC beltway, and it’s frankly a fucking mess. Steve wonders vaguely if he has the right kind of comb. Peggy had him help with her hair once, after a particularly messy op that had them wade through an actual swamp, and had him sit behind her and gently pick apart what used to be a braid that had gotten knotted at the back of her head.
He misses Peggy suddenly, blindly, the wave slopping over him so hard he bends, curling over Bucky’s head. They had been so good together, all of them. She’d been so good with Bucky. She’d had a plan, for after, even after Bucky had fallen; she had been the uncrackable rock in the midst of Steve’s entire world getting flipped on end.

The helplessness of loss is an acid burn in his throat every time. He buries it, usually, and this is why. He can’t be gasping like this every moment of every day. It’s untenable, unbearable, and pointless besides: crying never brought anything back.

He’ll call her, he thinks fiercely, scrubbing at his eyes. He’ll call her tomorrow. Today. He won’t be able to say much, not without compromising opsec, but she’ll hear it, he knows: that something good has happened, something miraculous. God, he hopes Bucky remembers her - he hopes she remembers him, and the thought is so awful Steve nearly bursts out laughing, here in the bed over Bucky. God. Were that it were all some enormous cosmic joke.

He doesn’t really manage to leave the bed after that. He stays half-curled over Bucky, leg pressed along the line of his arm, a hand on the mattress by his jaw. And good thing, too: barely half an hour passes before Bucky shudders, his face twitching and his hands opening and closing in his sleep. Steve sits up from his doze and hovers with his hands over Bucky’s chest; he doesn’t want to wake Bucky but leaving him in a nightmare’s no good either. After a moment of indecision he tries smoothing Bucky’s hair again.

Bucky’s eyes snap open. Steve twitches in surprise and leans over him, worried. If this turns into another round of Buck insisting he’s dead Steve will handle it, but it’s not like he particularly wants to. “Buck?”

“St - Steve?”

“Yeah Buck.”

“Steve.”

“It’s me.”

“Steve.”

“What is it, Buck?”

“Aliens exist, Steve,” Bucky hisses. His eyes are huge, pupils blown, whites showing all the way around. “They’re real, and they - and they’re bastards, they - they -”

“I know,” Steve soothes, even as his eyebrows go up and he has to smother a smile. “I know, pal, I punched out a couple dozen of ‘em. It’s alright.”

“Some of them look human,” Bucky insists. “They - with the, with the clothes -”

“Shh, I know.” Steve gently strokes Bucky’s hair back. “I’ve punched a couple of those too. They go down if you hit ‘em hard enough.”


“I know. I know. They smell different, though,” Steve says. “The two I’ve met, anyway. They smell like carbon, kind of, and that metal thunderstorm smell. Well. Maybe that’s just Thor. But he’s alright, even if his brother’s a genocidal nutcase. We sent them both off, back to Asgard, through their magic rainbow slide contraption…”
Bucky’s eyelids droop as Steve talks. Steve keeps petting him, smoothing a thumb over his eyebrow, stroking back towards his temple, explaining how they kicked Loki’s ass back to his Norse dimension and slowly Bucky slips back into sleep.

It’s the start of a pattern. Bucky half-wakes thrice more in the next thirty minutes, each time less coherent than the last, and after the second time Steve takes them as opportunities to get Bucky to take a few sips of water. He’s always thirsty as hell whenever he has to heal anything; presumably Bucky is the same. Buck always fights before going docile, but by the fourth time it only lasts a couple seconds: Bucky wakes, smacks vaguely at Steve, looks absolutely bewildered by the concept of a glass being held to his mouth and slips off again after a few fitful swallows. This last time his eyes slide shut with his metal hand locked around Steve’s wrist.

Steve wouldn’t mind keeping it there for the rest of their natural lifetimes, except after about a minute his fingers start to tingle and turn blue. Steve grimaces and starts by rubbing gently at Bucky’s wrist, wondering if any of the usual tricks will work when the arm doesn’t have nerves, but after five minutes he’s resorted to tugging at Bucky’s fingers with absolutely no effect. It’s like yanking on Thor’s hammer. Steve gives up and goes for the nuclear option, leaning over to blow gently on Bucky’s ear.

He manages to dodge the slap, but doesn’t escape the follow through. Bucky growls, flips on his side and uses both hands to clamp Steve’s arm to his chest, dragging him down until he’s half-spooning Bucky.

Steve has a brief moment of frozen urgency before realizing Bucky managed to flip on his uninjured side, and that he’s still flat asleep. Steve’s entire left arm is being held like - well, like Bucky used to sometimes hold rifles in his bedroll, which was more or less exactly like children hold teddybears. At least no circulation is cut off this time. Steve’s armpit is levered over Bucky’s shoulder, his hand somewhere around Bucky’s bellybutton, and he can’t see anything because his entire face is now surrounded by Bucky’s hair.

Despite his best efforts, he ends up sneezing three times directly into the back of Bucky’s head. It’s not the worst thing he’s ever smelled, but it’s strong and sudden and all at once, the smoke and blood and vanilla shampoo that’s not actually vanilla, just that vague clean scent modern chemists use when they’re trying to make something “unscented” and probably succeeding to anyone without supersoldier senses.

Steve tries to wipe his nose as much on his own shirt and as little on Bucky’s hair as possible, which is harder than it sounds. There’s just so much of it. Steve used to joke about Buck singlehandedly keeping Brylcreem in business and Buck spent most mornings with a head like a startled cockatoo, but this is an entirely new level of volume.

Maybe this is where all the serum went, Steve thinks, a little madly. It had given Steve height and weight, but since Bucky already had both maybe it had nowhere else to go but his hair.

Steve carefully flexes his wrist. Bucky tightens his grip. Steve scoots until he’s at least not half sitting up anymore, balanced on his hip; Bucky twitches, kicks Steve’s knee and turns further onto his side. If not for the faint smell of the wound-seal stuff and the 21st century softness of their clothing this could be any other night spent bunked down together in camp. All they need is some mud and the sounds of two hundred other guys giving their best stab at sleep around them.

Bucky starts to snore.

Steve closes his eyes. Only for a second, he reminds himself. It’s fine. He can hear everything outside the room and up and down the hallway. He can still keep watch like this. He’ll know if anything starts happening. He’ll detangle himself from Bucky in a minute: he knows how this
goes. He’s had to sacrifice pillows and balled-up blankets to Bucky’s deathgrip countless times in return for his arm or waist or leg. At some point Buck will relax, his hands will open and Steve will sit back up, and they’ll all face the music with Sam and Natasha in the morning.

-o-

At first he thinks it’s another dream: another memory, come skulking back at night in vivid technicolor. He knows Steve is nearby, close - Steve is touching him. Definitely Steve. He has the vague certainty that it was Steve sweet-talking him in the recent past, too, except that can’t be right because Steve only sweet-talks when things have gone to shitt and all things considered he feels pretty fucking great right now.

Pretty fucking… great.

Drugs, then. That explains Steve’s fussing. Did he get shot again? The technicians don’t like it when he gets shot. The doctors do. They like watching it heal, but all the technicians see is unpaid overtime.

He’s not on a table. The mattress is thin and the sheets are scratchy but he’s not on a table. The restraints are heavy and warm and kind of… damp… but he’s not on a table and why’d they tie him down on his side, anyway?

He tries opening one eye and immediately realizes the situation is even more dire than he thought. Steven Grant Rogers, all two hundred some sweaty pounds of him, is wound around Barnes with an arm around his chest and a leg over his thigh. His face is jammed firmly against Barnes’ neck, nose pressed tight to the skin behind his jaw. Barnes must be drugged to the fucking gills, because if it was his own native chemistry in charge of this he’d probably be balls deep in a panic attack by now.

But he can still think, relatively clearly, even: he must have woken up in that rare sweet spot of lucidity that sometimes hit between pain and anesthetized oblivion. Reality is starting to distinguish itself from the fog inside his brain. Steve’s behind him. Steve’s not hurting him. Barnes can remember most of the night, even: he came to Steve like a sick dog and Steve - helped him.

They’re alone in the room. It’s small, a typical budget hotel room, mostly bed and a nightstand and a desk in the corner. The drapes cover the sole window and the only noises filtering through the walls are distant city sounds. Still nighttime. Barnes vaguely feels like he heard Steve say something about keeping watch, but given the gentle snore currently issuing from behind Barnes’ ear, that didn’t happen.

Steve is straight off a mission too, he remembers. They saw action on the ships and while he knows Steve took no injuries he was still running around punching things while Barnes sat in his spaceship. He interrupted Steve’s downtime, shambling in with blood still oozing out of his bullet hole.

And then: tiny starburst tingle of his arm registering the microcurrents of Steve’s face. The sunrise in his brain again, unexpected. He can feel it now, a low barely-there hum from where Steve’s wrist lies along his inner forearm. It’s softer, or maybe smaller, than the little trill from the ipod; bioelectricity, Barnes thinks. The currents are very weak. But unlike the ipod this tingle moves: fluctuating up and down in quick, regular bump-bumps. Steve’s pulse.
He doesn’t know how long he lies like that, cradled in Steve’s grip. He’s got his face smushed against one unreasonably large bicep, propped against an equally unreasonable chest, and over all the blood he can smell sweaty sleeping Steve. This turns out to be one of the smells that makes his brain go blank but for once that’s - good. It’s good. It’s different from the usual. Less thrown in deep water and more rolled into warm ocean surf.

Steve is very warm. Barnes should be trying to think but all his brain is capable of is this half-asleep stupor. Something thin and frantic has gone quiet inside him, something he hadn’t even noticed was biting at him until it stopped. Something in him recognizes Steve’s touch as relief. He doesn’t think it’s the drugs. That’s ebbing out, anyway,

As lucidity spreads and details filter in, Barnes slowly realizes there’s a sort of… pressure on his tailbone.

That is - that’s definitely a dick against his ass. That’s definitely Steve’s dick against his ass.

Barnes, up until now carried by the gentle currents of chemical apathy, finds himself unceremoniously dropped like a tortoise out of a tower. He has no idea how the body will react to this. He has no idea how he’ll react to this. He sends an alarmed glance downwards, but of course he can’t see anything but Steve’s shoulder, lying as he is. He has the brief, wild thought that given what happened with his stupid nipple, if he gets an erection he might be the last to know.

But nothing happens. Nothing continues to happen, and Barnes’ heart rate starts to slow back down. Formula 3 is most likely still a major component of his bloodstream. Between the drug and the gut wound and the total lack of prior penis action he might actually be pretty safe in the stiffy department, but Steve has proven himself on multiple occasions to be the fulcrum around which reality breaks. This is not a time to take any chances.

Barnes’ dick continues to be reassuringly unresponsive. He wants this state of affairs to continue. He considers his options: they’re limited. His body’s all locked up still, and playing dead might be the best way out of this, both to minimize any… action… and to prevent his body from getting any ideas.

Then Steve comes awake all at once, a guard dog picking up a scent. He doesn’t so much as twitch: Barnes feels him wake the way he feels electricity in power lines overhead, in his teeth. “Perimeter?” Steve says, muzzy but commanding. He must have felt Barnes freeze. “Buck?”

Steve pats clumsily at him, checking for god knows what, and Barnes would do something except he’s suddenly presented with the whole, crystal-clear memory of the time Steve got up, took out four Krauts, stood barefoot and blinking in the middle of camp while Bucky and Monty subdued the last two would-be ambushers, and then stumbled back to his bedroll and straight back to sleep with no memory of doing any of it the morning after. That memory must occupy him for a good little while, because when Barnes tunes back in Steve has clearly decided there’s no emergency and is completely out again, slumped loosely around Barnes’ back.

His erection has not diminished in any noticeable way whatsoever.

In fact, his hips have started to… move. It’s sort of pushing Barnes onto his stomach, which he doesn’t mind - lying flat on his back is something he avoids even when he doesn’t have a bullet hole in his gut - until he remembers he does have a bullet hole in his gut and just because he can’t feel the pain doesn’t mean they’re not doing something medically stupid.

At least the wound is on the side not pressed to the mattress. He tries pushing back against Steve, trying to get him to shift over a little, but that backfires because of course it just makes Steve hump harder. Barnes is in soft grey pants now, Steve’s pants, his tac gear gone, and Steve is - only
wearing underwear. There’s no uncomfortable Kevlar or pinchy belt buckle anymore to discourage Little Stevie Junior, who is not all that fucking little.

Barnes bites the corner of the pillow in front of him to stifle whatever fresh hysteria wants to crawl out of his lungs. He’s pretty sure he’s not supposed to find this situation funny. It could be the drugs, and about fifty percent of it probably is - he’s not sure he has one hundred percent of a sense of humor - but the absurdity alone. The ex-fist of HYDRA, cuddled up in soft pants and getting his ass ridden by Captain America. He feels qualified to say that this is objectively nuts.

Steve makes a vaguely leonine sound and rolls his hips harder. Barnes chomps furiously on his mouthful of pillowcase. He still doesn’t dare move, but now it’s mostly because of the hazy certainty that if he wakes Steve up now all they’ll get is some kind of entirely avoidable meltdown. He’s not sure whether it’ll be him or Steve having the crisis, but he doesn’t want to find out.

Bucky Barnes, this is your life, he finds himself thinking hysterically, just as Steve gives a particularly inspired thrust. This time Barnes doesn’t manage to strangle the laugh in time and starts choking on his own spit.

Through the subsequent coughing he registers Steve grunt, twitch and then go lax all over, which means the grinding is over and he suddenly has nine billion pounds of blond meatsack sprawled heavily over his back. Barnes, wheezing, decides waking Steve up is acceptable collateral for getting to breathe just as Steve gives a mighty snorlfe and rolls them over.

Barnes gasps for air, now suddenly on top of Steve’s chest. His side gives a warning spasm so he stills as much as he can; he’s on his back now, but for once the general unease of lying flat face up is thrown off by how his mattress is entirely Steve.

As an afterthought, he smacks Steve on the thigh with his metal palm.


Barnes opens his mouth, realizes he has no idea what he’s going to say, and settles for thumping Steve again, sort of halffheartedly this time. “Asshole,” he manages raspily.

“Love you,” Steve sighs, turning his face into Barnes’ hair and going the fuck back to sleep.

Well.

Barnes just got his ass humped by Steve for twenty minutes and nothing bad happened. No traumatic flashbacks, no erection - well, there’s now kind of a damp spot at the small of his back, and Steve is significantly sweater, but Barnes is warm, and dry, and nobody is bleeding out. He had his adrenaline response, but he gets a fucking adrenaline response from waking up every morning.

He feels... relieved. Sex is a mess, between the HYDRA bullshit and everything Bucky got up to and all of it getting scrambled into soufflé by both Nazi brain taser and alien tech. Barnes has no fucking clue how he, current tenant of this mobile catastrophe, intersects with any of it, or even if he does at all. Maybe that stuff is just switched off in him now. Hair Stuff Hillary hadn’t been a very definitive test one way or another, and given the limited evidence Barnes has, this Steve situation is the kind of thing that would have triggered some kind of response, if there had been one to trigger.

Then again, he is kind of shot and doped to the eyeballs. He just can not catch a break in the definitive results department, can he. And the phrase he didn’t even buy me dinner is knocking
around in his skull like an annoying housefly.

So. He just had sex and nothing bad happened. If this is what he has as a highlight of the past twenty-four hours, he’ll take it.

Steve loves him.

Barnes considers smacking Steve in the thigh again. But his arm feels heavy and the rest of him does too, all flopped out. Adrenaline backwash is pushing on his eyelids again, and if none of that circus woke Steve up then he’s just not going to. This location must have been chosen by Widow; if they’re all in separate rooms with no one on watch then that means he’s as safe as he’s going to get. He doesn’t have to do anything.

And it’s not like he has anywhere to be.

He came here to get help, and he got it. Barnes tentatively lets his eyes close. His only job now is to stay put and let the morning come.

-o-

“Hi,” Natasha says, from where she’s sitting crosslegged on top of the desk. Steve blinks at her, muzzy, and then the whole world cartwheels on him as Bucky launches them out of the bed, lands on his feet, spins Steve around and then locks him into a chokehold with the metal arm around his neck and a knife pricking at his jugular.

“Hi - Natasha,” Steve gasps, now very, very awake, his hands halfway in the air and staying that way. Bucky’s vibrating at his back but the knife at his jaw is perfectly still. “Easy - easy, Buck. We’re fine. Look, she’s unarmed.”

Natasha’s already lacing her fingers behind her head. “Whoops,” she says. “I maybe overestimated the internal equilibrium of the room a little.”

“Really,” Steve manages. Bucky’s started breathing again, but it’s in panicked little gasps that shove his chest against Steve’s back. His knife hand hasn’t moved a centimeter.

“Yeah, there was cuddling going on and everything. Hey Soldier, remember me? We were in Manila together.”

Bucky’s making wheezy little noises now with every breath, which reminds Steve he was shot pretty goddamn recently and even Steve can’t walk off a GSW in less than a day. “He’s injured,” Steve says. The knife twitches a little at his neck but since he doesn’t actually get his throat slit Steve ignores it. “Natasha’ll stay right over there, Buck. You wanna sit down?”

It takes a few more seconds of panting, but Bucky does release Steve and take a staggering step away. He drops down into a crouch with the knife clutched close to his chest, staring at Steve like he’s trying to make sure the reality in front of him is a reality he should be paying attention to.

Steve crouches with him, and hitches mid-movement as it finally, belatedly registers that there is a… situation… in his underwear. He got pretty goddamn acquainted with wet dreams and what shorts full of jizz feel like in the months immediately after Rebirth, what with the scantily clad girls, newfound hypersensitivity and very tight tights, so this is unfortunately a deeply familiar scenario. He’s not usually dealing with a gasping, knife-wielding Bucky in the aftermath, but he
knows for god damn certain that at some point in the past three hours he came in his fucking pants.

Which he technically does not have. Because he gave them to Bucky. Thank god the briefs are black.

*Then it occurs to him that this definitely happened while he was - on the bed, holding Bucky, who was wounded - oh god, he fell asleep on watch -*

Steve needs to get himself under control, because Bucky, staring wild-eyed at Steve, is clearly taking his cues from Steve’s face and “mounting horror” is not an emotion Steve wants Bucky to have ever, let alone now.

“Yo, Steve, what’s - ” Steve hears, and that’s as far as Sam gets, coming through the door, before Bucky throws his knife overarm. Steve’s hand snaps out and catches it on reflex, the blade scoring a line of fire across his palm, as Sam swears and drops himself out of sight behind the bed. Bucky lunges forward, grabs Steve and yanks him backwards, getting his back to the wall and once again dragging Steve in front of him like a human shield.

“We’re - fine, we’re fine, we’re good,” Steve calls immediately, because Natasha’s still sitting exactly where she was but Steve saw the big muscles in her thighs flex. It’s a good reminder that he currently has problems bigger than some jizz in his underwear. “Sam? You okay?”

“Fine,” Sam says, only a little strangled.

“Good. We’re all okay,” Steve says, part reassurance and part invoking whatever power of positive thinking might be floating around. The blood pools around the knife in his hand and starts to drip, so he wipes it on his t-shirt and drops the knife, slowly pushing it away with his foot. Bucky doesn’t seem to notice; he’s back to having Steve in a stranglehold, which isn’t exactly comfortable but isn’t actually hurting him either. “We just got a little surprised,” Steve continues. “Sorry about that, Sam.”

“Yep. Yup. No problem. Saw Natasha come in here,” Sam says, from where he’s crouched behind the other side of the bed. “Figured we were having team breakfast.”

“Now you’re wondering why I’m here with my hands up and my pants off?”

“Well, I wasn’t gonna ask, but...”

“You gave him your pants, didn’t you,” Natasha says.


Bucky’s breathing doesn’t slow down but it does hitch, which Steve supposes is something. “You got me mac n cheese,” Sam adds, leaning his head out from behind the mattress to try and make eye contact. “That was great. Good to see you, man.”

Bucky manages a noise of deep incredulity before starting to cough, which makes his breathing go even worse than before. “Easy,” Steve says, alarmed, not daring to reach back because panic attack or no the tension in Buck’s body says he’ll regret it. “Easy, Buck.”

“Hey, hey, JB, you’re alright,” Sam calls. “You know breathing exercises? Let’s do some breathing exercises. On my count, one, two - ”

Bucky coughs out a snarl and hurls another knife, which embeds itself to the hilt in the wall a couple inches to the left of Natasha’s head. “Maybe not that,” she suggests, not even blinking.
“O-kay,” Sam says, rolling with it, god bless him. “We can… tell a story. I used to put audiobooks on, they’d calm me right down. How’s that sound. Good?”

Bucky fails to throw any more anything at anybody, which may be agreement or may be because he’s run out of knives. “Great, you’re doing great,” Sam says. “So. Storytime. Anybody wanna hear about… uh…”

Steve, who just made the mistake of shifting his weight and reawakening the growing itch in his underpants, blurs out, “Did I tell you about the time I nearly castrated myself trying to shave my balls?”

There’s a long moment where they all just stare at him. Steve can feel Bucky’s stare on the back of his head. “Noo-o,” Sam says slowly. “Can’t say you have.”

“You definitely haven’t told me,” Natasha says.

“Well,” Steve says, but he’s committed now. Damn his dick for somehow making itself part of this; if he’d imagined how it might be involved in his reunion with Bucky, it absolutely, definitely wouldn’t have been like this - but none of that matters, because he can feel Bucky’s breathing start to lose the awful panicky hitch. Steve sets his shoulders. “I... almost had to go to the hospital.”

“You? At the hospital? Must’ve been really dire,” Natasha says.

“You could say that,” Steve allows.

“And you did this shaving your... balls,” Sam says.

“Well. I was two weeks off mission, and I… decided I’d try something new, something different from all the other modern stuff everybody was recommending me. So I decided to uh… shave. But I use a straight razor. I figured it wouldn’t be that different. I get in the shower, I get all lathered up, and then, uh, well, there’s some maneuvering involved. To get at everything. And I end up slipping, my foot just slides right out from under me, and suddenly I’m doing the splits on my bathroom floor - ”

Sam’s mouth is twitching, despite his visible commitment to being the voice of sober sanity in the room. “Out of the tub?”

“Out of the tub,” Steve confirms. “I had my foot propped up on the edge so when I slipped I kind of, uh, straddled it for a second before I slipped some more. Lucky I caught myself on my hands. But I don’t even notice I’m bleeding until I stand up, and then I see I managed to uh… nick myself. In the general. Scrotal area. And I thought, no big deal, it’s just a cut, it’ll heal. But after I’m done mopping up the water on the floor it’s still bleeding, so I thought, okay, well, I’ve got the serum, it’s fine. By then it looks like I’ve slaughtered a chicken between my legs - ”

“A cock,” Natasha manages, looking like Christmas has come early and Santa has visited her himself. “A cock on your - ”

“- yes, thank you Nat, and by then I’m thinking maybe I should do something about this. Since I couldn’t even tell where I sliced myself open I spent a minute trying to get a good look through the bathroom mirror - ”

Steve awkwardly mimes sort of bending over and spreading his cheeks, as much as he can with Bucky still gripping him; by now Sam is bent double where he sits, his hand over his mouth and his shoulders shaking. “- and when I got done mooning myself with my own half-shaved asshole, I still can’t see anything, the whole counter is covered in blood and I’m still bleeding. So I’m
thinking, alright, what’s the first aid training? Elevate the wound, right. So I do a handstand.”

Sam sounds like an asthmatic parrot. Natasha’s face is redder than her hair. “Oh, god,” she gasps. “Oh, my god. What happened after the handstand?”

“Well, I kinda held it for a little while,” Steve says. “I think the bleeding stopped because at that point there was no blood left north of my bellybutton.”


“You seen the blue movies these days, Barnes? Everyone’s fucking bald,” Steve retorts, because that was the week before I worked up the nerve to say something to Handsome Jogger aka Sam is not something he will admit ever regardless of whether or not he just told all his friends about how he fucked up shaving his unmentionables. It’s his own problem if at one point his imagination took him on a fevered journey that told him they’d somehow get as far as Steve’s bedroom, the pants would come off, Handsome Jogger would take one look at his decidedly unmodernized genitals and decide this was a dealbreaker. “All over. I thought I might try it.”

“Who,” Bucky says, then has to cough. His arm shifts, then slithers off Steve’s neck. Steve really shouldn’t miss the touch. “Who were you trying to impress?”

He looks so surprised to say it, but the words couldn’t be more familiar. He’s still deathly pale and his whole body is trembling, but Steve’s struck all over again by how this is Bucky. It’s a Bucky so stressed he can barely speak, but it’s him. Steve edges back, then back some more, giving Bucky room even as he knows he’s staring, unable to look away. “I told you, I wanted to try something new,” he says, knowing it comes out much more adoring than aloof.

“Liar,” Bucky says, still looking so surprised, and Steve can’t help his smile even as he can feel the back of his neck turn pink.

“Is he lying, man?” Sam asks from across the room. “Shit, he is. Who was it, Steve? Who were you shaving for?”

“You don’t wanna ask that question, Sam,” Steve says.

“Oh, shit, was it - ” Sam cuts off, more abruptly than the realization would have called for. Steve looks around: Sam’s looking at Bucky, his eyes focused just beyond Steve’s hip. “JB, man,” Sam starts again, except now his voice is very even and calm. “Do you maybe wanna sit down? You’re bleeding through your bandage.”

Bucky looks down and takes a shaky half-step back, bumping into the wall again and starting to slide down. He is bleeding: a couple of nickel-sized spots of red, from where his panic attack must have ruptured the wound-seal. Steve goes to steady him but he flinches and Steve pulls back, flinching himself; he ends up backing away from Bucky as Sam steps forward. “What happened?”

“Gunshot wound,” Steve says. “From last night.”

“He got shot,” Sam repeats, still very calm. He turns to Steve, with an expression that Steve last saw on the face of Sister Catherine when she caught him doodling a pair of girl’s legs on his math book. “He got shot and you didn’t wake me up?”

“I gave him a blood transfusion,” Steve says, a little taken aback by the look of impending biblical retribution. “He patched himself up, the bleeding was stopped. He got the bullet out. I didn’t pour
“dirt in the wound.”

“They can shake off pretty much anything if the bleeding stops early enough,” Natasha adds.

“Yeah, okay, quick question though,” Sam says. “Either of you have a medical degree? Hm? No?”

“Neither... do you,” Steve tries.

“I got twenty-two weeks of paramedic training and a trauma surgeon sister, which is more than either of your asses got, so JB, buddy, can I take a look at your bandage there? I’m a field medic. Pararescue. I can make sure everything got taken care of properly.”

Bucky’s eyes dart between Steve, Natasha and Sam, but the look Sam’s turning on Bucky is very different from the one he gave Steve, with a noticeable lack of divine wrath and large helpings of patent Sam Wilson genuine empathy. Steve strongly suspects that look would stop a charging bear and leave it slumped crying on Sam’s shoulder. “Sam’s great,” he adds stupidly, as if what Bucky needs here is a character endorsement. “He knows what he’s doing.”

“JB, you wanna lie down on the bed, man? Face up, however’s comfortable.”

Bucky darts another glance at Natasha; she wiggles her fingers. This appears to be the guarantee he needs, because his gaze goes back to Sam, then to Steve, then Sam again before he jerkily stands up and edges over to the bed. He makes it to the mattress, then seems to stall out with his legs in front and his hands supporting him, half sitting up.

“Better?” Natasha says cheerfully, sliding around Sam; she’s got a knife, the one Bucky threw into the wall by her head. She holds it out to him handle first, and he takes it from her without hesitation. “Now Steve, come stand over here so if he stabs anybody on accident it’ll be you.”

Steve hustles over, ready to act as buffer, except the minute he gets within range Bucky drops the knife, lunges up from the bed and yanks him into a headlock.

“They can shake off pretty much anything if the bleeding stops early enough,” Natasha adds.

“Yeah, okay, quick question though,” Sam says. “Either of you have a medical degree? Hm? No?”

“Oh... do you,” Steve tries.

“I got twenty-two weeks of paramedic training and a trauma surgeon sister, which is more than either of yourasses got, so JB, buddy, can I take a look at your bandage there? I’m a field medic. Pararescue. I can make sure everything got taken care of properly.”

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Bucky’s gaze flicks to Natasha. “Don’t worry,” she says cheerily, slipping off the table and holds up her hands, palm out. “If he tries anything weird I’ll put him in a headlock.”

“For you guys, trying something weird would be getting adequate medical care,” Sam says, in a tone that implies his patience is limitless but his esteem for their intelligence is really not. “So how about we get real fucking weird in here for the next twenty minutes, because I am not dealing with supersoldier sepsis.”

“We don’t get infections,” Steve tries, on the basis that medical staff are generally pretty happy to hear that. “We run too hot, we can’t get sepsis.”

“Wow, I don’t care,” Sam replies pleasantly. “JB, you wanna lie down on the bed, man? Face up, however’s comfortable.”

Bucky does look marginally calmer with a knife in his hand. “Great,” Natasha says cheerfully. “Now Steve, come stand over here so if he stabs anybody on accident it’ll be you.”

They land back on the mattress with a thump, a pained grunt making its way out of Bucky’s throat. Steve ends up bent in half over the bed, cheek mashed against Bucky’s chest, and suppressing the reflexive countermaneuver means he nearly elbows Bucky in the face. Sam inhales, Steve twitches, and Bucky grunts again because he just jerked most of Steve’s weight onto his own chest and upper abdomen.

“Or... that works too!” Natasha says brightly.

“O...kay,” Sam says. Steve, trying to brace as much as possible to keep his weight off Buck’s
heaving chest, can’t really see anything until he turns his head; that makes Bucky spasm and
tighten his grip. “Shh, not going anywhere,” Steve says automatically, his right hand finding
Bucky’s thigh and patting it. “It’s alright. Lemme kneel down. Give me an inch, buddy, I’m
staying right here.”

Bucky, after a tense second, gives him the inch. Steve kneels down by the bed, shamelessly
covering as much of Bucky’s upper body as possible. Then he hides a wince in Bucky’s metal
elbow, as his underpants once again remind him that he has plenty of shame waiting to ambush
him the second he gets alone for ten seconds. On the one hand, it’s more or less exactly what
happened every time they shared a bed between the ages of twelve and seventeen; on the other,
Bucky’s shot and Steve fell asleep on watch.

Sam goes around to crouch by Bucky’s shoulder, so his face is level with Bucky’s and Steve can
see him if he twists around a little. “We good?”

“We’re good,” Steve agrees. He is a-okay with being a comfort hostage. “Buck, let Sam take a
look at you, alright? Five minutes, he’ll be done.”

Bucky doesn’t start choking Steve out, so that seems to be agreement. Sam also takes it as such.
“How are you feeling, man? Can you walk me through what you did here?”

Bucky stares at Sam, chest heaving, then thumps his fist where it’s clenched between Steve’s
shoulder blades. “Got it,” Sam says. “Steve, what did you do.”

“Uh,” Steve says, his brain sputtering briefly in attempt to produce a coherent sitrep. “He came in
about three hours ago, texted me, we met on the roof…”

Steve runs through what he did as accurately as he can, and Sam stops him when he starts talking
about painkillers. “He’d taken a sedative? What did he take?”

“Uh… not sure.”

Sam looks at Steve with true wonder on his face. “You weren’t sure,” he says. “And you injected
him with another substance anyway.”

“Um.”

“Clearly he survived,” Natasha says, leaning in around Sam’s shoulder. “Was it the Supersoldier
Special, Steve?”

“What the hell is that?” Sam demands.

“Fast-acting localized numbing agent, lasts a couple hours. SHIELD developed it for him,”
Natasha says, nodding at Steve. “It might have uppers in it, it’s meant to be used in prolonged
combat. Steve, you ever feel extra chipper after taking one of these?”

“Not really?” Steve says, a little muffled by how Bucky chooses that moment to shift his grip.
Steve raises his head a little so he’s not speaking directly into Bucky’s armpit. “Pretty sure it’s just
a painkiller. Bucky fell asleep right after.”

“Maybe they only gave uppers to me,” Natasha says thoughtfully. “Unenhanced personnel,
anyway.”

“I will dig up all of SHIELD just to drown them in DC again,” Sam swears under his breath,
then, at normal volume: “Are you in pain right now, is what I should have been asking.”
Bucky just stares. Sam tries again. “You know what a pain scale is?”

Bucky, while panting like a dog and moving not a single facial muscle, manages to convey both incredulity and disdain. “You’re right, fuck that, just give me the - Natasha, one of the… supersoldier specials. Thank you. JB, right now, we don’t want you feeling anything, alright? You’ll be conscious - right?” Steve nods as much as he can; plastic crinkles over his shoulder as Natasha holds out one of the single-package syringes. “See, you’ll be awake, you’ll see everything just fine,” Sam continues. “I just don’t want you in any pain.”

“...Had worse,” Bucky says tightly.

“How cares?” Sam says just as tightly, then drags up a grim smile. “Today I’m your medic and I say you get painkillers ‘til they come out your ears. You can refuse, but I’m not sure why you’d bother.”

Bucky continues to eye Sam like it’s all a foreign language and he’s only understanding one word in three. “...Local only,” he says after a moment.

“Local only,” Sam agrees, taking the syringe from Natasha and showing it to Bucky. “Want me to stick Steve in the ass with one of these first?”

Steve can’t quite bite down a smile. Bucky eyeballs him suspiciously, as much he can when they can really only see up each others’ nostrils, then sets his mouth in something just barely too hostile to be a pout. “No.”

“Alright,” Sam says easily. “Go?”

“Go.”

Sam opens the syringe, uncaps it and stands up to lean over Bucky’s hip, leaving Steve’s line of sight. “There we go,” he says, and a moment later Steve feels small muscles in Bucky’s abdomen start to unclench.

“I’m gonna take a look at this now,” Sam says, as more plastic rustles and the smell of nitrile gloves reaches Steve’s nostrils. Bucky tenses right back up again, though he doesn’t actually do much beyond smushing Steve further into his chest. “You let me know right away if anything hurts, alright? Yell or kick or pull Steve’s hair or something.”

Bucky’s ribs quiver in what might be laughter. “I’m agreeing with Sam, just this once,” Steve says, then yelps as Bucky flicks him on the ear.

“There you go, just like that,” Sam says, over the small sounds of the bandage being removed. “So you got the bullet out, Steve gave you blood and covered this up… Hm. Looks like he did a pretty okay job, even if he did slap this together like a two minute ham sandwich.”

“Thanks,” Steve says, most of his attention on Bucky’s heartbeat under his cheek, trying to swallow his moronic smile. A flick on the goddamn ear shouldn’t be doing this to him. “I was exercising my artistry.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sam says from the other side of Steve’s body. “JB - you’ve got some scabbing, but this needs stitches and I got no idea what’s going on inside.”

“How bad,” Bucky says.

“I don’t think there’s internal bleeding but I can’t be sure. Really don’t know if this nicked your liver or not. We’ll need to get imaging done.”
Bucky processes this, his exhales ruffling Steve’s hair. “Can you do the stitches now.”

“I can, if we have the supplies.”

“We have them,” Natasha says. “Here. We have staples too, Steve’s lazy and staples everything.”

“But not everything,” Steve protests, because this is an old dance for them. “I got stitches after Insight.”

“You mean doctors gave them to you while you were unconscious,” Natasha says. “You stole this stapler from SHIELD medical. You kept whining about how stitches take too long and if they had all this fancy future technology why wouldn’t they let you use it - ”

“Like you don’t - you borrowed it from me all the time!”

“Stitches are for shirts, Natasha,” she intones, ignoring him. “Do I look like a shirt? No. I am a man. A man who once decided to do first aid with his armor on, stapled his tac pants and compression shorts to his asscheek and had to ask Natasha to help him fix it - ”

“Aww, that is gross,” Sam says; Bucky’s chest is shaking again, hinting at laughter. “What the hell did he do to his ass?”

“Vaulted over barbed wire wrong during extraction,” Natasha says. “Great moment. He looked like a cow trying to do a cartwheel.”

“We were being fired on! And I didn’t ask you to fix it,” Steve complains. “You took the stapler outta my hands, after you took ten photos and laughed for twenty minutes.”

“I am very unsurprised by the shaving incident, is the moral of this story,” Natasha says with relish. The banter feels cartoonish, half exaggerated, but Bucky’s listening to them, his muscles continuing to unclench in microscopic intervals. His breathing has started to slow. Sam’s laughing too, sounding easy and relaxed. “You get a lot of ass wounds in the World War, Rogers? These days your junk sure seems to be ground zero.”

“Actually, no,” Steve says. He wants to feel Bucky laugh again. “The original Cap getup? All part of the Army plan. They made the tights that tight to make sure the Krauts were too busy laughing to aim.”

“Now that’s what I wanna hear,” Sam says, bending close to Bucky’s stomach. “Captain America weaponizing his ass to psychologically destroy the Nazis.”

“If you read the Cap comics without understanding the words, that’s pretty much exactly what it looks like,” Natasha says helpfully. “Which is what I did, during American Propaganda lessons in Soviet spy elementary school.”

That really makes Bucky’s chest shake, the laughter so close to slipping out. His chest hair tickles against Steve’s forehead. “Feeling better?” Steve says.

“I will bite you,” Bucky says, but his heart isn’t in it.

“He’d probably enjoy it,” Natasha says, cropping up over Steve’s shoulder. “Put your tongue in his ear instead, he might even scream.”

“Stop being nasty,” Sam orders from Bucky’s hip. “Save your freaky sex games for when I’m in a different zipcode. JB, you feelin’ anything?”
“No.”

“Perfect. Steve, how’re you doing?”

“Fine. Wish I had pants on.”

“I don’t,” Natasha says, making sure they can all hear her leer.

“What did I just say about being nasty,” Sam demands.

“I’m very sorry,” Natasha says. “I was just so overwhelmed by this view - ”

“What view,” Bucky says, then clamps his mouth shut like that fought its way out all by itself.

Natasha crows in victory. Sam gives a choked-back snort. “This view got you in bed when it was half the size and coughed every ten seconds, so I don’t want to hear any complaining,” Steve retorts, before remembering what exactly he’d done in bed just a few hours before. He presses his lips together; this is not about him.

Then: “Got bigger, not better,” Bucky mutters, sounding deeply put-up-on, and every other thought dissolves out of Steve’s head. “I’ll bite you,” Steve replies, even as he buries his face in Bucky’s sweaty chest and squeezes whatever he can reach.

“You nasties couldn’t keep it together for one more minute,” Sam says, with a couple of plasticky snipping sounds followed by the scent of antiseptic cream. “There. I’m done. You’re all sewn up, JB, and I’m officially banning you from any gymnastics in the near future - ”

A lot of phone-buzzing noises go off at the same time, followed by a couple of pings. There’s some rustling from Natasha’s spot. “Ah,” she says. “Well. Not quite unexpected, but…”

“What is it?” Sam says, his head going up.


Steve feels the entirety of Bucky’s torso tighten up again, even as he let go of Steve and lays his arms down at his sides. Steve eases back, cautious, but Bucky’s staring up at the ceiling, blinking unhappily.

“I was scouting,” he says. “The facility was active. I got in. I knew you didn’t have site plans or security counts. I was going to get them. Then they just. Knew I was there. Don’t know how, they just, they knew. They started to. Say things. Words that made me - ”

He cuts off, frustrated, and makes a couple quick gestures at Natasha, touching a fist to his mouth and then his ear. She nods sharply. “Trigger words,” she says aloud. “Old school. Fairly effective. How’d you get out?”

“The ship,” Bucky says. “Spaceship. Came in through the roof.”

The way Bucky says it makes all of them exchange glances. “You told me it…talks,” Steve says slowly. “Did you… call it?”

Bucky frowns slightly. “No,” he says. “It called me.”

“But you can talk to it,” Natasha clarifies.

Bucky’s eyes flick to her. “Yes,” says.
“You got an AI onboard?” Sam asks, glancing up from where he’s packing the medkit. “Artificial intelligence?”

“I know what AI is,” Bucky grumbles, but his annoyance is turned inwards. “Not sure you can call it intelligent.”

Natasha’s eyebrows go up as Sam and Steve exchange another glance. “But it can pilot itself independently,” she says.

Bucky screws up his mouth in a well, sort of expression. “It reacts to me,” he says unhappily.

“So it can’t fly itself,” Natasha clarifies.

“It can fly. In a line. It can do point A to B. If you don’t care what it flies over.”

“So it came to you,” Natasha concludes. “Through the roof.”

“Got me out. But we blew everything first.” Bucky’s face gets unhappier. “Don’t know how bad it was.”

All of Natasha’s phones going off at once suggests it was pretty damn bad, but her face doesn’t say any of that. “You got out,” she says. “Then you came here?”

Bucky’s face spasms, his hands starting to clench into fists. “Triggers were still active,” he says tightly. “Shot myself up. Went to Steve.”

“How do you feel now?” Steve can’t help asking, still knelt by the bed with one hand on the mattress. “The triggers - is it better?”

Bucky glares like he’s personally offended by Steve’s stupidity, but Steve already knows he’s a mess right now and he grew up on that look anyway. “No Nazis in my brain is a low fucking bar. Rogers.”

“And he’s as patched as he’s going to get, which means he needs fluids,” Sam says, pointing one finger at Bucky as he strips his gloves off. “We should get an IV going, you shouldn’t be taking anything by mouth.”

“We need to move,” Natasha says, a phone in either hand now, typing on both. “If we don’t know how they discovered Soldier on the base, it’s safest to assume they can find him in the city and move accordingly.”

“No trackers,” Bucky says, but he looks worried. “Took them all out.”

“We should move anyway. Steve, Sam, pack it up, I’m going to steal us an ambulance -”

“I can walk,” Bucky says.

“Should you walk, is the question,” Sam says. “Think we can find a stretcher?”

“Put me in an ambulance and I put us driving ninety into the median,” Bucky rasps.

“Good to know you are feeling better,” Natasha replies, not missing a beat. “Okay, no ambulance. Do we still need an IV?”

Bucky gestures in a way that looks pretty rude to Steve but makes Natasha smile. “I can drink too,” Bucky complains.
“Uh-huh. We’re getting you a CT scan,” Sam decides. “If you do have any trackers left that’ll find them, and you didn’t come back from the dead just to die of some completely preventable gunshot side effect.”

“Not gonna die,” Bucky mutters sullenly.

“Yeah, because I’m not gonna let you,” Sam says, exasperated. “I didn’t spend ten months in weird hostels chasing squid fascists for you to die on us.”

Bucky’s gaze snaps abruptly to Sam, his face suddenly sharp with that too-awake look he had when he told Steve he was dead. Even Natasha stops typing. “Who died on you?”


“You got nothing to be sorry for,” Sam says. “Unless you go septic on me, in which case you have no idea how sorry I’ll make you.”

The last bit doesn’t seem to register. Bucky’s face has gone glazed and distant. “Wingman,” he repeats. “I… broke your wings.”

“You,” Sam says, popping the p as he half-turns away, starting to clean up the medkit. “And ripped the steering wheel out of my car, which, on the other hand, you absolutely owe me for.”

Bucky’s face creases up further. “When?”

“On the overpass, man. You grabbed Sitwell out of the window and laminated him across the grill of a semi before you totaled my car.”

“…Overpass?”

“You don’t remember?”

Bucky slowly shakes his head. “Got wiped.”

“Oh.” Sam looks briefly and uncharacteristically uncertain. “Uh, well. In that case.”

Bucky fixes his laser-bore stare on Sam’s forehead. “What kind of car.”

Sam opens his mouth. Sam shuts his mouth. “A Lamborghini,” he says. “2012 Reventon. White gold finish. Red leather seats. Custom. One of a kind, really. And it had a lot of - emotional value, too, so don’t bother trying to find an exact replacement, it uh… it just won’t be the same.”

“Okay,” Bucky agrees.

“A regular old Lambo will do,” Sam finishes.

“Speaking of Lamborghinis,” Natasha says, before Steve can decide if this is something he should intervene in. “Soldier, where is your ride?”

There’s a pause as they all collectively remember the spaceship. “…On the roof,” Bucky admits.

“What, just hanging out up there?” Sam says. “In broad daylight?”
“It was dark. When I parked it.”

“We need to un-park it,” Natasha says. “Soldier - you said you can get it from point A to B?”

“Not right now,” Bucky says, his mouth turned all the way down. “It’s off.”

“Off,” Natasha repeats, but Steve can see her moving on even as she says it. “Okay. Sam, you’ve flown jets, right?”

“Can’t,” Bucky says.

“Can’t?”

“You don’t have the hardware.”

“You aren’t flying it anywhere either, mister all shot up,” Sam says, as Steve mouths hardware? at Natasha. “I’m not letting you disappear into the sky without a scan.”

“Wasn’t gonna,” Bucky mutters, looking extremely like yes, he actually was.

“Okay, so we can’t move the jet,” Natasha says.

“Throw a tarp on it,” Steve suggests.

“White man, it is a spaceship.”

“Tarp might work,” Bucky says.

Sam glances at him. “Your tarp got special anti-theft properties?”

“Nobody can fly it. And if they can’t fly it. How will they get it off the roof.”

“Give me a Halo chopper and I can get anything off any damn roof you like,” Sam says. “And these guys had a bunch of American warships with evil lasers, so I bet you they can get their hands on a Russian heavy cargo copter and a pilot, too.”

“They have to find it first,” Natasha says. “And know what they’re looking for. We have some time.”

“Enough time?” Steve asks.

“We won’t go far,” Natasha says. “There’s a couple places we can lie low - and yes, get him a CT scan,” Natasha says, as Sam opens his mouth. “But we need to move soon. This isn’t a big town and the hotel staff know we’re foreigners.”

“Take me to the roof,” Bucky says. “I’ll wake it up. Then it’ll come.”

They all look at him again, accepting the reality of a more or less self-piloting spaceship. “Okay,” Natasha says. “Steve, give him one of your button shirts and put some pants on, you’re going upstairs. Sam, let’s pack this up. You two, when you’re done meet us at the bottom of the stairwell.”

Steve has no idea which pants he gets on, barely wincing as the forgotten mess in his shorts tugs at him, stuffing his feet into boots without socks. When he turns to Bucky with a button-down he’s already sitting up, one hand braced on Sam’s shoulder, his middle one big patch of white gauze. Steve recognizes the murderous look in Bucky’s eyes and hands the shirt over, gesturing Sam away to let Bucky do it himself; he goes around the room and starts tossing things back into his
duffel, remembering at the last second to pocket the pink phone.

When he turns around again Bucky’s sitting with both feet on the floor, a little hunched with three whole buttons done. There’s a fine tremor running along his flesh arm. He’s looking down at his knees like they’ve personally betrayed him. Steve starts to bend down, then hesitates and instead holds his hand out.

Bucky’s eyes flick to his hand, then his face, back to his hand. He takes with his metal palm.

Steve exerts as little pressure as possible on the grip, bending down to set his shoulder to Buck’s armpit. Bucky tries to stand on his own for a second before slumping down, letting Steve take his weight. He’s starting to pant. “Easy,” Steve says, trying to keep his grip as gentle and strictly supportive as he can. He doesn’t know how to say it’s fine, it’s all fine, he’s ready and willing to carry Buck up ten thousand flights of stairs even if Buck’s puking down his back the whole way, and he knows it wouldn’t matter even if he could. There was a time when the worst thing Steve could think of was having somebody carry him, for any reason, and he knows pride hangs on all the harder when it’s the only thing you’ve got.

And now it’s his turn: standing there as Bucky finds his footing, staring straight ahead with his jaw tight and an arm clenched tight around Steve’s neck. “Easy, Buck. You got this.”

“You pop any of my stitches, I put your hair in pretty pink bows,” Sam calls to Bucky, holding the door for them; Natasha’s already gone. “Don’t think I can’t lay my hands on some ribbons. And Rogers, you drop him down the stairs, you wake up tomorrow with no eyebrows and a full-size dick drawn on your face.”

“Thanks,” Steve says, as they limp past into the hallway. “Thanks, Sam.”

“You bet, Rogers. I’ll see you two downstairs.”

Chapter End Notes

CONTENT WARNING:
Bucky and Steve “have sex”, in the sense that they are touching each other when an orgasm happens. Steve is asleep at the time and Bucky is awake but mildly drugged; basically Steve gets a sleep stiffy and rubs off on Bucky, and while there is some embarrassment afterward, it’s not very severe and nobody feels taken advantage of or violated. The entire thing happens in the same manner/tone as everything else in this story: as borderline absurdist comedy.

END NOTES
1. This is an INCREDIABLY UNREALISTIC depiction of gunshot wounds, drugs, healing, everything. All of it. Medical crap = straight fucking made up (except some minor details like veins hardening bc of repeated IV use). This kind of wound would put Bucky in the hospital for DAYS and also: HE WOULDN’T BE A-OKAY WITH ANYBODY HUGGING HIM LET ALONE HUMPING HIS ASS bc medically speaking that would be BAD. As such, we are handwaving everything here under the big ol’ banner of SUPERSERUM.

2. The electroswing song that plays for Bucky is Lone Digger by Caravan Palace, which came out in 2015 so it’s not super realistic that Sam would have it on his ipod, but we already know I don’t know what a timeline is. I do think Sam would have a
lot of jazz and some big band and electroswing in his music library.

3. The Bozshakol mine is nowhere near Almaty, but clearly i have now abandoned realism in space as well as time. There's a bunch more details here that I might make a post about when my brain is actually working.

4. The chapter title song is I’m Not Done by Fever Ray.
The stairwell is deserted, and it’s about the only thing in their favor. Bucky doesn’t pull away from Steve but he’s stiff as a board and occasionally gives a full-body twitch like a horse shaking off a fly, and his boots are still in the room, which means he’s going up the stairs in Steve’s socks. They’re good socks, but what would’ve been even better is if Steve had gotten Bucky’s damn shoes on.

For his part, Bucky seems to be doing the thing he’d do in the war, which is pretend Steve is a particularly versatile piece of winching equipment. It had spared them some indignity then, whenever Steve had to move him or one of the guys around; in private it was Steve’s best bet to get Bucky to laugh, to roughhouse and wrestle, but when Steve did it in public Bucky responded with good-natured hauteur. It had set the example for the rest of the squad: it’s hard to keep hold of your dignity when you’re hanging over your Captain’s shoulder or riding piggyback as he hauls you hand over hand up a fortress wall, but Bucky had let them pull it off.

It seems to be working now, even if good-natured isn’t quite the word anymore. Bucky’s glaring rigidly at the steps ahead of them, lips pressed together, but he’s leaning on Steve even as Steve can tell it costs him to do it.

Steve’s consumed with the need to say something even as he wonders what the hell there is to say. It’s alright. It’s fine. That’s less than nothing. They’re stumbling up a dingy access stairwell in a country Steve hadn’t known existed up until four years ago, going to wake Bucky’s spaceship and hide it with whatever they can find on the roof. Bucky’s shot; Steve’s got his shorts full of his own sticky bodily stupidity. HYDRA just found Bucky again and they don’t even know how. And how’ve you been, pal?

They stumble a little on the steps, Bucky’s grip yanking briefly on the neckline of Steve’s shirt. “Sorry,” Bucky mutters, and right, that’s what there is to say. Leave it to Bucky to get there before him.

“I’m sorry,” Steve says. Bucky’s got nothing to apologize for. “I fell asleep on watch, and I -”

“What?”

“I fell asleep on watch,” Steve repeats.

Bucky shoots him a glance, his brows scrunches together like he doesn’t understand why Steve’s talking about this. “People fall asleep.”

“That’s - it’s no excuse,” Steve says, but Bucky just shakes his head sharply and clams up until they reach the top of the stairwell.

The access door is still broken from where Steve forced it last night, swinging freely and letting them sidle out onto the rooftop. The wind whips Bucky’s half-buttoned shirt and even makes a spirited attempt at moving his hair, which in full daylight looks a little like it got dunked in tar. Steve registers the chill air and tries to put his body between Bucky and the worst of the wind. “Where to?”
Bucky jerks his chin. What Steve vaguely registered as a sloping section of rooftop is absolutely not, now that he focuses on the world outside Bucky. The thing is big, dark grey, gleaming dully in the early morning sunlight; it’s vaguely wedge-shaped, chisel-nosed with a couple of rounded stubby wings and a flat back end. As they limp around it, Steve sees there’s an opening on the wide end, with a ramp. Bucky takes them right towards it.

The inside is cool and dark and smells strongly of blood, with faint undertones of gun oil and eau de Bucky’s socks. It’s also a disaster, with a shredded sleeping bag and the contents of a sizable medical kit strewn across the floor. Rusty red smears cover everything. Steve’s boot hits something that goes skittering off with a sharp clinking noise, and when it bumps to a stop he sees it’s a pair of bloodied tweezers.

“The console,” Bucky says, as Steve stares at the tweezers. Bucky had pulled the bullet out of himself, here, alone. He’d lost so much blood that there’s handprints of it on the goddamn walls. Bucky had nearly died.

“Steve,” Bucky says. “The console. I have to touch it.”

The console can only be the waist-high counter built into the front of the cabin. Steve stares around as they limp towards it. Bucky’s clearly been living here, which would’ve been obvious even without the sleeping bag. Stacks of cheap paperbacks form precarious towers along the walls. Even more are piled on a wooden board laid across the top of a gun rack. There’s a pallet of water bottles, a huge painter’s bucket, and, incongruously, a large plastic bag in one corner full of brightly colored bottles. A couple of ammo cans peek out from under yet more books. Those Sharpie markers are everywhere.

Then the whole thing shudders and the view outside the hatch abruptly drops by a few feet. Steve tenses too late for a motion shift that never comes: it’s like the rest of the world moved while the cabin stayed still. His head jerks around as strange symbols start to scroll down the walls in dull grey light.

It finally hits that he’s in an alien spaceship, and it’s not that he doubted Bucky, it’s that his only reference points were the Chitauri scooters and the massive spiked whales that leveled half of Midtown. Then again, when trying to populate scenarios of Bucky, his imagination had barely made it past Bucky’s face, so it’s probably not surprising that he hadn’t much spared a thought to what his vehicle might look like. Besides, what did he give a damn? In “Bucky has a spaceship”, the only really important part of the sentence is Bucky.

Now, though, Steve is certainly giving a damn. This thing is like a cell with wings. The walls are featureless and dark apart from the flickery alien symbols, and that windshield hardly qualifies as a window. With the entrance sealed it would be halfway to a tomb.

When Steve looks back at him, whatever Bucky did to raise the ship is over and he’s now just leaning heavily with both hands on the console. There’s a kind of buzzing in the air, not quite a noise, something Steve feels in his back teeth. “It’s… awake?” he hazards, and Bucky nods tightly. Steve can’t quite tell in the strange grey lighting, but he thinks Bucky looks paler than before.

There are more bloody handprints on the console, starting to flake off the metal. Bucky must have stood here just like he is now, holding himself up. Steve takes another glance around. “Do you need anything from here?”

Bucky’s eyes flick to the ravaged sleeping bag. Steve can’t imagine any further use from it except maybe as a firestarter, but at this point if Bucky wants to rip out the console and take it with them Steve will drag it along just to get them out of here faster. Bucky might live here, but right now it’s
the place where he almost died. Steve’ll be happy to help him clean up once he knows the stitches are out of Bucky’s stomach.

But Bucky creaks down, going to his knees, so Steve helps brace him as he reaches for the mess and starts rummaging through it. “What’re you looking for?” Steve asks, but Bucky ignores him, tossing aside bits of bag. He’s starting to breathe harder, but then he lets out a little hah and snatches up something small and white. There’s a pair of headphones trailing from it.

The ipod, Steve realizes. The one he’d gone to Sam for, and traded for his truest or at least most immediate desire. Bucky stuffs it into the chest pocket of his shirt, tucking the headphones in haphazardly after it. He keeps his palm pressed over it afterward, like to leave it be is to risk it vanishing into thin air.

Steve, who has yet to take his hands off Bucky, can understand the feeling. “Let’s go?” he suggests.

Bucky nods. He doesn’t reach for Steve, but he also doesn’t flinch as Steve gets his arm back over his shoulders. He tries to be careful, remembering the brutal scarring around Bucky’s arm. Even if it’s numb, it can’t be comfortable to have it put under stress.

The moment they stumble fully out of the spaceship Bucky buries his face in Steve’s shoulder. Steve fumbles for a second in surprise, not knowing what to do with his free hand. Bucky has both hands fisted in his shirt, rigid with tension. “Buck?”

“Shut up shut up,” Bucky says, swallowing wetly, then, “Not you.”

“Are you - are you talking to the ship?”

“It never - shuts - up,” Bucky rasps, grinding his face into Steve’s collarbone. It’s not really any kind of hug: Steve is just a solid surface that happens to be in front of Bucky’s face right now. Steve gets the feeling if he weren’t there Bucky would be trying to shove through a wall or even the ground.

Steve cranes his head back to look at the ship. He does a double take before he realizes it really has changed: a flat windshield has appeared, and the segmented curves around the wings look somehow sharper and more defined. “We need a tarp,” Steve says, even as the thing rises off the ground, sans pilot. Jesus Christ. It talks to me, Bucky had said.

“Fuck a tarp,” Bucky grits out. He glances over his shoulder, still breathing unsteadily, then shuts his eyes and jams his face into Steve’s clavicle again. “This might not work,” he grunts, just as the ship’s hatch slides shut above them and the whole thing melts away like a heat mirage.

“Think it worked fine,” Steve says, staring. He can still feel it, that not-quite-unpleasant hum in his skull, but it looks like there’s nothing there. “Unless you weren’t trying to make it disappear. How did you do that?”

“Pixie wishes,” Bucky mutters, which makes Steve give a startled yap of laughter. It comes out louder and higher than a sane person’s laugh, but he’s giving himself a pass on this one. Bucky roughly scrapes his face against Steve’s shoulder one last time and then pushes himself up, angling himself back towards the roof stairwell door.

Going down is slower than going up. Bucky’s big, solid body is sweating against his as they stiffly pick their way down the stairs, each holding onto a railing. Steve soberes as as they limp on, remembering their ascent. “I really am sorry,” he says quietly. “I took advantage of you. It won’t happen again.”
Bucky’s brow, already creased with concentration, furrows further. “What?”

Steve girds his… well, whatever the opposite is of his loins. “I must’ve rubbed off on you. While we were asleep,” he says directly, eyes on the next stair, not letting himself talk around it or hesitate any longer. “When I should’ve been on watch.”

“Oh. That,” Bucky says.

The way he says it makes Steve hesitate: *oh, that*, like Steve was bringing up old news. “That?”

“We had sex,” Bucky says, sounding one hundred percent confident in his assessment.

“What?”

“We had sex.”

“In… general?”

Bucky glances at him like he’s worried Steve’s a few crayons short of a full coloring set. “Last night.”

“What?”

“What?”

They stare at each other, paused on a landing - or at least, Steve stares at Bucky and Bucky glares at Steve’s left eyebrow. “What do you *want*?” Bucky demands.

“What? I don’t want anything!”

“Then why are you talking about sex!”

“I’m not - I’m *apologizing*!”

“For what!”

“For - taking advantage!”

Bucky gives a noise of pure animal frustration. “Of *what*!”

“Of *you*!”

“When!”

It occurs to Steve that they are having two separate conversations, and that he needs to use smaller words. He’s not sure there’s a word for sex smaller than ‘sex’, but he’s going to have to find one because Bucky looks like he wants nothing more than to headbutt Steve into oblivion.

“Oh,” Steve says, trying again, “Look, it’s just that - I shouldn’t have. You were asleep, and I -”

“I wasn’t asleep.”

“What?”

“You were asleep. You didn’t wake up. At all. I hit you.”
“Oh, jesus,” Steve says thickly, nausea welling up. If Bucky had been awake, tried to shove him off and didn’t succeed -

“So if you were asleep, how did you take advantage,” Bucky says angrily.

Steve opens his mouth, and realizes he’s run into a wall here. Bucky starts trying to go down the stairs again, which means Steve has no choice but to start moving too. “I just -” he tries.

Bucky rounds on him, or as much as he can when he’s still using Steve as a crutch. “We had sex! It was fine! You and Bucky did it all the time so sorry it wasn’t as good but you weren’t even awake so what is the problem!”

Steve, his mouth open again, shuts it with a snap. “I just,” he tries, “I - wait - what do you mean, me and Bucky?”

“What?”


“What do you want, Rogers!”

Which is a deflection if Steve’s ever heard one. “You’re definitely Bucky,” Steve tries. “Trust me. I’d know.”

This, strangely, makes Bucky’s face compress with unhappiness. “Just leave it, Rogers.”

Steve’s not sure what’s going on, but… Bucky hadn’t known his own name. Steve shouldn’t be surprised there are some identity issues at play. When he’d talked about being dead last night Steve had chalked it up to drugs and delirium but apparently this runs a little deeper. “Sorry.”

“Stop apologizing!”

Steve decides this discussion can probably wait.

The stairwell has a door that leads directly outside, which conveniently opens on the back parking lot. It currently features Natasha and Sam dumping their bags into the ugliest car Steve’s ever seen. Rust makes an elaborate pattern of splotches on the hood, and it sports four doors in four different colors, presumably because they were taken from four different cars.

Natasha’s head pops out of the trunk the second the door opens. She looks them up and down. “It’s hidden?”

“Invisible,” Steve says.

“Good,” Natasha says, beckoning them to the back seat. “I suggest you lie down,” she tells Bucky, taking advantage of Steve bending down to yank a knit cap onto his head. Sam’s already wearing a giant fur hat with ear flaps. Natasha’s has a mustard yellow pompom. “We’re about to do a lot of driving and I don’t want us to get made because some traffic cop spotted you two through the window.”

“Do I wanna know where you got these high-tech disguises?” Sam asks, flicking one of his ear flaps as he climbs into the passenger side.

“Same place I got the car,” Natasha says, slamming the trunk and tucking a pistol into her coat as she gets behind the wheel.
“Was that the nearest dump or just the nearest five-dollar parking lot?” Sam says.

“Flea market down the street,” Natasha says. “Their parking was free.”

“You’re right. Stupid of me to assume the previous owner of this car could afford a parking fee,” Sam says, taking the pistol Natasha hands him.

“Not sure it had a previous owner,” Natasha says thoughtfully.

Steve’s not paying much attention. The back seat is not large, and full of stuff besides. It looks like Sam or Natasha had just stripped all the sheets off Steve’s hotel bed and dumped them in here, which is probably a good idea considering they most likely contain a full pint of blood, not all of it Bucky’s. It also lets Steve set up something a little more comfortable than the ragged upholstery of an ancient sedan; Bucky’s gingerly settled himself against the far window, but he looks willing to move as Steve gestures to the seat and indicates he wants to redecorate.

“Where are we going?” Sam asks, as Steve starts shuffling things.

“Away,” Natasha says. “For now. There should be a viable safehouse a few hours from here, but since we don’t know how or if we’re being tracked we’re going to confuse our trail first.”

“Is this going to involve Michael Bay car chases?” Sam asks.

“Not if we do it right,” Natasha says, starting the car with a noise like a cat coughing up a melon-sized hairball. “But if we do it wrong, I expect everyone to do their best Jason Statham impression.”

Steve doesn’t even wonder who the hell they’re talking about. Some digging around reveals they had scooped up all of Bucky’s gear, too, which Bucky snatches at as soon as Steve holds it up. Steve hands it over gladly, pretending not to see Bucky extracting his knives.

They end up with Bucky flat on his back, cocooned in stolen hotel blankets, his legs bent in Steve’s lap. Steve hunches down more than he needs to as they turn onto a bigger road and starts to pull Bucky’s boots on.

Bucky watches him, his bloody tac jacket clutched to his chest. He doesn’t move as Steve guides his feet into his boots, sticking his fingers in to test the laces aren’t too tight. There isn’t much of an expression on Bucky’s face beyond a sort of bewildered hostility, like the whole world has just leapt out at him yelling boo! and is gearing up to do it again, but he doesn’t pull away, either.

They drive all day, probably in circles. Natasha pulls them in at a couple of gas stations and a couple of times just in the woods, which is where Bucky claws his way out of the blankets, flinches away from Steve’s hands and staggers off for a piss. He has to prop himself from tree to tree as he goes, which Steve would probably find hilarious under different circumstances. As it is he has to grab hold of the car to keep himself from going after Bucky, something animal inside him convinced that if he lets Buck out of his sight he’ll disappear in a puff of gunpowder.

Even Steve can tell these are crazy thoughts. He does not let go of the car.

When Bucky stumbles back he lets Sam give him another painkiller, braced between Steve and the car on the side of the dirt road. He eases back into his cocoon, and doesn’t resist when Steve lifts his legs back into his lap.

They eat some plastic-wrapped fried cheese things Natasha buys from a gas station. Bucky drinks a gatorade, at Sam’s urging. They don’t really talk. It’s all deeply, unrelentingly surreal. The familiar lull of being on the road with Natasha and Sam contrasts sharply with the weight of
Bucky’s feet in his lap, the smell of dried blood thick in the air. Bucky keeps watching him, and Steve tries not to stare back because if he makes eye contact for longer than a few seconds Bucky twitches and looks away.

He ends up staring a lot at Bucky’s legs instead. Bucky’s boots. They’re black combat gear, hard worn and well broken in. He wonders if these are the same boots Bucky wore on the helicarrier. He doesn’t know. He used to know when Bucky needed a new pair of shoes by the way he stood. He knew how close Bucky was to the end of his Brylcreem by how he styled his hair.

He’ll know again. He wants so badly to know. The urge to say something has set up permanent camp in his throat. Are you comfortable? Do you need anything? Does it hurt? He’s said all of it. What else is there?

He’s not sure he managed to apologize properly for the humping incident, but Bucky clearly doesn’t want to hear it. Doesn’t much seem to care, either. Steve has no idea if this is a… symptom… or if this is just how Bucky reacts now. Maybe there’s no difference. After all, if it had happened in 1944 Bucky would have just laughed at him and made him clean up the mess.

He needs to calm down. One thing at a time. Bucky’s just shot, not lost a limb - lost another limb. The thought is so comically awful Steve’s face momentarily tries to twitch into a smile. He bites the inside of his mouth and makes himself look out the window.

After a while the background adrenaline of a potential car chase dies away, and they settle into the usual vehicular boredom. Sam leans his head against the window. Natasha lets her fingers tap occasionally on the gearshift. Bucky seems to be keeping himself awake through sheer stubbornness, though his eyelids start to droop every other minute. Steve thinks sleep is a great idea and would heartily encourage this, except Bucky seems dead set against it and looks about as ready to accept comfort as fish are to fly.

If this were 1940 Steve would hand Bucky a paperback, a mug full of three parts tea to brandy and tell him to sleep it off. If it were 1944 he’d give Buck a full carton of cigarettes and send him to clean his weapons somewhere quiet. But it’s 2014 and the supplies he’s got back here are limited, so all he can really do is hold still and keep his mouth shut.

The sun goes down. An hour after dark they pull up outside a large complex of buildings, more or less in the middle of nowhere. They all perk up, stretching in their seats; Sam checks his gun and Steve sits up, looking out the window. There’s a lot of wooden fences and sand. Natasha parks around the back and gestures them all out of the car, heading for a set of barnlike doors in the largest building.

Bucky clings grimly to Steve’s neck as they hobble up, their breath steaming in the air as they wait for Natasha to pick the lock. Steve and Sam both look around, Sam with his hand on his gun, but the entire place is silent, deserted.

Then they’re in, the doors opening on cement floors and strange rubber mats with holes in them. There are stalls, and nylon leashlike things hanging on the walls, and a sense of large bodies shifting in the gloom. Steve stops warily two steps from the door, getting a strong whiff of - animals?

“Natasha,” Steve hisses, the penny dropping. “This place is full of horses.”

“It’s stables for the hippodrome,” Natasha whispers back, heading off down the wide, dark hall. Steve sees ears swivel on several huge maned heads, visible over the edges of the stalls. “And it’s got a full medical suite, so - ”
“A medical suite for horses?”

“For large hairy mammals, yes,” Natasha says, with a pointed glance at Bucky.

“Natasha! It’s for horses!”

“For prize-winning, expensive, racing horses,” Natasha says. “The facilities are state of the art. It’s the exact same machinery, anyway.”

“Have you done this before?” Sam says suspiciously.

“Yup,” Natasha says. “Great alternative to when you can’t show up at a normal hospital.”

“You’ve scanned yourself at a horse hospital?” Sam says.

“No, I scanned Clint at a veterinary clinic for cattle. It’s the same exact equipment.”

“Are you sure?”

“Rogers, it’s radiation. You don’t get special radiation for animals, it’s radiation.”

“Tasty,” Bucky mumbles.

Steve glances at him in alarm. “Buck?”

A suspicious snort echoes from one of the stalls. “Both of you, shut the hell up before you start a horse riot,” Sam hisses. “Natasha, where’s that clinic?”

“Geez, everybody’s so highly strung tonight,” Natasha mutters, but at least she’s leading them away from the stalls.

“I wonder why,” Sam says under his breath. “Is this it?”

“This is it,” Natasha says, getting her lockpicks out again.

The clinic, unsurprisingly, also smells strongly of horse. There’s faint traces of antiseptic, but they’re thoroughly smothered by leather, hay and animal shit; Bucky and Steve both switch to breathing through their mouths at the same time. When Natasha flicks the lights on everything seems strangely spaced and confusing until Steve takes into account that the room is built for patients with four legs and weighing over a thousand pounds.

Natasha leads them further through two sets of barnlike doors, bringing them to what must be the scanner. It’s a chunk of machinery shaped like an enormous beige donut, with a wide gurney-like table set up to run through its center. Bucky stops dead the second he sees it.

“Buck?”

“I have to turn the ship off,” Bucky says, white-faced.

“Why?” Natasha says.

“So when I panic it doesn’t crash in and murder you,” Bucky snarls.

“How about we don’t get to panic,” Sam says. “And what do you mean, murder us?”

“How do you think I blew up a mine with my brains fucked, Wilson!”
“We won’t panic,” Steve says, trying to sound calm and authoritative even as he has no idea how they’ll manage that. “You can grab onto me again, I’ll be right there.”

“The scan itself takes five minutes, max. It doesn’t hurt, nothing will touch you, and all you have to do is lie still,” Natasha says.

Bucky doesn’t look like that’s selling it any. “Do me,” Steve says. “Both of us. At the same time. The table’s wide enough.”

“I hate to say this but you can’t, like, hug each other,” Sam says.

“We’ll lie down side by side,” Steve says.

“Good idea. It’ll give us an un-shot abdomen to compare to,” Natasha says. “Barnes?”

Bucky, after a second, gives a tight nod, but the look on his face says he’s backed into a corner about it. Steve knows there isn’t really a look that comes after that, because historically Bucky’s next move was to do something. It reacts to me, Bucky had said, talking about his spaceship. Steve can’t imagine how, but apparently what that means is that they might accidentally get bombed.

The table is wide enough, which makes sense considering it’s made for horses, but they’re not small men and they end up pressed together all down their sides as they lay down. Bucky’s movements are jerky and stilted as they climb on, but everything seems to be under control until he lies back, stiffly, and looks up.

Once again Steve goes from horizontal to vertical in an involuntary blur, Bucky flipping them both off the table as though launched by a giant spatula. He gets their backs to the wall, his arm once again forcing Steve onto tiptoe, his chokehold not quite cutting off Steve’s air but keeping Steve in front of him like a shield.

“Buck?” The Winter Soldier files had some notes on the equipment used to keep him in line. The cryochamber, the mind wiping apparatus - god knows what kinds of machines Bucky had been shoved into. “Is it the scanner?”

“I can’t,” Bucky says. “I don’t - I can’t -”

“Would closing your eyes help?”

“I know it’s there.”

Steve can’t help but turn at that; Bucky lets him, loosening his chokehold until he’s mostly just clutching at Steve’s shoulder. Steve slowly puts his hand on Bucky’s arm. Bucky’s visibly sweating again, his grip starting to pop the seams in Steve’s shirt. Sam and Natasha are watching them from the computer station, both on guard after Bucky’s sudden movement, but Steve makes himself shut them out: they’re not here. Bucky needs him.

He slides his hand up Bucky’s arm to his shoulder, where the star must be on his arm. “Look at me,” he says quietly. “Just me, nothing else. We’re not looking at anything else. Okay?”

Bucky’s eyes dart over Steve’s face. His gaze ends up fixed somewhere around chin level, but Steve will take it. “There we go,” he says. “This isn’t fun, is it.”

Bucky, still focused on Steve’s chin, gives a momentary flash of expression that conveys no fucking shit, genius. “I know. I know. I wish we didn’t have to,” Steve says. “But if it turns out something’s wrong, and we don’t catch it, and it gets worse… Sam’s good, but he’s not a
Bucky nods, slowly. His face is mostly slack again, the eyes just slightly too wide. “I don’t want to do this either,” Steve continues, risking a careful rub of Bucky’s metal shoulder. “But I don’t see a way around it.” Nod. “I think we just gotta get through.” Nod. “Can we do anything to make it better?”

Bucky’s grip tightens on Steve. He’s looking over Steve’s shoulder again, at the machine. He shakes his head.

“Okay,” Steve says. “Okay, we’ll just have to do it fast. We get in, get scanned, it’s done, then we smash it into a million pieces and torch this whole place on our way out, how about that?”

“Only if you’re prepared to lead each individual horse out first,” Sam mutters from behind.

“Sure, it’ll be fun,” Steve says, eyes on Bucky. “It’ll be like we’re cowboys.”

Bucky’s eyes finally flick to Steve’s, even if it’s only for a second. “Not going near any horse,” he croaks.

“You sure?” Steve says, relief spreading a smile across his face. “Don’t want to yell yeehaw and fire six-shooters?”

“Never yeehawed in my life,” Bucky manages.

“Now’s a good a time to start as any,” Steve says. “Come on, pal. We’ll get this over with and ride into the sunset. Ideally in the direction of alcohol.”

Bucky swallows, the spark of levity fading, his eyes darting back to the scanner. “Steve,” he says, raw. “You. If I. You. Knock me out.”

Steve grabs his other shoulder. “It won’t come to that,” he says firmly. “We can stop any time. You can do this.”

“Steve. What if.”

“Then I’ll calm you down,” Steve says. He will. “We did it in the hotel room. We can do it again. C’mon, Buck. You haven’t even pulled a knife on me, and I know you have some.”

Bucky looks so startled that he actually glances down, directly at where he’d stuck the knife in his boot. When he looks back up he meets Steve’s gaze directly, eyes wide, no flinch or twitch. “See, you don’t really want to hurt us,” Steve says, softer. “I bet your spaceship knows it too.”

Bucky keeps staring at him. Steve has no idea if the AI or whatever even works like that, but it doesn’t matter. He’s certain. He has to be. “I’ll get on the table with you. Just put me where you want me,” he says. “We can try as many times as we need. No hurry.”

“Just make sure your abdomen is clear,” Sam says from the other end of the table. That breaks the spell; Steve lets his hands slip off Bucky’s arms, and Bucky turns fully towards the machine. He’s sweating, his face waxen, but he walks towards it anyway.

Bucky climbs onto the table slowly, like he has to take control of each individual joint in his body and move it one at a time. Steve wants to help but he can’t see how, so he ends up just hovering, waiting to see if Bucky will want him on there as well.

He does. When Bucky turns to lie face up he grabs Steve by the collar, towing him forward until
he’s right overhead, blocking out any sight of the metal donut. It’s an awkward position to hold, bent over at the waist over Bucky’s head, but Steve tenses his core and settles in. He’s not moving an inch.

“Okay, no comparison scan then,” Sam says, hovering at the table near Bucky’s feet. “You good, JB?”

“Just do it,” Bucky says, biting out each word one at a time.

“Booting up,” Natasha says, just the top of her head visible over the monitor. “I have to figure out the software… seriously? A password?”

With a last glance at Steve and Bucky Sam goes to lean on the computer stand next to her. “Can you hack it?”

“Maybe with a chisel,” Natasha mutters over the sound of rapid typing. “This isn’t a supercomputer, Wilson, it’s a speak and spell hooked up to some imaging software. There. Which one of these programs is the scanner?”

“How should I know? Don’t you read Kazakh?”

“Yeah, but these are all acronyms.”

“How many secret agents does it take to operate an X-ray machine,” Steve says, mostly to see if Bucky will crack a smile.

He doesn’t, but his attention snaps back to Steve. “Tell another story,” he says abruptly.

“Sure,” Steve says, as his mind conveniently goes blank. “Uh.” He casts around for something equal to the Incident of the Shaven Balls. There has to be something. He knows he regularly made an idiot of himself basically his entire first year of living in the future.

There was the situation with Sharon. He’d been mad as hell at the time, of course, but now it just seems like a ridiculous story he heard in a bar, like it happened to someone else, long ago. And it’s funny, even, the kind of thing that cropped up in Bucky’s books about secret agents giving each other the slip on Mars. Not something real.

“So, when I was living in DC,” Steve begins. “I had a neighbor. Kate. Nice girl. Blonde. A nurse at Georgetown hospital. I asked her out, actually, the day you - showed up. She turned me down, but she was real nice about it.

Then, Fury comes to my apartment. You, uh - he gets shot - and she comes busting in with a gun.” Steve licks his lips, focusing on where Bucky’s borrowed shirt gaps, the bandage visible between the buttons. “Turns out she wasn’t a nurse at all. She was a SHIELD agent assigned to me. To watch me. Her name’s Sharon. And the kicker is, good thing she didn’t take me up on that date, because it turns out she’s Peggy’s niece.”

When Steve looks back at Bucky’s face he’s glaring up at him, once again incredulous with rage. “That’s a bad fucking story.”

“Sorry,” Steve says, caught off guard, just as the machine moans to life around them. The donut starts vibrating gently, whatever machinery inside it shuttling around and around; it’s completely unfamiliar to Steve, given he only gets these scans when he’s already unconscious and intubated on a hospital gurney.

When he looks back down at Bucky he sees there’s nobody home.
He only saw this once, during the war, when they raided a HYDRA lab near Lublin, but it stuck hard enough that he has no trouble recognizing it. Bucky’s checked out, eyes wide and unseeing, his pupils shrinking to pinpricks.

“Shit,” Steve breathes. When he found Buck like this there were two dead HYDRA soldiers beside him and he’d nearly knifed Steve when he put a hand on his arm. This time he’s got a spaceship that’ll do god knows what if Bucky - panics. “Buck?” Steve tries. No response. Damn.

“We need to wrap this up,” he says, directing it towards Natasha and Sam but carefully not raising his voice. Bucky’s breathing is short and shallow and Steve is not interested in seeing how loud noises are going to play out right now. He tries pressing his palm to Bucky’s shoulder. “Buck? You with me?”

“No trackers,” Natasha says distantly.

“Abdomen looks… fine,” Sam says, just as far away. “Wish we had an expert. Shit. I really hope the serum is all that.”

“Steve’s not dead, is he? Barnes will be fine. Come on.”

The second the machine stops humming it’s Steve’s turn to lever Bucky off the table like it’s become a hot stove. He tries to brace Bucky on his shoulder again, but it quickly becomes apparent that it won’t work; Bucky’s not really supporting his own weight anymore. Natasha starts shutting things down as Sam hurries around the table with his hands already out, but Steve has to wave him away: if Bucky gets violent Steve’s the one who can take it. “Is he okay?” Sam says.

“Don’t know,” Steve says tensely.

Natasha glances at Bucky. “Dissociated,” she says. “Or whatever the equivalent is. He comes back eventually - no, let Steve handle him, he can afford the damage.”

Steve ends up lifting him, half over his shoulder. They’re halfway to the door when Bucky’s left hand suddenly scrabbles at his hair and gets a scalp-stinging fistful.

Steve counts it as a win. Bucky doesn’t show any further lucidity but he doesn’t fight either, and Steve carries Bucky out through the stables, Sam holding the doors ahead and Natasha following, locking everything up behind them.

They get out without incident. Bucky’s hand stays clenched in Steve’s hair, breathing shallow, eyes glassy and unfocused, right up until the second Steve tries to get him into the car. Bucky twists like a rattlesnake, slams Steve’s forehead against the car roof and has him in an armlock in the time it takes Sam to yelp shit!

Natasha’s around the hood in seconds, but Bucky subsides just as quick: he drops Steve’s arm and backs away as much as he can, collapsing against the door and gasping. He’s looking around wildly, his hair flying. “Buck,” Steve tries, catching the metal hand as it flails at him and pressing Bucky’s palm to his cheek. “It’s me, Buck, just me. Come on. Let’s get out of here, yeah?”

There’s a tense, charged second where it looks like Bucky might actually do his level best to claw Steve’s face off, but then his hand twitches and starts to relax, pressing flat against Steve’s cheek. “There we go,” Steve says mindlessly, stepping closer and carefully taking Bucky by the biceps. Instead of trembling he’s gone rigid now, his right arm just as unyielding as his left. “Let’s sit down. Come on.”
Bucky lets Steve guide them back into the car. Sam and Natasha get back in too, Sam glancing back at them as Steve tries to wrap Bucky back in the stolen blankets. “You good? How’s his pulse?”

Steve carefully presses his fingers under Bucky’s jaw. The fact that he doesn’t get his hand bitten or otherwise violently objected to is currently more worrying than the fast but steady heartbeat. “He’s... fine,” Steve says, for lack of a better term. “We’re good.”

The engine coughs to life and Natasha peels them out onto the road. Steve lifts up Bucky’s shirt to check that he hasn’t reopened any holes in their journey to the horse clinic and back again. His bandage is dry and lacking visible bloodstains, though the bruising has darkened heavily over his torso. That’s normal, though. Everything always looks worse on day two. Steve reminds himself of that as he carefully bundles Bucky up again.

They get onto a highway. Dark shapes flash by as they pass, interspersed with the occasional glow of lights in the distance. Bucky slowly goes limp in Steve’s lap. His muscles no longer feel like rocks under Steve’s hands and that’s a good thing, but now it’s like he’s got an armful of deflated Bucky balloon. His eyes are half-open but he’s not tracking and every once in a while a big muscle spasm goes through him. After the third time checking his pulse Steve just leaves his hand around Bucky’s wrist, feeling the heartbeat flutter.

At some point Steve realizes his face is throbbing, his cheek and forehead feeling hot. It must have bruised when Bucky grabbed him. His shirt collar is all stretched out where Bucky had yanked on it and he no longer has the hat Natasha dragged over his head. Steve doesn’t care. Bucky’s rough cheek is on his shoulder, his breath slowly making a damp patch on his shirt.

They drive some more. Natasha consults two of her phones periodically, then takes them up a series of increasingly rural mountain roads, finally pulling to a stop at a winding dirt track. “It should still be empty,” she says, her voice raspy after being quiet for so long. The car’s watery headlights illuminate a grimy log cabin in the forest. “Too far up the mountain for squatters.”

Sam squints through the windshield, rubbing one eye with his hand. “Nobody lives there?”

“An acquaintance of mine killed the owner two years ago,” Natasha says. “It was his mistress’s weekend getaway.”

“This?”

“He was one of those outdoors people. Or he wanted to be remote enough that no one could hear the screams, I don’t know. He’s dead, we’re here, the keys are in that fake birdhouse.”

The local birds hadn’t considered it fake, judging by Sam’s quiet swearing, but he gets the keys out as Natasha returns from circling the property. The two of them nod at each other, stack up by the front door and start to clear the house while Steve carefully extracts Bucky from the back seat.

He stirs as Steve gets them upright. When Steve checks his eyes are still unfocused, but as they straighten Bucky latches onto Steve’s shoulder like a two hundred pound limpet. “Buck?” Steve says. No answer. Must have been reflex.

Natasha comes out of the cabin, Sam behind her. “Clear,” she reports. “Might be a little cramped, but it’s off the grid.”

“What’s our next move?” Sam asks, glancing at Steve and Bucky.

Natasha pinches the bridge of her nose, shutting her eyes. “I need to message Stark,” she says.
“We need to know what went wrong in the mine. We’re lying low, for now.” She opens her eyes. “There’s only one road to this cabin and we’ll hear anybody coming. Our priority is to regroup, gather intel and make sure Barnes doesn’t go septic.”

“Should he… radio his ship?” Sam asks.

“Yes,” Natasha says. “Better to have it close.”

“I’m not waking him up,” Steve says. He probably doesn’t need to mention that it’s more a question of can. Bucky’s still hanging off Steve’s shoulder like a life-size teddy missing half its stuffing and if he’s conscious it’s only by bare technicality.

“Let’s just get inside,” Sam says. “When he’s more with it we can try the spaceship. I want him to drink something warm -”

There’s a faint incoming whistle that has Steve grabbing Sam instinctively, instantly, tucking him and Buck under his body as he drops them behind the meager shelter of the car. Natasha throws herself down a fraction of a second later, just as an artillery shell plows into the ground somewhere on the other side of the vehicle. Dirt sprays dozens of feet into the air. Steve takes off the second he registers that it’s unexploded, skidding around the corner of the cabin with Buck and Sam halfway over each shoulder, and Natasha’s right behind them just as Steve’s ears contact his brain and say: that wasn’t quite the whistle of artillery coming down, it sounded much bigger than that -

Not a shell: Bucky’s ship. It’s not invisible anymore, wobbling precariously as it rises out of the dirt with the air of a dog shaking itself off after running headfirst into a door. It’s left a furrow nearly thirty feet long, cutting a scar across the meadow and into the edge of the woods. An uprooted sapling bounces off its side and topples over.

The ship continues to rise, stabilizing some ten feet off the ground, a wedge of deeper darkness against the night sky. Steve hears Natasha let out a hissed breath next to him. “Jesus fucking Christ,” Sam gasps from Steve’s shoulder. “JB, tell us when you’re about to pull this shit.”

“Sorry,” Steve says, apologizing for both of them and setting Sam back on his feet. It’s possible he might have overreacted, hearing the whistle overhead.

At that point he also notices Bucky trying to get free of him, though mostly what’s happening is that he’s repeatedly kicking Steve in the hip - and the second Steve lets go Bucky tumbles off him, scrambles to his feet and beelines to the spaceship. The fact that the car is in his way doesn’t even slow him down: he claws up the hood and uses the roof as a stepping stool, the ship moving to meet him. The second Bucky’s scooped inside the hatch snaps shut.

Steve pelts after him, skidding to a stop right underneath. He fully expects the thing to zip off and disappear, but it just hangs there over their car. The buzz vibrates in Steve’s teeth. He circles it, not looking where he’s going, head craned up; the windshield that had appeared this morning is gone now. The ship is featureless, sealed tight with Bucky inside.

Steve scrambles onto the car too, reaching up to put his hand to the hull. Immediately that feeling of not-quite-static shock courses through his body, and the radio in the car squeals to life and blares three seconds of accordion music before resolving into Bucky’s voice. “Stop touching me I want to sleep!”

Steve snatches his hand back. “Sorry, I - sorry,” he calls. He has no idea if Bucky can even hear him. He almost puts his hand back on the ship before he gets ahold of himself. Bucky wants to sleep. It’s likely the best thing for him right now. This is what Steve wanted.
He lets out a breath between his teeth. He jumps down off the car but he can’t seem to take his eyes off the ship. He can’t quite shake the certainty that if he looks away it might vanish again, flying off or just melting into thin air with Bucky in it.

He tries to remind himself Bucky came to him, all on his own. He wants to be here. And Steve has the pink phone, still - they have contact now, in case of... anything. In case Bucky feels he has to leave. He is not Bucky’s jailer. Bucky should be free to leave. It’s Steve’s fault if he didn’t do a good enough job to make him want to come back again.

Sam comes back from where he was leaning over to look into the giant ditch the spaceship created. He glances at Steve. “We need food,” he says. “And other supplies. I feel like now is the time to stock up on all the crap we’ll wish we had later.”

“I’ll go,” Natasha says.

“Me too,” Steve says, because the alternative is staring stupidly at Bucky’s goddamn spaceship with the urge to do something electrocuting him one cell at a time.

“You kids have fun,” Sam says, looking perfectly happy to not be getting right back into a car again. “Bring back all the bandages and antiseptic you can carry.”

“Call, if anything,” Natasha says, digging out a phone and a couple of extra nine-millimeter clips out of her jacket and handing it all to Sam.

They have to drive for another hour, but Natasha finds them a small all-night grocery store. Hats firmly on, they troop into the store and split up immediately. They both know the post-surgery shuffle. Steve drops all the ingredients for chicken soup into their basket, and Natasha adds rice and an armful of canned fruit and vegetables. After snagging a bag of oranges they move silently to the checkout, where the clerk is barely awake enough to scan them through.

Steve, on impulse, points to the only cigarettes he recognizes, the Camels. He adds a couple of cheap bars of chocolate and one of those plastic lighters as the clerk fetches the smokes. Natasha eyes his additions but pays for it all silently, waving for the clerk to keep the change.

They get back to the cabin without incident, where Sam has apparently discovered some car batteries, an extension cord and four space heaters. Steve throws one last look at the hanging shadow of Bucky’s spaceship before ducking inside, where Sam’s sitting on the floor in his space heater circle, the batteries in front of him and some stripped wires in hand. A couple of feet away there’s what looks like a bunch of black rubber piled on the floor.

“Sup,” Sam says. “Good news and bad news. I found all that in the bedroom closet -” he nods at the rubber pile - “and I gotta say we’re looking at door number two, freaky sex hideaway too far away to hear the screams. Now, I’m too damn tired to have an emotion about it, but somebody else gonna have to move it ‘cause I am not touching that again.”

“Is that the good news or bad news?” Natasha says.

“Ha ha. The good news is I also found these -” Sam gestures at the heaters - “and there’s plenty of juice in these batteries, so now I think we got a chance of sleeping without hats on.”

Natasha goes over and prods the pile of rubber with the toe of her boot. It unrolls with a gentle fwlap and becomes a distinctly human-shaped rubber suit with a variety of strategically placed cutouts. “Wow,” she says tonelessly. “At least all the bacteria have died. Probably.”

Steve, somewhere around month four of living in 2011, briefly went on what he can only call a
blue movie bender, so he does know that he’s looking at someone’s sex suit. He knows the twenty-first century didn’t invent sexual deviancy - god does he know - but he can’t deny the associated paraphernalia has gotten more… complex.

More commercially produced, at least. “Let’s just… put it somewhere else,” he says. He’s got no doubt that if Bucky enters the cabin and sees that in the middle of the floor there will be paranoid conclusions, none of them in any way beneficial to advancing interpersonal relationships.

They end up stuffing the rubber suit into one of the empty kitchen cabinets, for lack of better options; it’s probably going to topple out onto the head of whoever opens the cabinet next, but Steve currently has long-term concern for a very limited subset of people. The cabin isn’t large: one bedroom, though the bed is massive, and one main room, half kitchen, with a decently sized if rustic sort of couch. “Take the bed,” Steve tells Sam and Natasha. “The heaters too, I won’t get cold. I’m making soup now anyway.”

“You just don’t want to sleep on the freaky sex bed,” Sam says. “Also, there’s pots and pans and stuff but zero cutlery.”

“If the bed has sheets on I will be very surprised,” Natasha says. “Come on, we still have some clean hotel blankets. Clean-ish.”

“Better the body fluids you know,” Sam says resignedly.

“Steve?” Natasha says. She jerks her head in the general direction of the front door, where out there Bucky is - hopefully - sleeping soundly in his spaceship, or at least not doing anything to hurt himself worse. “Best case scenario? This next part is going to be him testing the ice to see what’ll break. It’s probably not going to be a lot of fun for you. For best results, watch what you say - ”

“Seconded,” Sam says.

“ - and don’t flinch.”

Steve looks back at them. Sam sighs and inclines his head. “That, you won’t have a problem with.”

“You might be surprised by what you’ll flinch at,” Natasha says. “In the meantime, feel free to let that first bit take up all your attention.”

“Right,” Steve says, too keyed up to be resentful about the fact that both of them still think he’s going to retraumatize Bucky by looking at him wrong. Bucky’s hurt but he’s not fragile. “Go to sleep,” he says instead. “I’ll keep watch. And - Natasha. Do you have a satellite phone? I need to call Peggy.”

-o-

Sam wasn’t exaggerating about the absence of cutlery. Steve chops vegetables and cuts up chicken with a combat knife, illuminated by the gas stove and the pair of half-melted candles he dug up out of a drawer. Both car batteries are in the bedroom with Natasha and Sam, powering the heaters, but Steve doesn’t feel cold. He’s not tired either. His body does this on missions sometimes: everything goes clear and sharp and obvious and the unimportant parts of him fade away, funneling all his resources into doing what he needs to do. He’s not going to sleep tonight. He doesn’t know how he fell asleep yesterday. On watch, no less. It’s never happened before.

The stove hisses and pops occasionally, the burners protesting at the sudden use after months of inactivity. Steve had to clean spiderwebs out of the kettle he’s using, but all the windows are well-
set and latched and the door has a sturdy modern lock. He can see the dark shape of the spaceship directly through the small window over the stove, and in case of anything, Bucky’s probably the safest of all of them anyway.

Steve’s still got a Colt on the table, extra ammo in his pockets. He nicks himself twice, chopping vegetables with one eye on Bucky’s spaceship outside. He sucks the cut on his thumb as he stirs. He’ll call Peggy once the soup’s done. It’s daytime in DC.

Peggy’s got a cell phone; it’s one of the ones that look closer to a full-blown tablet than a phone, but she uses it deftly and fairly often. She doesn’t really text but she has a stable of grandkids and nephews and nieces that all call, and she showed Steve her folder of puzzle games - according to the doctors, it helps keep the mind sharp. Natasha had been the one to show him how to work the damn thing, but seeing Peggy use one got Steve to stop treating his smartphone like a mysterious new species of lizard that somehow crawled into his pocket.

He dials the number from memory. It rings a few times; maybe she’s napping, or at a doctor’s appointment. But then there’s a click, and Peggy’s on the line, sounding, as she would have put it, rather cross. “If you’re a telemarketer, I’m telling you now, you won’t be able to get me to buy anything, I’m a crazy old woman with dementia.”

“Hey, Peg,” Steve says, a smile stealing over his face on automatic, hearing her voice. “It’s Steve. I promise I don’t have anything to sell you.”

“Steve!” she says, and Steve can’t help but smile bigger. She’s having a good day, if she recognizes him off the bat and doesn’t ask how in the name of fuck he’s calling her on a god damned cell phone in 2014. “Darling, how are you? How have you been?”

“I’m good, Peg. I’m - I’m great.” There’s a rustle from the bedroom. Steve glances over and then back to the kitchen, turning off the stove. He blows out the candles and goes outside, carefully shutting the door behind him. “How are you? How’s DC?”

“The same, I imagine. I’m in New York again now, darling. It’s changed quite a bit, hasn’t it?”

Steve’s eyebrows shoot up as he paces further from the cabin. “Really? You moved?”

“Tony suggested I move,” Peggy says dryly. “In that he showed up in my rooms, said something about making sure none of my nurses shouted heil HYDRA before smothering me with a pillow, told me he’d bought the facility, and incidentally there was a much better one in Manhattan, where, as he put it, I wouldn’t have to wither away in DC, miles from any semblance of civilization. That boy has quite a lot of energy, hasn’t he.”

There’s something under the lightness in her voice, and the fact that Steve can tell there’s anything there at all means it’s hitting her like a truck. “I’ve been a real bastard,” he says. “I haven’t called, I haven’t - ”

“Oh, don’t bother with that, darling. I hadn’t heard anything of you in the news, so naturally I assumed you were hip-deep in something serious. It only gets quiet because there’s someone covering things, with you. And if you’re involved in a cover-up, it’s for a damned good reason.”

“That’s no excuse,” Steve says, feeling worse - there hadn’t been a damn good reason, he could have called her any time he liked. “It’s been months, I could have - sent a postcard. Something. I’m sorry.”

“No,” Peggy says, quieter. “No, I am, darling. I… I did this, didn’t I.”

“What do you mean? Did what?”
“All of it, darling,” she says, her bitter smile audible. “This whole HYDRA mess.”

“Peg,” Steve says.

“Operation Paperclip,” Peggy says. “By the time I saw the full rosters, projects were well underway, and the Secretary… I should have fought harder.” She gives a short, mirthless laugh. “I should have arranged an accident for Zola myself. I knew what he had done. But I told myself - maybe this was better, to have him locked in here with us, under our thumb, doing our bidding. He was watched, under guard, and I got reports of all his movements - only it turns out all the guards were HYDRA, too.”

Steve swallows, his throat clicking. “Nobody saw it, Peg,” he says roughly. “Nobody suspected.”

“Don’t make excuses for me, Steven. It was my job to suspect,” she says, her voice gone crackly as well. “And that was what got me, wasn’t it. What I built, what we all built - secret weapons, preliminary strikes, all those wiretaps in people’s homes… We made our own Gestapo, and told ourselves that we were doing the right thing.”

“Peg,” Steve says. “If HYDRA was there, right from the start, you can bet they damn well made sure it was going in that direction - ”

“What did I say about excuses? I know my memory’s going,” Peggy says. “But don’t you let me forget, Steven. If this is the last lesson I ever learn, so be it. But I will learn it. It’s a good thing, really, that Tony came around when he did - I was his godmother, you know. I’m helping him with the files, when I can. I still know a few things.”

“Good,” Steve says, wiping his eyes. “That’s - that’s good, Peg. I’m glad.”

“I’m not asking forgiveness,” she says firmly.

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Steve says immediately.

“Steven.”

“You and Buck never blamed me. Can’t get mad at me for doing the same.”

Peggy’s quiet for a while, the only sounds coming from the background noise of the call and a quiet sniff on her end. “Neither of us were saints, you know.”

“You’re good people,” Steve says. Not saints - he’s not going to get into how she and Bucky might as well have been, giving him a hand up when he needed it most. “Both of you. And we all make mistakes. I was part of SHIELD for three years and I never saw anything either. Peg,” he says. “You weren’t even working there for the past thirty years. How could you have known? And besides. You and I both know that if you’d been there, the second you saw the helicarriers you’d have gutted Pierce with his own letter opener.”

Peggy’s laughing a little by the time he finishes. “The faith you have,” she says, her smile audible. “There’s nothing like it. You make people want to the best version of themselves.”

“I just tell the truth,” Steve says, little uncomfortable, like he always is when people start talking about inspirational and morale of the troops. Anybody talking like that about soldiers has never been a soldier themselves, and is usually using those words to encourage more people to die faster.

This is Peggy, at least. Bucky used to say she and Steve were two peas in a pod, if peas wielded blunt instruments and had a natural inclination for violence, but Steve could only ever aspire to be
that brave. If she wants to talk about owning up to the best version of yourself, well - in Basic, Steve had looked at her with her right hook and her neat Army uniform and thought *if she can do it, I can too.*

It occurs to him that he needs to confirm: Peggy’s made no real mention of Bucky, and talking in code is somewhat beyond Steve’s grade-school knowledge of spycraft. There are probably specific phrases for this but he doesn’t know any. How can he say it? *I found water in the desert. I found gold in a pit of ash. Bucky is alive, and he came back to me, Peg. We’re alive.*


“Who you’re with?” Peggy repeats. “Sorry, dear - you’ll have to tell me again, you know things slip my mind these days.”

“Right,” Steve says, and decides - fuck it. If they’re calling from one of Natasha’s phones to one of Stark’s buildings that’s about as sure as they can get that the line isn’t bugged. “He isn’t dead, Peg,” he says, low. “He’s here, with me.”

Peggy pauses. “Who is?”

“My - my oldest friend,” Steve says. He can tell right away she doesn’t know who he’s talking about. He knows better than to say Bucky’s name out loud, but he doesn’t have a better euphemism. “We - it’s alright, Peg. We’ll come visit. You’ll see.”

“Well,” Peggy says, sounding a little lost. Steve closes his eyes and presses his hand to his forehead. She really was having a good day, but this was inevitable. He knows she does better when they’re talking about tangibles, specifics, when he doesn’t bring up the past and confuse her, but he had to go and talk about Bucky anyway.

“Well,” Peggy says again, in the determined voice she uses now when she knows she’s slipped and is trying to get her mind back on track. “You sound happy, darling.”

“I am,” Steve says. It feels cracked and violent inside him but it’s there. “You sound - you sound really good too.”

“It’s the new drug regimen,” Peggy says dryly, sounding much more grounded. “Things are sticking a little better now, for however long it lasts.”

“It’s really good to hear you. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry I haven’t called.”

“Make it up to me if you must. I’ll want flowers.”

“All the flowers I can carry. I love you, Peg.”

“And I you, darling.”

“We’ll come visit.”

“You’d better.”

“Take care of yourself.”

“You too,” Peggy says. “I have a feeling I’ll be seeing you quite a lot on the television, when you get home.”

Steve makes an exaggerated retching sound, which gets Peggy laughing. “We’ll deal with it as it
comes,” she says. “I’ll give you the number of my lawyer. But only if you bring the flowers, of course.”

“Mountains of them,” Steve swears. “I promise. I’ll see you soon.”

After he hangs up he stands outside for a long minute, breathing the crisp night air. His eyes have long ago adjusted to the darkness; with the moon so bright it’s barely nighttime anyway, the entire clearing lit a ghostly silver. He circles the cabin, checking on Natasha and Sam. There are no curtains on the cabin’s dusty little bedroom window and Steve can see both of them fast asleep, Natasha clamped around the blanket roll Sam has become.

Across the clearing, Bucky’s ship is limned in moonlight. It’s on the ground now but otherwise exactly where it was: unless Bucky’s hopped out for a midnight stroll, he’s still right here.

Steve walks a perimeter around the cabin, his footsteps almost silent on the carpet of pine needles. He feels like whatever it is that comes after awake, like he opened his eyes and then opened them again. It’s not the manic energy he spends so much time trying to run off but something more, something deeper. His feet are firmly on the ground now.

HYDRA is after Bucky. After all of them, by default. They’ve spent the past year chasing HYDRA down all over the world but now it’s flipped: they’re in hiding, in the forest of a strange country, and they don’t know what the enemy knows or if they’ll be found at any second.

Steve can’t say he’s missed it, but this is familiar territory. This is far from the first time he’s worked these kinds of odds. Whenever anyone talks to him these days about higher education the war is all he can think of - it’s where he learned the most, the fastest and hardest. And he got pretty damn good at it.

An owl hoots nearby. Steve listens for a while, standing silent in the trees, but he can’t hear any human sounds: no power lines, no voices, no cars. Somewhere to his left some kind of animal is scrabbling in the leaves. Steve learned the hard way what a forest of would-be ambushers sounds like, and this isn’t it. For the time being, they’re safe.

Bucky is here. Tomorrow morning he’ll climb out of the spaceship, and Steve will give him chocolate and cigarettes and soup. They’ll all sit down together and figure out what to do next. Bucky will get better, one step at a time. They’ll get better together.

Steve turns back to the cabin. He’s been unmoored this whole time, running around the world doing god knows what, hell, since the moment he was defrosted and served to Nick Fury on a star-spangled silver platter. He’s done with that. HYDRA, Congress, whatever the hell is going on with the CIA - they won’t get Bucky, none of them. He’s going to bring Bucky home, back to Brooklyn, and they’ll go visit Peggy with enough flowers to stack to the goddamn ceiling. They’re all alive, and Steve’s been given a second chance. This time, he’s going to do it right.

But first, he really has to change out of these shorts.

-o-


They’re not alone. Bucky is at the control panel, naked, bruised, one pale hand resting casually on the monitor’s edge. He winks.

Steve doesn’t see him. Barnes tries to open his mouth but can’t. He tries to point, show Steve,
there’s the one you want, but his arms aren’t his. “We’ll get you fixed up,” Steve says. “We’ll get you right in no time.” He sounds wrong. He doesn’t - talk like that. He’s prepping the halo. What are you doing, Barnes tries to say, but it’s like he’s encased in glue, frozen to the table. What’s happening.

“Did you think it was over?” Bucky is looking right at him, his eyes gleaming. He’s slowly twirling Barnes’ mask on one finger. “Did you think I was gone?”

Barnes doesn’t want to look at him but it’s like there’s some kind of distortion, some gravity, dragging everything back to Bucky. He’s smiling at him with bone-white teeth. “I told you,” Bucky says. “This is mine.”

He can feel the electricity in the halo, powering up. The hum builds in his ears. He tries to move, to fight, something, anything, but he’s never gotten free of the surgical tables, not once. It doesn’t matter how he fights. It never did.


“It’s just me,” Steve says. The distortion is around him too, making his face hard to look at. “It’s just me.”

He closes his hands arounds Barnes’ throat. Behind him, Bucky starts to laugh.

Barnes jerks, airless, in darkness, and for a very long moment there’s nothing. No context. Before he can do more than hack out a few panicly coughs the rest of his surroundings write themselves in, the smell, the blood, the cabin of the ship. Motherfucker. Steve. A dream.

A dream like a hallucination, too crisp and too real. Was any of it real. What happened.

A sharp twinge in his abdomen reminds him that hello, it is very real, and yes it did happen. It’s what got him into this in the first place.

There had been a table, and a halo, but it was different and smelled of horse. Steve was there, and the ship, query, query, until Barnes was keeping it away without knowing why, only that it’d be bad if it came to him. He clearly didn’t succeed. Hopefully he held out for long enough. He doesn’t think he liquefied Steve and his friends last night, but right now his list of absolute certainties is very, very small.

His gut aches sharply, the healing wound radiating pain in dull waves. He’s stiff all over, joints popping and muscles burning in protest as he slowly, heavily sits up. He pats his chest: his ipod is still with him, in the front pocket of the shirt. Steve’s shirt. And pants, and socks, and underwear. It takes him a couple seconds to remember that all his gear was left in the car.

He probes the bandage under his shirt. It feels dry, and when he lifts the hem the few stains on it are the yellow of pus, not blood. If Steve or Wilson see it they will undoubtedly insist on unwrapping it all over again and having it changed. That feels like enough of an inevitability that he doesn’t bother messing with it himself. Better to not go through that more than once today.

He pries himself out of the bloody ruin of his bedroll, which never made it to luxurious at the best of times but now probably only qualifies as a crime scene. Parts of it are crunchy. Motherfucker is silent, and none of the cabin’s lights are on: he must have turned the ship off again at some point in the night, or maybe it just passed out with him. Standing takes two tries. He feels like a scarecrow stuffed with dirt.

He’s not going to wake Motherfucker now, not when it’s taking all his concentration just to get
both legs moving at the same time in the same direction. He ignores the console and lumbers outside.

It’s midmorning. All around is pine forest, blue sky and sloping ground: they’re on a mountain. The air is so cold and crisp it burns his sinuses on the inhale. There’s a beat-up patchwork car parked several yards away, next to a long scar of earth that Barnes dimly recognizes as the results of Motherfucker’s entrance last night.

If the car is here he probably didn’t laser anyone to death. He can’t hear anything but cheery birdsong, but there’s probably some sort of safehouse or camp or something on the other side of the ship. Either that or Widow’s got all of them in the treetops, gluing pine needles to themselves with fir sap to make extra sure anyone coming for them through this forest is not going to end up an ambusher but an ambushee.

Barnes had been planning to come to Steve. This just forced his hand and moved up his timeline, and instead of showing up as a competent professional and handing Steve anything useful Barnes bellyflopped back into his life like a water buffalo pushed out of a hot air balloon. With a gaping gut wound, no less. As second - third - first impressions go, he’s not sure it counts as better or worse than when he showed up in DC and fired a rocket at Steve’s face.

But Steve and his team had helped him, just like he said. They’re still helping him.

It feels like he has to experience all of this in very small chunks or his head will explode. Some of the chunks he just has to skip entirely. He got ambushed by HYDRA: pass. Steve and Wilson and Widow are right the fuck here: pass. He is covered in blood, antiseptic and eighteen different kinds of sweat: okay, yes. He can deal with that.

Except of course Steve waylays him the second he sets out. Barnes turns Motherfucker’s corner, and Steve leaps up from where he’s been sitting on the rough-hewn proto-porch of a sturdy-looking cabin. Barnes’ startle reflex knocks him back against the ship, and Steve makes an aborted little jerk like he wanted to lunge for Barnes before he realized what a spectacularly bad idea that was.

It’s obvious Steve hasn’t slept, and just as obvious that it’s not even making a dent in the manic wakefulness coming off him like steam. His eyes are greedy on Barnes’ face. He’s not even wearing a jacket. He’s carrying himself the same way he has since Barnes dropped to the hotel roof: stiffly, like he’s keeping his hands off Barnes by divine intervention alone. There’s a perfect horizontal line of a bruise stretching the width of his forehead.

“What the hell’s that?” Barnes says hoarsely. He sounds like he’s been gargling nails.

“What?” Steve says distractedly. Barnes jerks his chin at his face. “Oh. Nothing. You pushed me against the car door when we were leaving the… clinic.”

Barnes consults recent memory, finds it full of holes, and decides he’s going to take Steve’s word for it. Resentfully. “Why?”

“You didn’t want to get in the car, I think. You were pretty out of it.”

But he didn’t do any lasting damage. Steve’s upright and moving fine with just a couple of bruises, and Barnes doubts this is the welcome he’d get if he’d accidentally savaged either of the others while he was out of it. “You brought me here?”

“Yeah. We’re safe - Natasha found this safehouse. It’s… safe.”

“Wow,” Barnes says, remembering too late he’s supposed to be ingratiating himself with Rogers.
Then again, what’s the point? If this is how Rogers responds to hostility, if Barnes starts fawning he’ll probably bust out a wedding ring.

His head twinges. Steve is liable to bust out a ring regardless. He’s been giving the guy nothing grief for months and here he is, all smiles.

“Will you come inside?” Steve asks. “There’s food.”

Barnes eyes him. There’s nothing suspicious about the invitation, which, through the perversity of paranoia, only makes him more suspicious. “What if I don’t come inside.”

Something in Steve’s expression sets, going sharp and considering, and Barnes is both wary and oddly relieved to see it. That’s Steve looking for the edges, figuring out the rules. That’s his how to win face. Unspecified parts of Barnes are signaling that this is a prelude to good things, but other, equally insistent parts are telling him to prepare for adrenaline.

But Steve only smiles, small but sure. “Then I bring the food out to you.”

Barnes eyes him some more. “What food.”


There is a vanishingly small chance that there is something horrible waiting for him inside the cabin. If they wanted to hurt him, they had every chance before now. He should eat something that isn’t emergency protein bar.

“After you,” Barnes says, and Steve grins and pushes the cabin door open.

The inside is wood, all of it, with a once-plush rug lining the narrow corridor. Barnes stops barely a step after he enters it. He can hear Widow and Wilson inside, just around the corner, not talking. To his right is a door, opening onto a tiny bathroom. Barnes is reminded of his original purpose with a vengeance.

“Buck?” Steve half-turns and sees where Barnes is looking. “D’you want to -”

“Bath,” Barnes says shortly.

“Okay,” Steve says, again in that calm, steady tone. “You shouldn’t get the bandage wet -”

“I know,” Barnes snaps, as if he hadn’t planned on just taking the bandage off. Or would have planned, if he’d thought that far at all.

Steve is undaunted. “Will you eat first?”

Barnes opens his mouth to snap and hesitates. He should. He’s got no idea how many times his phone alarm must have gone off but it’s probably way too many. He can smell the soup, too, the scent of rich broth permeating the safehouse. It doesn’t really come across as “appetizing”, but basically nothing does, and healing needs calories.

And if he washes up first, his luck will inevitably decree that something sets him off and sprays soup halfway up the walls. It’s not that Barnes is opposed to two baths - he thinks if he ever has a good dream it’ll just be him taking one long uninterrupted bath - but right now it’d be an idiot waste.

He makes himself take a step towards the kitchen, then another, and it’s not like the hallway is all
that long, so another two steps puts him at the mouth of the room.

Widow and Wilson are sitting down, the table between them and Barnes. Wilson has a knife in his hand and a wooden stick in the other. “Hey, man,” he says, nodding at Steve and Barnes like he definitely hadn’t heard that entire exchange in the hallway. “How you doing, JB? How’re the stitches?”

Barnes would answer but he’s watching the knife in Wilson’s hand. He’s… whittling?

“Chopsticks,” Wilson says as he sees Barnes looking. He holds up something that certainly aspires to chopstickhood. “We don’t have any spoons.” There’s something that might be a fork at his elbow, if forks were hewn from some crumbling plank excavated from the dawn of civilization.

Widow, at the head of the table, has a nail file in one hand and a chopstick in the other. She’s steadily filing off the splinters with every sign of total absorption. Her eyes flick up to Barnes and she smiles: small, sharp, genuine.

Barnes hastily looks away. Wilson and Widow are both looking at him, their faces carefully friendly. Steve, at least, has gone over to the little stove, and through a careful balancing act is pouring soup from the pot into a tin bowl. But then he brings it to the table, and when he sits down catty-corner to the remaining empty chair he looks expectantly at Barnes.

“Can you get me my bag, Steve?” Widow says, and after a glance at her, then at Barnes again, Steve gets up and disappears into the cabin’s other room.

Barnes’ feet come unstuck and let him come to the table. He gingerly sits down. Widow produces a ka-bar and pushes it towards him with one finger. He takes it. He doesn’t know how to feel about the fact that she clearly knows how to put him at ease, for whatever miniscule value of ease he has to be put at. Widow never does anything without a reason.

Steve returns, handing Widow a rugged black backpack with a fluffy yellow keychain shaped like a duckling clipped to the zipper. Barnes just knows that if you squeeze the damn thing it’ll quack.

Widow takes the backpack and immediately extracts a second nail file that she hands to Steve, along with another splinterly chopstick-in-potentia. “Help a girl out, would you?”

Steve takes it with two fingers like she’s handing him a dead mouse, but after a glance at Barnes he obediently starts scraping. Wilson, having produced a little bundle of sticks for Widow to shave down, goes back to chipping at his proto-fork. Barnes focuses on mentally deleting anything that isn’t the steaming tin bowl.

Up close the broth is overpowering. Barnes steels himself and chokes it down one sip at a time, interspersed with chunks of meat and vegetable speared on Widow’s knife. He feels his metabolism turn over even as he eats, his body temperature ticking up; his head slowly starts to clear. He still feels queasy all over, but it’s the familiar queasiness of the body working overtime to repair whatever got fucked up.

Wilson is doing a decent job of not looking at him while actually watching like a hawk, with Widow doing the same thing only she’s much, much better at it. Steve alone is making no attempt to hide that he’s staring like a Dickens orphan in front of a full feast. Barnes gnaws resentfully on a chunk of potato and hopes they’re all thrilled by the spectacle of watching a filth-encrusted cyborg slop soup into his mouth.

The anger overrides the anxiety, for now. It’s not that he expects them to attack, it’s that he’s a bundle of neuroses lashed together with hypervigilance and all three of them are like bowling balls
dropped onto the already-frayed sheet of his attention. Better to find them annoying than threatening.

“So,” Wilson says, apparently taking it upon himself to break the silence, which had been going just fine and not doing anyone any harm. “Your spaceship. I’m guessing you didn’t just pick it up at the nearest Honda dealership.”

Barnes eyes him. “Found it in a cave,” he says, which inexplicably makes Wilson chuckle.

“Thank you for helping us,” Widow says. “In Chile. I doubt we’d have succeeded without you.”

“Yeah, that was fun,” Wilson says. “With the lasers, and the way none of us died? That was cool.”

“Maria says they found a lot of dangerous substances on the ships,” Widow continues. “We’re glad you could help.”

“And that time you told Steve to shut the fuck up? And then he actually did?” Wilson nods approvingly. “That was my favorite part.”

“Mine too, incidentally,” Widow says, still in that tone of casual diplomacy.

“Hey,” Steve says, but since he’s still lovingly watching Barnes chew it doesn’t carry any weight.

“That’s basically a superpower,” Wilson continues. “You’re gonna have to teach me that trick.”

Barnes glares at them uncertainly. He doesn’t know how to tell them that trick only works for a couple seconds, because he’s got no memories backing that knowledge, he just knows. But it’s what he should be saying. They’re being friendly to him: this is what he worked for. He should reciprocate. He can feel the shape of the motions, the words, the body language that would grease his way, but it’s out of his reach. One of the few practical gifts of Bucky’s inheritance, and he can’t even use it anymore. None of it comes automatic anymore. The tradeoff for not having a ghost speak with his mouth.

The nightmare comes back to him all at once, his throat constricting sharply, and it’s a heroic effort of will to swallow his mouthful of soup instead of horking it up onto the table. Very abruptly he can’t be here, sitting at this table, with them, eating, none of it, and he’s got his back to the wall with the chair still juddering from his exit before he quite knows what’s happened.

“Buck?” Steve says, half-standing, all eyes on Barnes.

“Bathroom,” he chokes out, and bolts for the hallway.

There’s no lock on the bathroom, but it’s small enough that he can sit and brace his legs against the opposite wall, his back to the door. He is not going to throw up. He grinds his hands into his face and gulps for breath and grimly holds onto his calories.

The bathroom, when he’s in a state to notice his surroundings, is also made entirely of wood. The toilet is just an off-white cover set into a wood bench. There’s an ancient tin tub on stubby little legs under a small dusty window in the corner. Barnes dearly hopes he won’t have to go back out and fetch buckets of water from the kitchen.

Thankfully the taps work. The tub emits thunderous glonging noises as the water pours down, which makes Barnes wince; no chance that the sound won’t echo through the entire cabin and the next five miles of forest too. The stream the tap spits out is lukewarm, but it’s for the best. He already feels like one big nerve and hot water would probably just be an aggravating stimulus.
That’s what he tells himself, anyway, piling all his filthy clothes in the sink and filling that with water too, avoiding the mirror. The ipod he carefully places on top of the closed toilet lid, curling the headphones on top.

Halfway through hunting for some soap he realizes too late that wetting his clothes means he’ll have to walk back through the cabin naked. It’s not like there’s a towel in here. And of course there’s no fucking soap, either. He doesn’t know what he expected: it’s not like safehouses or abandoned woodland cabins are known for their amenities.

Maybe Steve and Widow and Wilson will all slip into brief, inexplicable comas for however long it’ll take Barnes to scuttle back to the ship. Maybe he’ll just stay in here until he dies.

Barnes stands for a while with his hands pressed to his face, then gets in the tub.

Then he leaps back up again as his forgotten bandage soaks through. His stitches sting, the water in the tub sloshing from his abrupt departure. He considers punching a hole in the wall. He sits back down again. Just - just - fuck it. The bandage is already wet.

Barnes tries to refocus, breathing deep. The bathroom smells of faint mildew and wet tin. He has no soap, or washcloth, or any other necessary materials whatsoever. He considers scrubbing himself down with one of Steve’s socks. He considers his default coping mechanisms of throwing up or punching the wall again. Maybe he should just sit quietly until he slips into a coma. That would be new and fun. Staying in here until death is starting to look increasingly likely and exponentially more desirable.

His clothes gloop wetly from the sink, releasing a trapped air bubble. Steve would bring him soap. Steve calls him Bucky and considers getting his head bounced off a car to be a literal love tap. If Barnes can get himself to ask, Steve will hop to. It wouldn’t be - it wouldn’t be that bad. Steve carried him for most of yesterday, didn’t he?

It had been easier to think of Steve as a kind of… mobile wall, or - a weapon, like his knives or Steve’s shield: something for the job at hand, necessary to get it done. He can handle that. It was harder when Steve insisted on talking, but it wasn’t unbearable. He lost time, repeatedly, but every time he’d come back and it was all the same: car, Wilson, Widow, Steve. He didn’t hurt them. They didn’t hurt him.

The halo. The - scan, whatever, the machine. Not the halo. He knows that. No matter what his head cooks up in the dark, it wasn’t what happened. He got scanned for internal bleeding, and Steve was there, and it was all just medical enough for things to slip sideways and kickstart the nastiness just waiting inside Barnes’ skull.

But. He hasn’t had to deal with the real Bucky in full and vengeful technicolor for a long time. He knows a lot of that was - hallucinations, medically explainable, but now he can’t shake the bone-deep surety that they were just a vehicle for something - else. Is there no such thing as ghosts? When there are aliens, and super serums, and god knows what else going on? Is it really that far-fetched to think it’s something - other, something not all flesh and bone?

It certainly feels that way. Barnes might have been Bucky, but this thing that’s riding him is not gone. It doesn’t like him. He might have chased it away for a while, but he can’t help but think that now, he’s here, with Steve, and it’s made the Bucky-thing angry.

There’s a knock on the door. “Buck?”

Bathwater sprays up the wall as Barnes jerks in the tub. It’s a long moment before he can make himself unfreeze and quit staring pie-eyed at the door like a SWAT team is about to burst through.
“What?” he barks.

“It’s me,” Steve says unnecessarily. “I have soap. And a washcloth. If you want.”

Paranoia briefly yells something incoherent about Steve reading minds, but Barnes shakes himself and makes it quit. Steve must have just used his common sense, which might technically qualify as a supernatural phenomenon but is definitely not mind reading.

“I can leave them just outside the door,” Steve offers.

“Yes,” Barnes says belatedly, realizing he’s been silent for too long. “No. Bring - bring them in.”

The door creaks open, Steve’s giant head poking inside. It’s completely preposterous that a man the size of Steve can make a face that belongs on a ten-year-old girl holding a puppy in a Norman Rockwell painting. Except he means it, he means it, and there is nothing ridiculous about that, not even slightly. Barnes can tell he’s going for steady, calm, unaffected, and he might have most people fooled, but to Barnes it’s like his lovestruck thoughts are scrolling across his goddamn forehead.

How could he have thought he’d need a knife, Barnes thinks suddenly, in a shock of recall. Standing on INSIGHT 3, how could he have thought he needed to pull a weapon, any weapon at all. He looks into Steve’s eyes and Steve is flayed before him, open to the core, and it’s like he doesn’t even care, doesn’t even notice. Every layer is peeled back and Steve’s just looking at him, like he doesn’t care he’s got the defenses of an opened pudding cup right now, like he wouldn’t protect himself if he could.

How could he have been afraid of this? The danger was never in what Steve might do to Barnes, it was what Steve would do for him. Steve brought a washcloth but wants to give him everything, and there’s terror still but it’s turned outward now. Jesus Christ, put that look away. Steve, before someone sees. The compulsion to lay his palm over Steve’s eyes is overwhelming, to hide his face, make sure nobody can see him so bare. The shock of it burns in his throat. He didn’t know he could feel like this, this sharp protective urge to tuck Steve’s head under his metal arm and shield his face, his skull, his soul.

But feeling and doing is two different situations. Getting ahold of what he needs to do is like groping for pennies with the lights off and oven mitts on. He knows he has to - give, here, give something, but Barnes doesn’t have anything. He’s fuckass naked in a tin tub with nothing but a soggy bandage to his name. Even if he had all his stuff to hand, what could he give? A gun? Some overpriced shampoo? A fourth-hand copy of WOLVES of CLIMAX?

He wants to reach out. Even all his neuroses aren’t setting off alarms about it. The most dangerous thing Steve might do is hug him. That’s definitely a hugging face.

“Let me just put these down and I’ll go,” Steve says, gesturing slightly with his handful of toiletries and already half-turning back out the door.

“Stay,” Barnes blurts out. It’s the only thing he knows Steve wants, the only thing Barnes has to give. “Stay.”

The dawn that spreads across Steve’s face is embarrassing, awful, like claws in Barnes’ chest. How had he not seen this. In all the snapshots of fighting and fucking and Steve’s iron face how had he not seen that raw soft look, this look that makes Barnes feel like he’s turning inside out. And right now it doesn’t matter if Steve means it for Bucky: Barnes will take it all the same. It’s not in him to turn away.
It fucking figures that even Steve’s vulnerability hits like a goddamn brick. Jesus. He shot this guy.

Steve closes the door behind him, not taking his eyes off Barnes. He comes to the tub, crouching down and switching awkwardly mid-movement to kneel. He’s so close. Barnes actually feels his hand coming up, out of the water, like he’s actually going to reach for Steve, except Steve sees it and thinks he must be going for the soap because he holds it out to him. “Here you - oh,” Steve says, cutting off as Barnes’ hand connects with his face, harder than a pat but nowhere hard enough to be a smack. Then he starts to smile, big and slow and spreading from ear to giant stupid ear.

That smile makes him look so, so stupid, but it’s a nice trick, because clearly it makes Barnes even stupider. In the middle of all that is Barnes’ metal hand, covering Steve’s cheek, nostril, eyebrow and right eye. It’s like trying to cover a supernova with a paper cup. Barnes can’t believe he even tried. He had no idea it could feel like this. “Stop that.”

“What?”

“That!”

“Can’t,” Steve says happily. He’s holding very still, like Barnes’ touch is a small animal he doesn’t want to spook off, but his eyes are fucking shining. This is unbearable. It’s just so overwhelmingly obvious that it doesn’t even occur to him to be afraid.

Barnes has to take his hand off and look away. He can feel the smile dim by a few milliwatts but he refuses to feel guilty about that. “Soap?” he says, the word coming out rougher than he’d like.

“Right,” Steve says, sounding a little more grounded. “Here.”

He’s brought a washcloth, a razor, and a couple of small chunks of soap in hotel toiletry packaging. Barnes picks up the razor out of Steve’s hand. It’s a good one, old, wooden handle, well-worn but sharp. “This what you shaved your balls with?”

Steve goes red even as he gives an exasperated sigh. “Yes. And it’s a perfectly clean razor. You think I’d shave my own face with this without cleaning it first?”

Barnes looks Steve up and down. “Yes,” he says pointedly.

Steve clearly tries for offense, but it doesn’t make it through the embarrassment of happiness glazing him like a donut. Barnes has to look back down again. He’s not about to shave off his beard, but the razor quiets the pinching part of him that had been gibbering about his nudity and lack of edged weapons, even as he knows Steve is about as much a threat as an arthritic hamster. Physically, anyway. Barnes’ chances of some kind of emotional embolism do not seem to be lessening.

Steve seems to realize it’s not exactly optimal to be staring at Barnes like he’s some kind of precious zoo animal, and he gets up and turns to the sink. He doesn’t look surprised to find Barnes’ clothes in there: his own clothes, technically, now just with a lot of Barnes’ body fluids on them. He just rolls up his sleeves, palms some of the soap and starts to wash.

Barnes can’t shake the awareness of Steve in his proximity, but it isn’t the shrill internal alarm that’d be going off if it were anyone else in an enclosed space, standing over him, clothed while Barnes is naked. Besides, Steve isn’t looking at him anymore. He’s smiling to himself, perfectly happy to be scrubbing bloodstains out of Barnes’ borrowed underwear.

It had been impossible for Barnes to imagine the - the ordinariness of Steve, seeing as he did
through the muddled lens of Bucky’s memories. He’d seen flashes, in the stupid cowlicks and ill-fitting clothes, but now it’s all at once, the picture coming into focus. Of course Steve would lather up his underpants in a hammered tin sink. Supernova or not, there’s dirty laundry and a job that needs doing, and Steve is doing it.

Barnes looks down at the washcloth, then the soap, then picks up both and combines the two. He has his own scrubbing to deal with.

Steve glances over at him. “There’s blood on your back, and the back of your shoulder,” he says. “Left one.”

Barnes grunts in acknowledgment and tackles his legs first. He knows the back of his left shoulder probably has more than blood on it: it’s a bitch and a half to reach, and since it’s numb too he wouldn’t be able to feel any crustiness or clinging dirt. He’s not as flexible on that side, and the sore pull of muscles with every movement reminds him he’s spent the past two days being very bad to his body.

Hot water might’ve helped with the stiffness. With every twinge he’s more convinced he should drag this stupid tub outside and spend the rest of the day between a creek and a bonfire, ferrying water from one to the other. Maybe he can figure out some kind of pulley system. Maybe the pulley system can just be Steve.

Another grunt escapes as he tries to reach his shoulder and only gets as far as his back armpit. He needs one of those bath brushes that look like a woolly pompom on a stick. Hell, he should take a walk through a carwash. Motherfucker can come too. It probably needs it. At least Barnes has had a bath in the past two weeks. At least Barnes has had a bath at all.

Barnes startles when Steve crouches down by the tub. His sleeves are rolled, his skin wet halfway to the elbow. There are suds caught on the fine blond hairs on the backs of his forearms. He puts his hand out, palm up, a clear offer.

Barnes looks at the outstretched hand. His body isn’t afraid of Steve. It was a surprise, to find out; more of a surprise to find out he - likes it. Steve is big, a soldier, but he’s warm and smells good and he doesn’t flinch. Could stand to flinch more, actually, what with how he just stands there under Barnes’ mauling and takes it.

Steve’s got that look on his face again, open and patient, like he’d wait any amount of time for Barnes to decide whether he wants to hand over the washcloth. Barnes gives it to him. If Steve wants to get in some mauling of his own, no one can say he hasn’t earned it.

But Steve is nothing but gentle. He smiles at Barnes like being handed a wet rag is the best gift ever and presses his free hand to Barnes’ collarbone to brace him, trickling sudsy water down his chest. From this angle Barnes can see the freckles under his ear.

He’s careful and precise. Barnes can feel how he wraps the washcloth over his hand and uses it to carefully chase each groove on the back of his shoulder. Steve’s still smiling to himself, his whole face relaxed. That damn inner lightbulb has been turned on, just by Barnes letting him scrub gunk out of his cyborg arm.

As Barnes thinks it the arm seems to realize it’s being washed, because it starts the almost imperceptible vibrations that force all the dirt from between the plates. It’s strongest at the hand, so he’s not sure Steve even notices; it makes the water of the tub ripple but doesn’t otherwise disturb much. Barnes does have to admit it looks a little strange: for a couple seconds it almost looks like his knuckles are bleeding, as the old blood trapped in the joints mixes with water and gets dislodged.
Steve seems to think the same thing at the exact same time, because he sits up straight all of a sudden. “Is there - are you bleeding?” he demands. He grabs Barnes’ hand, all the lightness evaporating from his face. “Is there flesh under here?”

Barnes glances back at his seeping knuckles. “What? No! No. It’s - metal. All the way down.”

“Oh,” Steve says, but he doesn’t look convinced.

“There’s nothing under there,” Barnes says. He lifts his hand out of Steve’s grip and flexes his forearm, making the plates ripple apart and show the cables around the core. “Just - that. All the way up.”

Steve watches his plates move with wide eyes. “Does it hurt?” he asks.

"No. It's just metal."

“Your shoulder, I mean.”

Barnes looks down. He’s seen the join plenty of times, felt it, but only now does it occur to him that it’s - not pretty. The join where the metal sinks under his skin is a rumpled mess of scar tissue. Where it’s not angry red it’s a shiny greyish-pink.

“Doesn’t hurt,” he says. It doesn’t, really. It gets sore sometimes, and after the whole thing where he and Motherfucker… integrated… it had felt sort of inflamed for a little while, but that went away. There’s also the numbness, but that’s definitely not pain.

“How did you…” Steve trails off, closing his mouth. The lines in his face seem to deepen. “Never mind.”

“What?”

“It’s alright, it’s nothing.”

“What,” Barnes repeats, leaning on the word.

Steve’s mouth tightens. He looks up at Barnes’ face and then back down, rubbing the washcloth gently across his metal fingers. “I just realized, I… don’t know how you lost it. Your arm.”

That wasn’t what Barnes was expecting. “Don’t know,” he says. That, he’s more or less always been aware of: there was a time when he had a stump, and then he had his arm. It was probably Bucky who lost it, since there were no missions for a guy with nothing but rotting meat hanging off his left shoulder. “Don’t remember. I think - early. Maybe.”

“Oh,” Steve says, in that uncertain voice he uses when he remembers Barnes has a busted colander for a memory. He still looks so - flattened. Now that Barnes has seen his stupid lightbulb smile, it just seems wrong.

“It’s fine,” Barnes tries. “It’s my arm.”

“Yeah?”

Barnes nods. “Before the arm, I was an experiment,” he says, knowing the words are true as he says them. “After the arm. I was a weapon.”

Steve’s composure cracks then, just a little, and something terrible passes over his face. He takes Barnes’ metal hand and bows his head to kiss the knuckles.
Barnes can only stare. He knew Steve was having some more intense feelings than usual, but this is - a lot. His grip is so tight on Barnes’ fingers. Steve lets up the kiss but doesn’t raise his head, pressing the back of Barnes’ hand to his cheek.

The now-familiar tingle of his pulse runs up Barnes’ arm, and the feeling of Steve’s wet cheek on his hand multiplies. Not quite a memory - or several memories, cascading together. Cold rivers, tin tubs, barrack showers: their bodies, pressed together under water. The beach, high summer, and the small Steve again, five feet tall with a body like a bag of paperclips but doing his level best to drag Bucky under the waves. Bucky, laughing so hard he was spitting seawater.

He catches Steve’s wrist in his metal hand. The bioelectricity registers immediately, a tiny, thrilling tickle flowing up his arm. “We did this,” Barnes says, squeezing Steve’s wrist. Steve must have those memories too: all of them, in full, not just the scraps off the cutting room floor. He had been laughing: the memories must be good. “We did this?”

Steve, somehow, understands exactly what he’s talking about. “Yeah, Buck,” he says, about fifty percent successful in keeping a lid on whatever systemic meltdown is clearly going on inside. “Yeah. We did.”

“Tell me,” Barnes orders.

Steve’s face discovers new levels of mush even as he can’t seem to get rid of the twist to his mouth. “We - we were always kissing on and off, ever since we were kids,” he murmurs. “We started - I think it wasn’t anything at the start. It was just we were - squishing together all the time. Always together. Our mas got to be friends, I was at your place every day, we had school together. Your folks didn’t go to church and neither did we - I mean, we’d go once, but after the service Ma would march up to the priest and ask her questions and then there’d be forty minutes of yelling. I think I’ve attended every church in Brooklyn at least once and been run out of just about all of them.”

Barnes gets a flash of a face like a brick with freckles, along with the general impression of a battering ram stuffed into a white hospital uniform. “Red hair,” he says. “Nurse?”

“Yeah. She patched you up a couple times. You got bit by a dog pretty bad when you were nine ’cause you wouldn’t stop feeding strays and one finally bit you. Your ma was yelling I told you so the whole time my ma was stitching you up.”

Barnes doesn’t have that. Maybe Bucky was too young, or maybe not scared enough for the memory to stick in detail. Steve doesn’t seem bothered by his silence. “Scars’re gone,” he says, gently touching one knuckle to Barnes’ right forearm. “Not surprised, I guess. All of my old scars are gone too.”

Barnes looks at his forearm. There’s at least four scars there just on the underside, including one pretty jagged one about an inch from where Steve touched him. For all he knows all of them came from dog teeth. “Not that?”

Steve shakes his head. He’s sure. He touches Barnes’ forearm again, this time with a fingertip. “No. It was all white, it was old. And there was some here, from the bottom teeth. I had a drawing - I drew you, it was kind of a… study… anyway, the scars are there. I drew a lot of - details.”

Steve scrubs briefly at his face with his free hand. “Wish I had my old sketchbooks to show you. They’re all in museums now.”

“You painted cards,” Barnes says.

Steve looks up. “What?
“Cards,” Barnes repeats. “With stars. For - me.”


“What happened to it?”

“I don’t know,” Steve says, voice softening. “I think you left it with your parents, so… it’s probably with one of the kids. Your sisters’ kids, I mean. Your - nieces, nephews. Most of them had kids too. Your grand-nieces.” Steve smiles, hopeful but still somehow sad. “You’ve got six, last I checked.”

The entire concept is so alien that it can barely even register. “It’s not in a museum?” Barnes presses. “The cards?”

“Don’t think so,” Steve says, brow furrowing. “They trotted out a lot of my own stuff to show me, for this one Cap exhibit in DC, and it wasn’t there. I think one of your relatives has it.”

Barnes doesn’t know how he feels about that, that the card deck is probably rotting in the attic of some clueless kid, at the bottom of a cardboard box layered with crap. Then again, a museum would preserve it all professionally, keep it in good condition, but doubtless at the cost of shoving it in some display case for every Tom, Dick and Harry to come by and have a good gawk. See Captain America’s rarest mementos! Private collection - never before shown!

“I’m sure we could get it from them,” Steve says. “Or - I could. If you want.”

Barnes looks down at his knees, poking out of the water. Maybe a museum should have it. What would he even do with it, if he had it in his hands? Squirrel it away somewhere, probably. Let it rot in an ammo box instead. It’s not like he has anyone to play cards with.

But then - what right do they have, either? If it’s anyone’s it’s his, isn’t it? And if it’s his he can do whatever he wants. Stick it in a box or burn it or eat it if he fucking wants to. It was Bucky’s but Bucky fucking corked it. It’s his.

“What else,” Barnes says. “What else did you do. For me.”

Steve’s quiet for a moment. Barnes doesn’t look up. He’s not sure he wants to see what’s on Steve’s face now. “What do you want to know?”

Barnes twists the washcloth around his fingers. “How did I get you to like me.”

Steve’s whole face is still an overload of conflicting signals but he seems willing enough to answer questions. “All of it,” he says. “You were - you’re a real good guy. You’re funny, you made me laugh all the time. You always told the most amazing stories - you’d read to me, or pretend to read, because you’d make the stories up. They were amazing. And - you never backed down from anything. Whatever had to be done, you did it. You - you cared. You care about people, and things. You paid attention, and you listened to people. You were kind.”

“You fucked me,” Barnes says, watching him.

Steve looks pained. “We… had… sex. Yes.”
Barnes is treated to the once in a lifetime experience of watching Steve become convinced that Barnes doesn’t know how sex works and then visibly steel himself to explain. “How did we start, I mean,” Barnes says, before Steve can start soldiering through the mechanics of dick in ass and associated maneuvers.

“Well... we were kissing, like I said,” Steve says, not quite masking his relief. “It was just dumb kid stuff at first. We - oh, christ,” he says, like it’s only just coming back to him now. “We used to play the lollipop game. Barely a game, geez. We'd share lollipops. Ice creams, sometimes. Five licks for you, five licks for me. Or however many.”

Barnes gives him the dubious look that deserves. “This was for sex?”

“Well, we’d usually haul off and kiss on each other right after,” Steve admits.

Barnes considers this. “And it worked?”

“Anything you did worked for me,” Steve says.

Barnes feels his eyebrows trying to rise. “That line work a lot for you too?”

“It’s true!”

Barnes snorts. It all sounds... sweet. Literally and figuratively. Then again, of course Steve would tell the good parts. It can’t have all been lollipops and blowjobs.

He needs to know. “What didn’t you like about hi - me?”

Steve sits silent for a moment, watching him, and there’s that sharpness in his eyes again that cuts through the mush: an understanding, that Barnes is laying landmines even if he doesn’t quite mean to.

“I didn’t like that you had to - take care of things, all the time,” Steve says slowly, careful. “I didn’t like that you were ashamed about some things, that you felt you were boxed in. And how you’d be nice to people who could be real bastards, even though I knew what you were doing to them while you smiled in their face. I hated that you had to smile. Though I guess that was me - projecting, maybe. You never seemed to mind.”

Steve must understand exactly what Barnes’ sour look is telling him, because he spreads his hands slightly. “What do you want to know? We argued. Of course we argued, everyone did. Sometimes we just caught each other in bad moods and had to go away, leave each other alone. But we always came back.” Steve looks down for the first time, away from Barnes. “You’d always come back.”

Barnes is abruptly overwhelmed with shame. What is he doing, looking for bruises to press on? Steve is helping him. Steve is just - taking it, Barnes’ blatant needling and clumsy barbs. Is that why he’s doing it? Because he knows Steve can take it? That Steve will take it, won’t even defend himself, not even with his cheekbone pulping under Barnes’ fist. Oh, god.

Barnes looks down. The bathwater is a dirty grey now, the thin soap suds clinging to the sides of the tub. “You can check my stitches,” he mumbles, the best peace offering he can think up.

Steve glances at his side, his brows drawing together. “Your bandage is wet,” he says, but he doesn’t sound accusing.
I forgot,” Barnes says anyway. The water level has dropped enough that it’s well below the
wound, so Barnes starts picking at the edges of the dressing. Steve reaches across his body, slowly
enough that Barnes doesn’t startle, and helps him peel it off.

The stitches underneath are little black knots amid a furrow of angry red, the scab a dark red gash
hot with inflammation. All of it is surrounded by bruising, his entire right side gone burgundy,
shading to blue.

“Hell of a sunrise,” Steve says softly. His hand is resting on Barnes’ knee now, where it’s poking
up out of the water. He’s looking at Barnes’ torso, letting out a low whistle between his teeth.
“Look at those colors. That’s practically a mural.”

”Had worse,” Barnes says.

”So’ve I,” Steve says. ”Doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt.”

Barnes shrugs. Steve doesn’t press the issue but he does probe around the wound, skimming it
with his fingertips. He follows the spread of the bruising halfway up Barnes' chest, and then it's
like he forgets to stop. Maybe Barnes forgets to make him.

Steve cups his cheek. His hand smells like metal and soap. Steve is looking
at him and Barnes
can't make himself look back, but Steve doesn't seem to mind. His thumb rubs gently over Barnes'
temple and it's like the feeling kicked everything else out of his skull.

Steve’s hands have calluses in unusual configurations. Handling the shield gives him broad stripes
across the palms as well as the side of the thumb, and there’s roughened skin on heel of the hand,
where the wrist strap tends to catch and rub. The gun calluses are in the usual places - both hands,
Steve fires ambidextrously - and the drawing calluses are on his index and middle fingers, right
hand only. His nails are always short and his knuckles knobbly, still slightly too big for the rest of
his body. His hands are always warm except for when they’re fucking freezing.

Most of the hands that touched the asset thing were in gloves. The smell of latex makes him gag
still, but the rubbery surfaces of tactical grips are fine, for whatever reason. The ungloved hands
on him were usually damp and soft, sweating and untouched by labor: nervous technicians,
scientists in a hurry. The knowledge makes phantom prickles rise under his skin. Barnes shudders
all over and jerkily scrubs his face against Steve’s palm to feel the scratch of his calluses.

Steve pauses, letting him do it, but when it becomes obvious Barnes isn’t shaking him off he keeps
petting, slow and steady and well telegraphed. His own face is relaxed, wondering. He scratches
gently at Barnes’ beard, at the hinge of his jaw, then runs a thumb very gently over the shell of his
ear.

Barnes is so melted he can’t even shiver. He’s starting to have a little bit of sympathy for Bucky
and the frequency with which he accepted sex from Steve.

They still shouldn’t have done it in combat zones.

“There’s still blood in your beard,” Steve says, but he sounds pretty melted too. “And in your ear.
Geez. How’d it even get up here?”

Barnes tries to think. “Nosebleed. Probably.” In his experience blood just gets everywhere,
regardless which bit of him it’s coming from.

Steve cups a bit of water in his free hand and brings it up, palming it onto Barnes’ beard. He gives
it a scrub and brings up the washcloth, rubbing at his throat, then across his collarbones and up to
his temples, under his ears. Barnes stops keeping track. Steve cleans off the blood until eventually
it registers that he’s just petting at Barnes again, stroking over his face. “How’d you get these?”

It feels like Barnes has to run the audio through his brain thrice before the words make sense. “What?”

Steve’s fingers stroke gently over the scars in his eyebrow, his upper lip. “These scars,” he says. “They’re new. From - after the helicarriers, I mean.”

Barnes tries to blink through the hot static in his brain. “Kangaroo.”

“Oh.” It’s Steve’s turn to blink. “Is that a…”

“Big hoppy thing. Australian. Looks like an overgrown rat.”

“Jesus. It, what, attacked you?”

“Yeah.”

“What’d you do to it?”

“Pissed on it.”

Steve opens his mouth, then stops. “Before or after it attacked you?”

“Before.”

Steve stares at him. “Bucky, what the hell’ve you been doing?”

Barnes stares back. Then, slowly, in increments, laughter bubbles up out of him, getting louder and louder. He laughs so hard he bends, curling over his knees, his gut-shot side on fire. He sounds crazy. “Buck, your stitches,” Steve says, putting a hand on his back, but Barnes can’t stop laughing. He is crazy. What the hell has he been doing? What in god’s fucking name has he been doing?

Steve’s laughing too, more because Barnes is laughing than out of any real humor. Or maybe not - maybe Steve gets the joke too. “Are you fucking with me,” he demands, giving Barnes a gentle little shake, still laughing. “Are you fucking with me, is that it?”

“No,” Barnes manages. No, his life is just that stupid. “It happened, it - it all keeps happening,” and he’s off again, laughing so hard it sounds like he’s coughing up a lung.

“I know,” Steve is saying, like he does get the joke, “I know, I know - god, I know,” and he’s drawing Barnes close by the cheek, to his shoulder. Barnes goes. “What a fucking year,” Steve says. Barnes can feel his voice through his chest, pressed against his temple. “What a fucking century. We’re a hundred years old, Barnes, Jesus fucking Christ.”

That sets Barnes off again. Steve starts up too, the two of them curled over and knocking into each other from either side of the tin tub. It’s surreal enough to feel like a complete fantasy. They’re holding onto each other now. “Fuck, I missed you,” Steve is saying. “I missed you, Buck, a hundred years, jesus christ.”

Barnes has Steve’s forearm clutched under his chin, both of them rocking slightly. “I’m so fucking glad,” Steve says into the back of Barnes’ neck, into his filthy hair. His arms are tight around Barnes, holding him sideways to his chest. “I’m so fucking glad for you, Buck, you got no idea. I’ll draw you new cards. Whatever you want.”
Barnes squeezes his eyes shut. The thing inside Steve is ferocious, lethal, and it’s belly-up at Barnes’ feet. Steve’s in love with him and he thought he knew what that meant but he didn’t, he had no fucking clue. It’s like Motherfucker all over again, everything pouring into him at once, except it’s not data it’s feelings and Barnes is pretty sure he’s going to explode.

Just like at the table, it’s too much suddenly, all at once. He doesn’t want to shove Steve away but he needs everything to stop, now, and it if doesn’t there’ll be shoving anyway. With Motherfucker he can just shut everything down but with people he has to run, except he’s naked in a tub and Steve’s between him and the door.

Steve seems to sense something is wrong, because he leans back and draws away. “Buck?”

Barnes drags in a breath, then another. He has to make Steve leave, but nicely. “Get… get new bandages,” he manages, impressed by his own strategic brilliance.

“You alright?”


“Alright,” Steve says, disentangling himself carefully from Barnes. He doesn’t sound hurt, or mad. He has to know Barnes isn’t chasing him away because of anything he did. He pushes himself to his feet. “I’ll be right back.”

When the door shuts behind him Barnes knots his fingers in his hair and presses his face to his knees. He wants to go just one week without having to do breathing exercises over - nothing. Nothing even happened. But the body doesn’t care. It’s got its invisible tripwires and god help them all if he smacks into any of them.

He can hear the murmur of voices, Steve and Wilson and Widow talking in the cabin somewhere. Steve doesn’t sound upset. Maybe he knows that Barnes just needs to be a fucking basketcase all by himself for a minute.

He uncurls shakily. He might as well finish washing while he’s in here. It’s as good a time as any to dunk as much of his hair as he can manage into the water: all but the ends have stayed dry so far. It turns out there are significant amounts of detangler left in there, because when he gets it wet it goes from cardboard-coarse to slippery as goo. He can tell immediately that it’s not going to be enough. There’s like one third of a braid still in there somewhere.

There’s a knock on the door. “Come in,” Barnes mutters. Steve eases in just in time to watch Barnes extract one of the pink stripey hair ties. It turns out that was in there somewhere too.

“Sam says to leave off bandaging again until he can take a look at it,” he says, eyeing Barnes’ hair as he hefts a wad of something grey. “But here’s a towel. Kind of.”

It’s a woolly blanket that Barnes vaguely recognizes as taken from the hotel. “Thanks,” he says, twitching as he accidentally yanks on his scalp.

Steve shakes the blanket out and hangs it on the empty towel rack next to the tub, still watching him. “I have a comb,” he offers. “If you want.”

Barnes shakes his head. He has a comb too, a wide-toothed metal one that won’t succumb to his hair’s defensive perimeter, but he’s not sending Steve into Motherfucker to dig out his things. It’ll just have to wait. “Needs a special brush.”
“It looks pretty tangled,” Steve says dubiously. “You might have to cut it.”

Barnes hadn’t even considered it in recent months, between the mess of his scalp and his aversion to electric shears. If he just uses scissors he has no doubt he’ll come away looking like he’d narrowly escaped getting scalped by a lawnmower, and there’s no way he’s letting someone else cut his hair. He’s not sure he’d do it if he could, actually. It’s grown on him. Hahahaha.

Barnes realizes he hasn’t replied when Steve crouches down by the tub again, as close as before but with his hands dangling between his knees this time. “Can’t,” Barnes says.

“Can’t?”

Barnes, half in apology and half exhausted by the thought of trying to talk his way through an explanation, takes Steve’s wrist instead. He drags it to the back of his head, and Steve freezes in his grip before getting the idea and cautiously feeling at the base of his scalp. It takes a second for him to dig through enough to actually touch skin, but then his face tightens as he realizes what Barnes showing him.

“That’s a lot of scarring,” Steve says quietly. Barnes can feel him probing carefully at the thick ridges of warped tissue, running up through the hairline and down his neck. There isn’t a lot of sensation in the actual scars but the flesh around them still tingles. “Pretty visible, huh?”

“Surgeries,” Barnes mutters. The tingles are somehow migrating over his scalp and slowing his thoughts to snail speeds. “Brain, spine.”

“For the arm?” Steve guesses, still gently tracing the scars.

Barnes snorts, derisive, and that’s enough to break the spell; he drops Steve’s hand and Steve obediently extracts himself from the hair. “They wanted to figure out how it works.”

Steve frowns. “They wanted to - the Russians?”

“No. HYDRA. The Russians left it alone,” Barnes says approvingly. They cut into him plenty, but there was far more training than surgery. They were reluctant to do anything that would put their sole specimen out of commission.

“HYDRA - didn’t they make it?”

Barnes frowns back at him. “How do you think I fly the ship, Rogers.”

Steve stares at him. He looks down at the arm, then back at Barnes. “Are you serious,” he says. Barnes stares back. “How else could I fly it?”

“I thought you just figured it out!”

“What!”

“You’re a smart guy! You know engines and things, I thought you just - figured it out, I don’t know!”

“Rogers,” Barnes says incredulously. “It’s a spaceship. From space.”

“So! It’s got to have a way to steer, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, with my brain!”
“With your brain?”

Barnes puts his face in his flesh hand. “Yes. With my brain. My arm is connected to my brain. That’s how I can use it.”

“But - so your arm -”

Barnes sighs and reminds himself that he’d had a meltdown too, when he first figured it out. “Yes. My arm too.”

Steve’s now staring at his left hand like he expects it to turn into a cobra. “You don’t remember how you got it?”

“No.” Barnes looks at his hand too, flexing it again. It sends a diagnostic pulse down to the fingertips and back again, the plates rippling up and then down in a wave as if to show that everything is fine and working normally. “They probably found it somewhere,” he says.

“HYDRA. They collected up all sorts of weird shit.” And they must have found an arm, and then they thought, hey! we already have a prisoner with an arm missing, how convenient. Might as well stick it on. “Maybe if they found an alien right hand they’d have cut off my other arm,” he muses.

By the look of it Steve does not find this speculation reassuring. His face is going all pinched again. “It doesn’t hurt?” he repeats.

“No,” Barnes says. Now is probably not the time to give his best attempt at a joke. He settles for saying, “It’s a good arm.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I can feel… electricity. Pretty sure electricity. Even if it’s really small. Like this.” Barnes carefully reaches over and presses his palm to Steve’s bicep. “I can feel your nervous system. I think.”

“Really?” Steve says. The pinched look is gone now, at least. “What does that feel like?”

“Tingles,” Barnes says. “It goes up and down with your heartbeat. Machines and stuff don’t do that.”

“Oh,” Steve says. “That’s why… on the roof, you were touching me with your metal hand a lot.”

“Yeah. I didn’t know it could hear alive things too.” Barnes lets go of Steve’s bicep, bringing his arm back into the tub. “For a long time. I didn’t know it could do that. Then I started eating better. Either my brain healed or this thing is powered by calories.”

Steve’s face is starting to go cramped again, but then his thoughts visibly run into each other and bounce. “Wait. So - when you said the spaceship talks - ”

“Doesn’t really talk. It’s - it’s -” Barnes huffs, waving a hand in the air. “It is extremely stupid.”

“And it… how does it react to you?”

“It can. Kind of tell what’s in my brain.” Barnes grimaces. He’s not about to tell Steve about how Motherfucker is convinced the two of them are one big happy organism. “It can tell when I’m in danger. Sometimes. It doesn’t really know what I… am.”

“So when you say it talks, you don’t mean actually talks.”
“You thought it did?”

“I don’t know! I thought it was the ship - scanning you, or something, I don’t know. I wasn’t thinking that hard about it.”

“You weren’t thinking that hard about aliens?”

“Well, no! I just got you back, of course I wasn’t thinking about it. Aliens aren’t my job until I have to punch them.”

Barnes eyes him. There’s a bit of a flush in Steve’s cheeks, making his pink face even pinker. “Aliens were always your thing,” he adds defensively, and Barnes feels his face try to do something complicated before the laughter hurtles out of him again.

Steve starts laughing too, probably out of self-defense. There’s less hysteria this time, so it doesn’t last as long, and besides, this time it really hurts. Not enough endorphins. A grunt escapes Barnes as he straightens up slightly and tries to control his breathing, his elbows drawing in over his sides as he tenses to redistribute the pain.

Steve’s laughter dies away fast too, his expression returning to the baseline Barnes now recognizes as non-emergency concern. “Jeez, that can’t be good for your stitches,” he says. “Come on, let’s finish up. We’ll need Sam to take a look at this once you’re done.”

Barnes, confronted abruptly with the end of his bath and the looming necessary medical episode, does what he can and stalls. “Clothes first.”

“Alright,” Steve agrees. “Let me get you some, I’ve got extra.”

Barnes doubts it: he’d seen their packs in the car, and all three of them are traveling pretty light. He’s positive that all of Steve’s spare clothes are currently soaking in the sink. And he’s got his own: his own spare set is just inside Motherfucker. “I have some,” he tells Steve. “I’ll go get it.”

“Is it tac gear?”

“No.”

“Okay, okay.”

“I have things that aren’t guns,” Barnes says mulishly.

“I know you do,” Steve says, smiling. “You should tell me about your books later. But let me get you underwear, at least. And leave your boots, I’ll clean them up. You can wear my sneakers.”

This time Steve comes back and leaves without Barnes having to shoo him off, taking Barnes’ boots with him. Barnes wraps himself in the hotel blanket, collects his ipod, sticks his toes in Steve’s shoes and exits the bathroom at a high-speed shuffle.

He makes it across the clearing in record time. Motherfucker’s cabin is a disaster that feels like a cheese grater on his nerves, but he focuses on finding his spare set of clothes. They were folded on top of his gun rack, and luckily they’re just as he left them and don’t have any blood or weird stains or suspicious smells. Barnes tugs them on and remembers Steve’s underwear just in time: they’re kind of pinchy, but it’s not like he wants his dick to be comfortable.

The socks Steve supplied are very warm. Good solid wool, heavily darned on the heel. They make it a little hard to stuff his feet into the flimsy blue shoes Steve gave him, but he’s worn much worse.
He has to make himself walk back to the cabin, but he manages it with more or less all outward indicators of composure and normality. He’ll get this done, and he can sleep. It will be painless. He is not unarmed.

Wilson is in the kitchen, testing what looks like a ladle made of tinfoil wrapped around a stick by dipping it directly into the main pot of soup. Barnes can hear Widow rummaging around in the bedroom, saying something to Steve that’s muffled by Wilson’s loud slurping. A large self-adhesive bandage is laid out on the table already, along with a bottle of iodine and some prepackaged wipes next to a small medical kit. Barnes doesn’t see any gloves.

Wilson turns, notices Barnes, startles and hastily puts down the makeshift ladle. “Hey - oh, wow,” he says. His eyes are fixed on Barnes’ chest. “That’s… you comfortable in that, JB?”

Barnes looks down. The purple cardigan fits as well as ever, that is, just barely, but the buttons are large and easy to manage and the fabric is soft. The pink mistake pants are soft as well. It’s all clean and none of the important bits are hanging out. “What,” he says suspiciously.

“Nothing. Nothing. If it’s good, it’s good. How’re those stitches?”

Barnes forces himself to undo the big lavender buttons. Wilson comes over and bends down to look, and Barnes holds onto the ends of the cardigan and plants his feet to avoid any reflex kicking. Steve’s head sticks out of the bedroom and Barnes watches him visibly force himself not to hover. Good for him. Barnes knows with absolute certainty that if he hadn’t Widow would be dragging him back into the bedroom by the hair.

“This looks pretty good,” Wilson says from somewhere around Barnes’ navel. “As good as it can, I mean. Damn, you and Steve heal fast.” He straightens up with a sigh. “I’d love it if we didn’t have any repeats of last night, but I recognize that in these circumstances that’d be like mooning fate and then giving it the finger. Just try not to do your own stunts for a while, okay?”

Barnes nods despite understanding about half of the sentence. He gets what Wilson means, anyway. He also wants to not do anything that’ll involve any more bleeding.

“Okay, so now what we’re gonna do is a collaborative effort, okay?” Wilson goes over to the table, tapping the wood next to the medical supplies. “You probably know how to bandage yourself pretty well, so now that you’re all stitched up you’re gonna put this dressing on by yourself. I’m just gonna watch while you do it to make sure everything’s okay. Sounds good?”

Barnes nods slowly. This is way more than good. “Alright,” Wilson says. “Let’s start with the iodine, let’s get a whole bunch of that shit on there…”

Barnes cleans, sterilizes and dresses the wound all by himself, with Wilson giving step-by-step commentary and routine approval. Once it’s on Wilson squints close for one last check of the bandage adhesion, and then he’s gesturing for Barnes to do up his cardigan. He does, relieved. As medical exams went that one was - fantastic. It lasted under five minutes and there was no touching. Wilson is also unafraid, Barnes notices. He’s more cautious than Steve - which isn’t hard to do - but he hasn’t got any fear either. He’s - kind. “You should become a doctor,” Barnes tells him.

Wilson’s eyebrows shoot up as he screws the cap back on the iodine. “Well thanks, man, but my sister already claimed that one. She’s older, so she got first pick of careers.”

“Is she like you?”

Wilson grins a grin that’s mostly directed inward, still packing up the medkit. “According to my
family we might as well be twins, but since I got wings and she don’t, she still ain’t cooler than me.”

Barnes examines this statement and finds he agrees. Wings are a bit of a trump card.

Widow must choose that moment to release Steve from the bedroom, and he surfaces with a large grey sweatshirt held up in front of him like an offering. “Here, Buck.”

Barnes takes it carefully. It’s baggy enough that it might fit, and has a zip so he won’t have to pull it over his head and aggravate his stitches. “Thanks.”

“You can just put it on over top. You should keep warm. D’you want to…”

“I need to sleep,” Barnes says preemptively. He doesn’t know what Steve was going to say, but Barnes has had enough happen to him today already. It’s as good an excuse as any to go hide in Motherfucker until everything stops… happening.

“Good idea,” Steve says. “The bed’s probably - ”

“In the ship,” Barnes clarifies, before Steve can run off and start fluffing pillows. There is absolutely zero chance of him sleeping anywhere else.

“Oh. Alright,” Steve says. He would doubtlessly prefer to stick Barnes on a down mattress in a pool of sunshine, covered in flower petals, but what he’ll get is Barnes safely in his gloomy space hole, covered in romance novels.

“You should move the ship under tree cover,” Wilson says. “We don’t want it showing up to anybody overhead.”

That’s a good idea. He nods at Wilson, impressed. He’s not sure if other people engage in behavioral self-reinforcement, but if Wilson does, he should definitely give himself a Hershey kiss for that one.

“Wait - hang on, Buck, wait,” Steve says, digging at his pockets. “I have something for you.”

He produces a carton and a couple of foil-wrapped packages - chocolate, Barnes realizes. And cigarettes. He takes them automatically when Steve holds them out; the cigarettes say CAMELS and have a little picture of a camel on the carton.

“This too,” Steve says, producing a cheap plastic lighter and handing it over.

Barnes looks down at all of it. It’s not very many things, but it feels big in his hands. “Thank you,” he says.

Steve’s face once again goes extremely mushy. “You’re welcome.”

Barnes, pinned by the liquid stare of Steve looking at him like a loving but nevertheless carnivorous tiger, quashes the urge to fidget. “I need to go move my ship.”

“Okay. Oh - just be careful, don’t go too far,” Steve says. “I set up a bunch of tripwires last night.”

Widow’s head pops out of the bedroom. “What?”

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Barnes is not looking forward to sleeping in what’s left of his bedroll, but between cabin couch,
Barnes is not looking forward to sleeping in what’s left of his bedroll, but between cabin couch, cabin bed and pine needles in open air it’s currently the most appealing option. He climbs into Motherfucker to the distant strains of the terrible trio traipsing into the woods, Wilson and Widow making Steve show them where he put all his traps.

“You set up *tripwires*? With *what*?”

“Well, not really tripwires - here, like this. We’d do it in the war, when we were bunking in the woods in occupied territory. You find a tree, a young bendy one, with the right kind of branch, and then you do this - ”

Barnes intends to go straight to his bedroll, but Motherfucker’s cabin looks like it hosted a combination bar fight and category 5 tornado. He briefly presses his forehead to the wall to block out the sight of all his worldly possessions strewn around and covered in blood. There’s no way he can sleep without cleaning first.

“…so all you really need is a really sharp knife, though string helps if you’ve got it. You just gotta balance it right, so when somebody does this - ” There’s a faint snap of wood. “It does that.”

“Huh.”

“That is some Robin Hood forest shit, white man. You can take an eye out with that.”

“That’s the idea.”

“And you told me you didn’t know shit about nature.”

“This isn’t nature, this is tactics. Using the environment to your advantage. It was originally a kind of animal trap, I think. Morita and Dernier and Buck figured it out and taught the rest of us.”

Barnes shakes his head and goes on gathering up the pieces of his sleeping bag.

Apparently it’s not Widow who would be chasing them into treetops in ghillie suits and homemade camo.

-o-

He coughs himself awake god knows how much later. He fell asleep halfway out of the bedroll, curled around a stack of books with his face directly in the pile of markers he’d managed to gather up. He barely remembers putting his head down, thinking it’d just be for a moment.

He touches the numb part of his face and feels a fleshy dent. His cheek is probably stamped with a perfect impression of a Sharpie. Great.

Groping his face reminds him all over again how Steve had touched him. He sits up and runs his skin hand over his face, copying Steve’s motions down to the awkward skip of the thumb over his mouth. Barnes has calluses too, but they’re not the same. His face can tell it’s not Steve and stubbornly refuses to tingle.

He wants to keep this. Steve’s - allyship.

He glances at the console, but the cracked-egg feeling in his brain has yet to fade, so he leaves it alone to sleep a while longer. He crawls out onto the roof again instead. He was going to pull out his phone, but the second he glances up he stops, neck craning upward, mouth open. The night sky is - it’s - *stars*. Nothing *but* stars. It doesn’t look *real*.

That’s why they call it the Milky Way, he realizes dimly. Because here, up a mountain, far away, it’s clearly milk, diffusing into the giant blue-black coffee cup of the sky.
As metaphors go, it’s not poet laureate material, but Barnes doesn’t care. He gropes around on the roof until he can brace himself enough to lie down, still gaping up at the sky.

He’s not sure how long he lies up there. He feels… quiet. As close as he ever gets to calm. There’s a whole cartload of problems just waiting for him to look, but right now they feel muted, ignorable. It’s like the vastness of the night sky gives him some space to breathe.

Maybe this is why Bucky liked stars.

Automatically his hand drifts to his pocket, and he feels the crinkle of plastic. Steve’s - gifts. Chocolate and cigarettes. He sits up; the chocolate is warm and a little mushy from his body heat, so Barnes sets it aside to cool down and stiffen up to eat later. He peels open the carton of cigarettes.

The fresh smell of new smokes wafts up to him, and from there his hands have a mind of their own. He taps out a cigarette, sticks it in his mouth, cups his hand over the end and flicks the lighter on.

The first inhale is pungent, acidic, and he starts coughing immediately. Despite the fit he finds himself bringing the cigarette back to his mouth again, sucking another breath down. He wheezes his way through a couple of iterations of this before finding his rhythm, the coughing dying away. His body knows how to do this, too. The feeling is so damn familiar that it’s almost unremarkable, like there’s so many memories attached that no single one is getting through. It’s just smoking.

Despite the burn in his throat and the feeling of his tongue starting to go numb, the motions of inhale-exhale-watch-the-smoke are strangely soothing. He tilts his head back and experimentally blows out a plume, and his mouth shapes the smoke so that it comes out in a steady, even stream. All he can smell is tobacco. The smoke is pretty, dissipating into the night sky.

He glances down at the carton, rubbing his thumb over the camel. _SMOKING HARMs YOUR HEALTH_, it says underneath, in Russian capitals. Barnes looks at his cigarette, then shrugs. “I guess you can try,” he tells it, bringing it back for another drag.

He sits, blowing smoke at the stars. He slips his flesh hand into his pocket to keep off the chill and closes it over the phone; he turns it over a couple of times in his palm, thinking. He pulls it out: he’s got signal up here, surprisingly, though barely any, and the little data marker is on.

He googles _steve rogers_.

Predictably, enough information loads to fill a book. People have written books. Most have serious red white and blue covers, or grainy black and white photographs to assert their authenticity. If a title is less than six words long and lacks a colon it doesn’t appear to qualify for the Steve Rogers canon. Barnes skims through, having collided with most of it in his previous googlings of Bucky. None of this history crap is any good anyway. He wants the recent stuff. He wants Steve now.

There are articles, mostly speculation, long thinkpieces and short soundbites. Unsurprisingly, Steve seems to have been pretty reticent about talking to the press. After his resurrection had been declassified all his media stuff had been managed by SHIELD, so the interviews he does give are bland, rote and uninformative. It doesn’t take a genius to see his answers are just so obviously canned.

There are videos of him. He did a couple of press conferences in 2011, some post-Battle of Manhattan media things. He doesn’t talk that much in those, even with the moderators and journalists clearly trying to draw him out. Barnes can see him making eye contact, but when
someone’s not directly demanding his attention he stares into space. His hands are lax in his lap. He looks - ossified, the soft tissues of his face gone hard and stiff. He looks asleep on his feet. He doesn’t smile once.

He doesn’t look like that now. Steve’s face had been an open book the whole time he was looking at Barnes.

Steve’s clearly out the kitchen window on Bucky, except Barnes isn’t Bucky, he’s… the aftermath. But it can’t really be said that Steve’s here for someone else, someone who isn’t there. Not with him going for his metal hand all the time like that, like it’s his new favorite toy. Not when everything of Bucky’s is pouring back into Barnes’ head faster than ever before.

Barnes presses his fist over his belly near the gunshot wound. It aches, sharp but not enough to justify more painkiller. He missed something, down there in the mine. What will he miss next? Can he be trusted on missions anymore? Can he trust himself? And even if he can -

This is the thing, now, that he has been sitting on, repressing harder even than the bad sex memories. Eventually, he will run out of targets. His mission will be completed. The engine turning inside of him will go dark. And then what? What does he do then?

It’s only a couple of freakish sci-fi steps separating him from being just another wild-haired bum living out of his car. He only owns two sets of clothes and one of them is a combat uniform. He panics if he doesn’t wake up with guns in his hands. He needs a timer to make himself eat. All the other bums living in their cars don’t know how good they have it.

He can’t spend the rest of his life like this, bracing for whatever idiocy Motherfucker pulls next, living on the run. It’s unsustainable. He can’t make a career of killing: he doesn’t need the money, and he’s pretty sure his ability to voluntarily take orders has been resoundingly burnt out. Besides, nobody hires a mercenary to make the world a better place.

So if not that, then what?

Steve gave him food, answers, blood. Steve said he’d paint him new cards. If Barnes says he wants to go with Steve the guy will probably throw a party. And if he doesn’t go with Steve, then what? If he’s not Bucky, what the hell does he have?

He knows, with stone certainty, that Steve won’t ever stop thinking of him as Bucky. And - he isn’t, he isn’t, but -

Bucky is his predecessor, the previous owner of this body that died and left him with a banged up chassis and a fuckton of baggage tied to the license plate number. He is not Bucky, but everything that’s Bucky’s is his. Formerly-Asset-Thing Barnes is the sole heir to this fortune: this body, this trauma, this mess.

This Steve.

He has a choice, here.

He will fight to stay alive. It was practically the first thing he chose: maybe the very first. He dragged himself out of the Potomac, cut the trackers out, detoxed, and he decided: no Chair. No more fucking Chair. No more waking up newborn, nothing left but the body, the echoes, the ghosts. No more. Never again.

He chose to live. Him. Bucky or no Bucky, he chose to live.

And if he’s gonna keep doing it, he has his work cut out for him. For all that seventy years is more
than twenty-five, Barnes is certain there’s - less of him. Less in him. James Buchanan Barnes lived a real human life while the asset just got taken out of a fridge every once in a while to get dunked into the latest warzone like a stale biscuit into boiling tea-water.

But it wasn’t Bucky who survived.

Barnes survived. Barnes survived all of it. If everything so far hasn’t managed to kill him then what fucking can, and that means - he lives. He’ll live. And he’ll do the thing properly. Barnes might have nothing but a bartered ipod, a couple of copied breakdance moves and a dumbass spaceship to his name, but that’s not nothing. It might be pretty pathetic now, but it’s enough to build on. It’ll have to be.

Of course, he’s not making this decision in a vacuum.

Widow steps out of the dark, her face a pale oval under the dim moonlight. She’s got her hands in her coat pockets and her ugly pom-pom hat firmly on her head. Her nose is bright pink from the cold, visible even in dim starlight.

Excellent body memory, talent for languages. Too small for wetwork so she was tracked for contact ops, at least until she proved that no, actually, there was no such thing as too small. Romanova, she said. Barnes wonders why she chose it as he stubs his cigarette out on Motherfucker’s roof. It’s not like her to associate with failure, let alone take the name of those labeled traitors and executed by the state.

Then again, she did defect. Maybe she chose it then. A private little joke.

She nods to him, like neighbors who ran into each other on an evening stroll. “I talked Steve into taking a nap,” she says. “Sam’s in there co-napping to make sure Steve doesn’t get any fun ideas about staying awake another 24 hours and forgetting to tell us he put up even more traps.”

It has the air of a report, for all that it’s delivered as casually as if they were picking up a previous conversation. “You?” Barnes says.

“I’m on watch.”

“Armed?”

“When am I not?”

Barnes considers this. There’s something refreshing in talking to her, almost relaxing. Barnes might currently have the social skills of wet compost, but with her, he doesn’t need them. She knows exactly what he is and vice versa.

And pink nose and pompom or not, she didn’t come over here just to chat. He signs clear, asking the question by jerking his chin up.

She signs it back, putting her hand back in her pocket after. She wants to speak. Barnes jerks his chin again.

She looks him in the eye. “I came to tell you that if you want to disappear, I will help,” she says, blunt. “Even from Steve.”

Barnes straightens up slowly. She looks back at him, unmoving. There is no overlay on her face, just a faint edge of fatigue - but Widow was a master manipulator at the tender age of fourteen, and she probably hasn’t gotten less good at it since. If the offer is sincere, there is a reason she made it.
Barnes studies her a moment longer. “Why?”

She smiles faintly. “Because when I was in your position, I needed all the options I could get. I might have seen I had more of them if I hadn’t needed them spelled out to me in ten foot high lines of fire.” She isn’t the type to fidget - Barnes is pretty sure not one hair follicle dares move on her without her explicit permission - but there’s a definite air of fidget suppression going on down there. “So… here I am. Spelling it out.”

“You help me disappear,” Barnes says, sounding it out. “And then the Winter Soldier owes you a favor.”

Widow sighs, the pointed lack of fidgetiness disappearing and the fatigue getting that much deeper. “I’m talking about removing you from the gameboard. If that’s what you choose, nobody will come after you for favors ever again.”

*That* definitely comes with no strings attached. “Why?”

“How many friends do you think I have, Soldier?”

Barnes blinks at her. That came out several degrees more savage than Widow typically went for. She’s glaring up at him. “I could lose fingers on both hands and still have a few left over to count. You helped me. You might not remember, but I do. Good people are hard to find, and their worth is priceless. I’m not going to burn you a second before I absolutely have to.”

Barnes blinks some more. It’s not that he thinks she’s lying - it’d be useless to try to tell - but more that he can’t imagine why she’d be lying. Especially for this particular sell. *I’m the only one who knows where the Winter Soldier is* would be a pretty good card to hold, but it’s a little fucking late for that considering, well, Steve. If she *actually* takes him off the gameboard, her collecting on the favor would be entirely dependent on Barnes’ goodwill, and in the meantime all her time would be spent fending Steve off with both hands.

“If you disappear me, you burn Steve,” he points out.

Widow briefly closes her eyes. “I don’t want to disappear you, Soldier. I just told you, I won’t burn you unless there’s no other choice. And I didn’t say it’d be easy. But you should have the option. I love Steve, but the guy is like a gun to the head sometimes.”

Barnes narrows his eyes. “You have a plan,” he says. “I know it. So tell me. What are you trying to make me do.”

Widow rolls her eyes skyward for a second in exasperation, a perfect mirror of her in Manila. “Maybe the plan isn’t for you.”

“So it’s for Steve. Or involves Steve.”

“It’s not for Steve, I’m just accounting for Steve, which I have to because every major plan is going to involve Steve for the next decade. He’s a bigger wildcard than Tony Stark these days and the world will be watching even more than before. Which you have to account for, too,” she says. “If you choose to resurrect James Buchanan Barnes, that’ll take the heat off Steve, quadruple it and dump it all right onto you. And from there you choose how much lying you’re going to do for the rest of your life, because this is one of those cases where telling the truth won’t do a goddamn thing.”

Resurrect James Barnes. The bastard’s up and loose already, sweetheart. He’s not saying that out loud, though: ghosts might have a place in dark rooms and tin bathtubs but not in the middle of
tactics. “So those are my options,” Barnes says, watching her. “Come back, come in or disappear.”

Widow shrugs. “Some of them. I can’t say your choices are unlimited, but you have some wiggle room. We’ll know exactly what the menu is once Stark gets back to me.”

“You chose SHIELD.”

“My circumstances were very different,” she says. “I don’t regret it, but I don’t do regret.”

“And now?” Barnes asks. “If you could choose. Again. What now?”

Widow tips her head back to look at the sky. She’s quiet for a long time, thinking about it. “I wouldn’t have started over as a civilian,” she finally says. “I’m bored without blood in my mouth. And I can’t say I didn’t benefit from going to SHIELD, in more ways than one - letting someone else make your moral judgments for you isn’t workable, long term, but before that I was making my own moral judgments and they were… bad.” She sighs briefly. “SHIELD - some people at SHIELD - showed me better. Not best, but… better.” She shrugs again. “At least it got me started down the right path.”

“The right path,” Barnes repeats.

“I wanted to be a good person,” she says. “To help people. I still do. And it turns out it’s really simple. You just have to do what good people do. Look: whatever you choose is going to be a long, uphill slog full of really stupid experiences. But that’s life for everyone, apparently, or so reliable sources inform me. At the end of the day,” she says with a mocking sort of smile, “we’re just not that special.”

All those internet forums of PTSD people, trekking through the bullshit day after day. Living lives. None of them are cyborg assassins - well, not enough to be a statistically significant percentage. None of them have super serums, or Black Widow and Captain America at their backs. Plenty have brain damage, and memory problems, and no prosthetic for their missing limbs. They get up anyway.

“I’m not going to choose for you,” Widow says. “But whatever you decide, I’m backing it. All the way, if necessary.”

She doesn’t want a thank you, that much is obvious. “Your recommendation?”

“I told you. Good people are hard to find.”

And he’s one of her good people whether he likes it or not, says the little smile on her face. He narrows his eyes back at her. “I’ll think about it.”

She inclines her head. “As soon as Stark gets back to me, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks.”

There’s almost a moment, there, where Barnes might have sworn she looks unsure. But then it’s gone, and at least she’s too good to try and cover it up with cockiness. “My name’s Natasha,” she says. “Natalia Alexeyevna, but… call me Natasha.”

He knew it, but it’s one thing to hear it tossed around and another to be introduced properly. “Barnes,” he says, his hands automatically coming up in their sign - the name sign. The one they shared.
She smiles big this time, her eyes creasing and her cheeks dimpling up. “It’s a pleasure,” she says. “Sam’s watch starts at five. You should get some sleep. And get inside, too. It’s supposed to snow tomorrow.”

He watches her go, circling the cabin once before slipping back inside. He’s not sure what kind of traps Steve set up in the woods but between Barnes’ nap and now he’s sure Widow - Natasha - has made more of them. She’s done a lot, for Steve and Wilson. For Barnes. At cost to herself, and asking nothing in return.

Being a good person.

It had occurred to him, after Widow told him he’d killed innocent guards in Manila, that killing people was, well… not very good. This ran headfirst into his primary operating principle of good nazi = dead nazi and sputtered out, but he can see now how that sort of complex philosophical thinking had been beyond him. Killing people had never been complicated. It had always just happened.

He didn’t kill those two guys with the llama. Witnesses. There it had been more a matter of rebelling against conditioning than taking a moral stance, but he still didn’t do it. So it’s not that he can’t control himself. It’s that in Manila, he didn’t care. Didn’t care to do the research, didn’t care to even think. And with killing people, you don’t get a margin of error.

He shouldn’t be doing that anymore. That’s off the menu. So what then?

He doesn’t want to disappear from the world. For all that it would be… easier… to start over, it smacks too much of erasure to Barnes. He’s been erased enough. And he can’t run from the important bits, anyway. His haunting lives inside him. He can’t make Steve forget. And if he could, he – wouldn’t.

So he sticks around, and does… what. There has to be something, some kind of mission or goal or imperative. Widow managed it, so he knows it’s possible, but… Being a good person. Hah. To get to good he’d have to work up to person first.

Or maybe not work up to. He already has a name, a face. A history. Nobody else is using it. If he won’t get rid of it, he might as well put it to use. Maybe one last bad thing, if he can fight off the ghost: one last theft.

And then on to a virtuous lifetime of lying.

Barnes puts his face in his hand, pinching the bridge of his nose. He should write this all down just to make heads or tails of it, but right now that feels like a titanic effort of will. The peace of the stars has dissolved into good old exhaustion and his skull feels stuffed with wet wool. He wishes he could hold his brain upside down and give it a couple of thumps to see if good ideas fall out.

He doesn’t want to be a mercenary, or an agent or Avenger or what the hell ever. Revenge had felt - good, but that was before he’d heard music. The satisfaction of a kill done right didn’t even compare to the immensity that opened up inside him when he heard that machine song in Peru. Even fulfilling Bucky’s original programming isn’t enough now.

He wants to dance again. He wants to find Jarrell and his friends and see if they’ll teach him some more. He wants more music, more Hershey kisses, more books. He wants to be doing things that let him feed himself reward chocolate every single day.

Being a good person.
Widow - Natasha - had gone to SHIELD. No: to SHIELD’s people. And Barnes has people now. That’s what this whole mess has been for.

But choosing Steve would be… hard. Steve is important, and public, and half the time Barnes can barely look at him head-on. Steve will never be the quiet option. He is like a gun but Barnes has experienced quite a lot of that and in the grand scheme of things, when it comes to what he’s afraid of, a gun to the head doesn’t make it high on the list.

And if he goes to Steve, Steve will take him. There is nothing in Steve that would turn Barnes away. In the bathroom it felt like something young and fragile and alive had been tipped into his palms, and he wouldn’t even need to squeeze to kill it: he could just let go.

He doesn’t want to let go.

No one else will have Barnes’ back like Steve does. No one else is as unflinching, as reliable, as unfailing. It would be hard, but what isn’t? In a way, there is no safer choice.

Stepping into the life of James Bucky Barnes would be a lie, but the kind of lie that bleeds at the edges. After all, who could tell the difference? If Steve can’t tell, who can? Only Barnes would know. He’d be the only one who knows he’s lying. He doesn’t want to lie, except what choice does he have?

Make it so it isn’t a lie. Make it the truth.

The enormity of the idea is like a crowbar thrown under the little pushcart wheels of his train of thought. He stares at his hands in his lap, one holding the cigarettes, the other his phone. Isn’t this what he’s been hurtling towards the whole time. He’s been fighting it, but what if he didn’t. Didn’t he learn already that he can’t say this bit but not the others; it’s not a damn burger order. I’d like the social skills and the connections please, extra loyal, but hold the trauma - it doesn’t work like that.

And this way, he just has to embrace it. Take everything that comes to him from Bucky and say, okay. This is mine.

And as for acting like Bucky - well, the guy’s been dead for decades. Nobody will remember him. Steve remembers him, but Steve is - he’s - not a problem. Whatever Barnes does, that’s what Bucky is like. There is no one left to contradict him.

Under the bright moon the flat black of his phone screen is a mirror, showing him a chunk of cheekbone, mouth, eye. Under the clear, cold starlight the idea of ghosts seems, silly, almost, or at least no longer an unassailable threat. Just another problem to be solved.

“Took your face, your memories, your mind,” Barnes whispers, trying it on. “Now I’m fucking your man. Hah!”

His breath fogs the screen, covering up the slice of reflection. He scrubs it off on his front and shakes his head at himself, putting the phone away. He really is due for bed if he’s sitting around delivering dramatic lines to himself.

He should have known better than to just go to sleep after that. He might as well have waved a red flag at a bull. If Bucky can’t get him while Barnes is awake, he’ll just bite twice as hard in his sleep.

This time he knows it’s a dream, but it doesn’t help. In a way it’s worse. He’s picture-perfect again, back in his uniform, advancing like a soldier down one of the endless familiar dark cement hallways. Barnes runs. If he catches him, Bucky will take him to the Chair.
But Bucky is faster. “I told you,” he’s saying. “I told you. I don’t need a Chair. You can’t run from me,” and Bucky has him, pinned like a bug. He’s prying the arm off one plate at a time. Barnes claws at him but he can’t get a grip, there’s nothing to hold onto, no pulse. He’s already dead. And then Bucky kisses him, mouth slimy and cold, and then it’s coming from the inside. Barnes chokes. It’s in his lungs, spilling down his throat. He’s clawing at his neck now but it doesn’t work, the ice is spreading through him, going hot, burning in his middle. Bucky told him. He’s taking his face back. He’ll crawl back inside, and burn him out, and this time he’ll finish it. He’ll do what he promised, what even the Chair couldn’t, and this time there won’t be anything left of Barnes.

He wakes already retching, his whole body heaving, flipping himself over with the force of the spasms. It’s a long time before he can stop coughing up air and spit. His side is on fire, sharp and fierce like he tore something while thrashing around. The rest of him is freezing cold. He’s trembling, but this time it’s because he’s breathless with rage.

He kicks the hatch open and shoves out of the spaceship. Dawn is just starting to creep over the horizon, the clear night sky gone heavy and grey with impending snow. As cold as it was inside the ship out here it’s colder, the air hitting like a slap. Barnes welcomes it. He knows what’s real and what isn’t. He’s awake now. If Bucky wants his body back he’ll have to do better than some mother fucking dream.

His feet hit the ground with a crunch of frost, his angry panting making big white clouds in front of his face. If the ghost thinks it can stop him it doesn’t know what it’s fucking dealing with. He’ll lie through his teeth backwards and forwards and upside down if that’s what it takes. He is done sitting on his ass and taking it. He’s not going to back down. He’s meaner. Barnes doesn’t care anymore if it’s bad, if it’s wrong, if he has no right, because if Bucky wants to play this game then fine. Barnes will eat him whole.

When engaging the enemy, the best possible defense is to mount a devastating preemptive attack. Barnes crosses the clearing in three stumbling strides and wrenches open the cabin door. He’s going for Steve.

-o-

Steve wakes as a massive weight drops heavily over his thighs, straddling his hips and pinning him down; the couch gives an ominous creak as Steve oofs into consciousness. In the pre-dawn light it takes a second for him to realize it’s Bucky, pale eyes staring at him from six inches away, and Steve’s so lit with muzzy joy that it takes him a few seconds to realize Buck doesn’t really look like he feels the same.

“Buck,” he says sharply, quietly, before Steve can open his mouth. “Bucky.”

It seems a little early in the morning for an identity crisis, but if it’s happening, it’s happening. “That’s... you,” Steve says cautiously.

Buck nods, slowly. His eyes are just a little too wide, a little too intense. “James Barnes.”

“That’s right.”

Bucky shifts closer, taking the lower half of Steve’s face in his metal hand. “I’m going to be him,” he says, his eyes bright and sharp and boring into Steve’s. He looks almost like he’s about to laugh. “I don’t care that he’s dead. He’s mine now. I’m going to be him.”

“You are him,” Steve can’t help but point out, feeling like he’s still playing catch-up. “Did you
sleep at all, honey?”

Bucky’s fingers dig in. “I’m going to be him.”


Bucky looks like Steve has veered off script and he doesn’t know what to do with that. “You don’t care,” he says.

“Of course I care,” Steve says. “I’m just trying to - understand what you’re telling me here.”

“I don’t remember any - any of the - I don’t remember a lot,” Bucky says, ignoring him, back on whatever internal script he’s following. “I’m gonna do it anyway.”

“But... you do remember,” Steve points out. “You told me, in the bathroom -”

“Maybe I was lying!”

Steve waits for Bucky to realize how ridiculous it is for him to say that, but Bucky doesn’t seem to be in the most rational frame of mind. Steve isn’t quite sure how to address that without telling Bucky he sounds crazy. It was always Bucky who had been the rational and reasonable one in the face of Steve’s moodiness and wild statements, and to be cast in the opposite role is like being dropped from a great height directly into a pair of extremely small pants.

But Bucky needs him to be, so Steve will learn. He’s squeezed himself into things a lot tighter than pants. It can’t be any harder than it was for Bucky, dealing with Steve’s petty little emotional thunderstorms.

“You’re arguing against yourself here,” Steve points out, as gently as he can. “A little bit.”

“So!”

“So I think you had a rough night. Maybe we should step back a bit -”

“I mean it,” Bucky hisses. “I know what’s real. This’ll be real. I am not giving this up.”

“Buck, whatever you want to do, I’ll help,” Steve says. “I know you mean it. I mean it too. You’ll be Bucky, okay, no problem. But you seem - upset, and I just think we should - calm down.”

Buck watches him for a long moment. He doesn’t look calm, exactly, but his teeth are no longer bared. “You mean it.”

“You’re you,” Steve says. He’s still not fully sure what’s going on here, but that he knows for certain. “Whoever you are. Whatever you want me to call you.”

“Me is pretty fucked up,” Bucky says, but he’s starting to look a little less like he’s half a second away from going for Steve’s throat.

“I don’t care,” Steve tells him. Maybe it’s a sin not to care what Bucky’s done, but it’s the truth. Steve doesn’t care what he looks like or what he calls himself or if tomorrow he announces he’s the commander of an alien fleet sent by the Twelve-Tentacled Sacred Star God. Obviously Steve would care, but it wouldn’t change him. “Bucky or not Bucky. Hell, paint your face and call yourself Marlene for all I care. Anything, Buck. Whoever you are, however you are. Just let me be there with you.” Steve swallows. “Get to know you.”
“Yeah,” Bucky breathes. He hasn’t let up on the eye contact yet, and even though he still looks like he just got dragged face down along a couple yards of gravel road Steve can’t help but be grateful. He knows it’s not anything to do with him, but it had still hurt every time Bucky had flinched away.

The bedroom door creaks, and both of them whip their heads around like spooked dogs. They haven’t exactly been loud, hissing at each other, but Natasha could probably be woken by a mouse fart in another room. It’s her coming out of the bedroom: she isn’t looking at them, though. She’s rubbing her eye with one hand and looking at her phone.

Then she does look up, blinking. Steve and Bucky watch her eyebrows rise steadily as she takes in the two of them, frozen on the couch, Bucky crouched over Steve like a hyena having an unbelievably bad hair day. Bucky snatches his hand off Steve’s face after a second. Natasha’s eyebrows keep rising.

“Well,” she says. “Good thing you’re up already.” She holds up her phone. “Stark texted me back.”

Chapter End Notes

- This chapter was helped ENORMOUSLY by quietnight and AggressiveWhenStartled, both of whom are unique, deeply inspiring and naturally occurring wonders, like sunsets or the Aurora Borealis. they are also baller ass betas. one million thank yous to them both.

- Typically vets just take the animals to human hospitals and use the CT scanners there. However, there are occasionally animal-specific scanners, usually in animal hospitals in big cities (or, like the one in Massey, NZ, where there’s industrial need for it - Landcorp Farming paid for a special extra-big one at the local university so they could determine fat composition in live animals and breed for leaner meat. It can scan cattle, horses and even small whales). Would there be one in Almaty? Fuck if i know! In the MCU there is now.

- The title song is Upside Down & Inside Out by OkGo.
into the wild - I

Sam’s just finished his final circuit of the cabin, yawning, when Natasha pokes her head out of the front door. “Hey,” she says. “Stark says he has intel.”

“Urgent?” Sam asks.

“Doubt it. He said he’d call within the hour and give it to us.” She looks around and wrinkles her nose at the snowflakes starting to fall from the sky.

“Time for breakfast, then,” Sam says. He’s decided to take an expansive view on things. He’s been thinking about the future, now that he’s had a little space; dawn watch is his watch, what with him being the only natural born morning person he’s ever met. Like goddamn Tweety Bird, Riley used to say, as if all the bird jokes didn’t apply to him too.

The little porch in front of the cabin has a small fire pit. Sam looks at it critically. He really wants to conserve the battery power for the space heaters just in case they’ll be spending another night in these woods, and a little fire goes a long way. The porch has waist-high log walls that make a pretty decent windbreak, so there honestly isn’t that much of a difference in temperature between inside and outside. Steve doesn’t even seem to feel the cold, and in fact Sam would swear he’s throwing off more heat like his body temperature upped itself in response to the weather, but the rest of them are either mere mortals or sporting a hole in their abdomen, so hell yeah, they’re gonna make a fire.

When Sam enters the cabin Barnes is already in there, and it doesn’t look like he popped in just to get some snuggle time with Steve. He’s standing by the couch, breathing heavily, and Steve is throwing worried little glances at him as he struggles out of the saggy cushions. Barnes looks like he spent the night upside down in a tree, which, to be fair, might have been exactly what happened. Sam has no delusions about whether or not the Winter Soldier could have slipped past him while he was on watch and done whatever he wanted, in a tree or otherwise. Clearly he managed to get into the cabin without Sam noticing.

Steve has the look of a man who had his coffee substituted with adrenaline, but since Natasha has her eyes on her phone and not on Barnes it’s probably not an emergency situation. Barnes is darting glances at Steve like he’s seeing something way more strange and magical than just a big white dude in a bad outfit. He’s still massive and twitchy and radiating an aura of barely repressed violence, but Sam has significantly downgraded his level of alarm in dealing with Barnes ever since his brain recategorized him from unsprung bear trap to soldier I sewed up. And Natasha’s not even looking at them, texting at the speed of light.

Sam makes a situational assessment. “So,” he says, going to the kitchen and picking up the bundle he dug out of a cabinet yesterday. “I found these cooking skewers. And we’ve still got chicken and vegetables and that canned pineapple. And I figure if we get the fire going out front it’s gonna be warmer out there than it is in here, because these sex freaks decided a couple of space heaters was gonna be enough for this place.”

Barnes’ gaze snaps to Sam. “Sex freaks?” he says hoarsely, the way some people might say unstable explosives?

“Previous owners,” Steve says quickly. “They used this place as a… recreational getaway.”
“Yeah, so now we gotta figure out how to warm up without that.”

“We could run the stove,” Steve suggests, as he uses a combination of hand gestures and aerosolized concern to try and convince Barnes to take his spot on the couch. Barnes, lost in the horror of contemplating the cabin’s original purpose, doesn’t seem to be getting it.

“We don’t know how much gas is left in there, and carbon monoxide poisoning is like, a thing,” Sam says. “I don’t wanna fuck around with gas in a hundred percent wood structure. Today is not a day that will include fireballs.”

Natasha takes a break in her texting to give Sam an extremely dry look. “You sure you wanna tempt fate like that, Wilson?”

“Can we make the fire in here?” Steve says.

“Did you hear anything I said just now?” Sam marvels. Even Barnes seems to get knocked out of his fugue by that one. “The floor is wood, Steve.”

“We won’t make it on the floor,” Steve protests. “We can… make a firepit out of the soup pot. Or, hey. My shield.”

“If I hadn’t slept last night in snow gear I think I’d pay to watch you try and make that work,” Natasha says. “I can’t believe the sex people didn’t think to build a fireplace to fuck in front of. That’s lacking foresight and creativity.”

“The problem’s ventilation,” Sam says, even though now he needs nothing more than to try and make the fire in Steve’s shield. “Either we build a chimney or open all the windows and doors, and we ain’t got shit for chimneys and if we’re letting in all the cold air we might as well be on the porch anyway. Come on. Firepit time. Steve, go chop some wood.”

Steve looks at Barnes, who turns creakily towards the door. “Ohhh no,” Sam says, as Steve says “No, Buck, you sit down. I’ll - look, I’ll be right back. Can Sam look at your stitches?”

Barnes’ answer is to clamp his metal hand around Steve’s forearm and shake his head so hard he visibly gives himself vertigo. Steve looks extremely conflicted about the fact that this brings him joy. Natasha heaves a sigh. “I’ll get the firewood,” she says. “All of you, sort yourselves out.”

If Natasha’s decided Barnes doesn’t need her personal supervision and potential intervention, any threat assessment Sam can come up with is moot. In any case it’s Steve coaxing Barnes to the couch and undoing his shirts.

“Oh come on, man,” Sam says, when Steve’s hands end up framing the mess Barnes has made of Sam’s work. There’s blood everywhere again and half the bandage has come unstuck. “What the hell did you do last night?”

“Buck,” Steve says, equal parts reproving and chagrined. “You gotta tell us when you pop your stitches.”

One glance at Barnes tells Sam the guy is once again in no state to tell anyone anything. Sam decides that doing this fast is probably the most he can help right now, and goes for the kit.

Steve spends the time scraping back Barnes’ hair and literally tucking a blanket around Barnes’ legs. Sam’s just happy Barnes is holding still. He’s definitely not gonna be the one putting his hand in the crocodile’s mouth here - he heard the noise Steve’s head made when Barnes boinked him off the car last night - but this time Barnes seems to have not only mentally gone out to pasture but over the river and through the woods as well. He doesn’t grab for Steve at all or react
in any way, really, which is somehow worse than when he was holding onto Steve and explaining
how he got his brain hijacked by just a couple words.

Sam cleans up Barnes’ stitches and then the kit to the background track of Steve trying to
persuade Barnes to drink a glass of water. When he’s done Steve is still trying to water Barnes like
a sickly houseplant, so Sam goes out to the porch, the woods echoing with an occasional crack as
Natasha methodically strips branches out of the trees.

Sam surveys the territory. It's pretty much as he left it, i.e. zombie car on the left side of the
clearing, spaceship on the right. Sam eyes it warily. It doesn't look any less alien in full daylight.
He got used to not knowing the full scope of the picture back in the Air Force, but he didn’t like it
then and he doesn’t like it now, either. However, since he’s capable of reading the situation and
picking his time, he is not going to just grab Barnes by the shoulders and shake until he gets some
answers as to what the hell is the whole spaceship thing.

If there’s a problem, Sam’s going to meet it headfirst. If that’s not an option, the next best thing is
to manage his own emotions and expectations. So he’s going to whittle. And tweak the car
batteries for more efficient electrical output. And figure out some way to make halfway decent
kebab seasoning when the materials at hand are pineapple syrup and pine needles. Yesterday’s
adventures in woodworking might have ended up a little less polished than Sam would have liked,
but given he’s never done it before in his life and started up yesterday on the vague prompt of ‘shit
that people in cabins do’, he’d say he’s doing pretty well. Besides, the failed chopsticks will make
great kindling.

He turns his eye on the food. The selection includes bread, onion, apple, potato, chicken and
canned pineapple. Could be worse. He starts ferrying everything to the porch outside.

Steve walks Barnes out and settles him on the haphazard bench next to the firepit, draping his
jacket over Barnes’ shoulders. Barnes is still in his purple cardigan. The fact that it’s now under a
couple layers of Steve’s clothes does nothing to mitigate the overall impression of a bear stuffed
into the cheapest outfit found in a Limited Too catalogue. Sam can practically hear the buttons
creaking from here. If Steve’s muscles were lovingly carved by weeping angels out of precious
marble, Barnes’ are the work of a drunken bricklayer and an overloaded cement truck. Steve is an
edifice but Barnes makes him look positively dainty.

And yet Barnes somehow just seems sad and hairy, like a Newfoundland perpetually in a state of
watching its milkbone get taken away. It’s a far cry from the Winter Soldier stalking them across
the freeway. That might be colored by Sam’s recent experiences watching the guy hyperventilate,
freak out and cling to Steve like an extremely violent barnacle, but Sam suspects Barnes’ face is
also just like that. If he mentally deletes the beard, hair, cardigan, frown lines and general aura of
cornered animal, Sam can almost see how the expression could be considered a handsome kind of
pout.

Right now the pout comes with a big helping of crazy eyes. Steve keeps sneaking glances like
he’s worried Barnes will rip his clothes off and sprint yodeling into the woods. Sam really hopes
it’s not gonna come to that, but either way that kind of problem will be for Steve to solve, because
Sam’s sure as hell not gonna be the one chasing after him with a pair of pants.

Sam is glad most of his worries about Steve and Barnes have turned out to be… well, not
unfounded, but also not quite applicable. Steve seems to have sublimated his violent tendencies
into something too sincere and necessary to be called mother henning, and for Barnes, it seems to
be working: his palpable aura of distress ratchets down some when Steve is talking to him. Not a
lot, but some. Natasha seems to have been right about Steve’s intensity not scaring Barnes in the
slightest.
She comes clomping back seconds later with her arms full of wood, dumping an avalanche of pinecones directly into the little firepit. “So,” she says, looking at Barnes. “You’ve got trigger words.”

Barnes’ face goes from confused and frowny to murderous. “Yes,” he says.

“It’s not the end of the world,” Natasha says, dusting her gloved hands off and squatting down. “There’s ways around that sort of thing.”

Barnes does not look reassured. “You got a lighter?” Natasha asks him.

It takes a couple seconds, but Barnes extracts a lighter out of the pocket of his Victoria’s Secret pants and hands it over. Sam honestly doesn’t want to know what circumstances led to that being Barnes’ civilian outfit. Natasha takes the lighter and starts the process of applying fire to pinecone, by all appearances oblivious to Barnes’ intensifying glare.

Upon consideration, Sam holds out a handful of skewers and the bowl of chicken chunks to Barnes. The guy looks like he could do with a little light stabbing.

Barnes looks at the bowl like it’s full of live scorpions. Sam doesn’t take it personally, because Barnes looked that way at the forest, the car, Natasha, the first aid kit and Steve’s soup. “You do the chicken, I do the veggies,” Sam suggests, indicating the other bowl with his elbow.

Barnes takes the chicken. He’s surprisingly careful with the skewers, frowning as he eases the meat on. Natasha feeds wood into the fire, waiting for Barnes to finish his first tentative application of chicken to stick. “Can you describe the trigger activation?” she says. “Anything you remember can help.”

Barnes’ flesh hand spasms, and Steve exits the cabin just in time to lunge forward and save the bowl of chicken from getting breaded in porch grit. He manages to do it without dropping all the stained hotel blankets in his arms and ends up stabilizing the bowl against Barnes’ thigh, pressed up close; Barnes hardly notices. “They said something,” he says. “I forgot. Where I was. Who I was.” He stabs a piece of chicken onto the skewer so hard it tears right through. There’s a clank as the tip hits his metal palm. “The handlers,” he growls. “They know. The words. They told. All their guards.” He makes a fist with his metal hand, the plates rippling sharply. A piece of chicken gives a miserable squelch. “Didn’t kill them fast enough.”

Steve sort of expands in place next to Barnes, like he’s trying to get closer while already wedged into Barnes’ space as much as he can possibly be. “The - trigger phrases,” he says.

“Yes. Words or phrases that trigger a conditioned neurochemical state. Usually compliance,” Natasha says. “More complicated than that and the efficacy goes down exponentially. Usually they’re used to make you stop fighting or just drop you completely.”

“Dropped me,” Barnes mutters viciously, ramming another chunk of chicken onto his skewer.

“All the more reason to fake your own death,” Natasha says. “And then get some deconditioning.”

Barnes looks at her sharply. “I only had two triggers implanted, but the process to get rid of them is the same. Yes, it’s exposure therapy. Yes, it’s exactly as bad as you think,” she says, in response to Barnes’ increasingly pinched look. “Not a fun couple of weeks. But it works.”

“Does he have to come in for that?” Sam says. “That doesn’t sound like something you can just set up with any old trauma therapist.”
Natasha tilts a hand back and forth. “Technically, you can do it yourself. Mostly by yourself. You can’t really hold onto the words or phrase in your own mind so you have to work around that. But you can use a text to speech function and play it back at yourself while shooting up a lot of drugs, ideally in a place where you don’t mind throwing up in a 360 degree radius.”

Sam is trying to figure out where to even start with that, but Barnes is watching her intently. “Is that what you did?”

“Yep. Once I realized I had triggers implanted.”

“Now,” Barnes says. “We start now.”

“Whoa, no,” Sam says, as Steve grips Barnes’ shoulder. “Heal that hole in your side first, JB. You know how much it sucks to throw up with a gut wound?”

The look Barnes gives him says very eloquently that yes, he does know how much it sucks, and that he doesn’t give a damn. He looks like he’d happily excise his own ribs and use them as picks to give himself a field lobotomy if that would get these triggers out. Steve doesn’t look much happier, the hand that’s not on Barnes’ shoulder going white at the knuckles.

“We’d need to get ahold of the trigger words first anyway,” Natasha says. “Unless you have them.”

Barnes shakes his head sharply, his face gone murderous again. Sam is starting to suspect that’s less homicidal rage and more just Barnes being upset. Next to him, though, Steve has definitely passed murder and moved straight to vivisection. “In that case, leave the handlers to me,” Natasha says. “We might have got them already, if you put their info in that intel dump you gave us back in Prague.”

“And the words?” Steve says.

“I’ll extract them,” Natasha says evenly. “I have experience there too. It’ll take some time to gather up the drugs,” she tells Barnes. “But with Stark, maybe faster. He might be able to synthesize them himself. In the meantime, we need to convince everyone the trigger words are useless because you’re already dead.”

“Maybe I died. In the mine explosion,” Barnes says, which, good point. Sam did some cursory googling yesterday while in the car and while he doesn’t read Russian or Kazakh he can look at the news photos. That had been a big crater.

“We still need a body,” Natasha says. “We can’t leave any doubt. Stark is making a decoy arm and we’ll probably have to give him some blood samples. After that, it’s just a matter of engineering the right death scenario. We’ll do details once we see the landscape we have to work with.”

“What about after?” Sam says, looking at Barnes. “Do we just WitSec you? Give you an ID that says Abe Lincoln Loghouse and send you on your merry way?”

“Abe Lincoln?” Steve says. “Loghouse?”

“James Buchanan, with a barn on the end,” Sam counters.

“It’s a very American name,” Steve says.

“Then so’s Abe Lincoln Loghouse,” Sam says.
“Does he even need a fake name?” Steve says.

“Yes, he does,” Natasha says.

“What’s wrong with telling the truth?” Steve says.

“It’s too big,” Natasha says simply. “James Buchanan Barnes is alive and the Winter Soldier? If you’re not ready for a media war on top of a legal dogfight, you don’t drop that bombshell.”

They all glance at Barnes, who looks like he could just about fight off a pack of preschoolers if they were moderately sedated first. None of them have to point out that Barnes would need a solid month of work from a team of skilled professionals to even begin to be camera-ready.

“He deserves his life back,” Steve says anyway. “It’s not right.”

Natasha is giving Steve an unusually explicit version of the look that says she is colossally unimpressed with whatever fantasy is at the reins inside his skull. “Of course it’s not right,” she says. “But it’s what we’ve got.”

Steve’s face is going hard and remote again, starting to look like he did in Cabo, when he told them he didn’t care what it took to bring the HYDRA base down. “What if we tell… some of the truth?” Sam says, hoping to cut the knees out from under that fight before it even starts.

“Which some?” Natasha says, and nope, yep, they’re going to have that fight now. In some ways, Natasha’s just as ram-headed as Steve and sometimes Sam’s honestly not sure if he wouldn’t rather be quietly manipulated. Natasha’s not being cruel, but her honesty’s got all the softness of an ax.

“If he comes out as James Barnes, he’ll have to come out as the Winter Soldier. If he comes out as the Winter Soldier, he will be put on trial. If he gets acquitted, he will be watched and followed for the rest of his life - ”

“Natasha,” Steve says.

“You want me to lie, Steve?” She looks at Barnes. “You can go back to America. You just can’t go as yourself. And that means we have a lot of work to do.”

“That’s it?” Steve demands. “That’s our only option?”

“Oh, you have plenty of options,” she says. “Seek asylum with a foreign government - but they’ll have to have systems that can withstand the CIA, and the countries that do will use you for their own purposes. Or go back to the States, don’t resist when one or both of you gets arrested and convicted, go to prison. Sign a contract and become a weapon for the CIA under whatever shock collar they give you, tangible or intangible.” She shrugs. “Fake both of your own deaths, move to Mombasa and keep your heads down, though for that option I’d have to give Barnes something heavy to smack you with when your aggression and your savior complex collide.”

Steve looks taken aback, probably at how certain Natasha sounds about getting arrested and used by the CIA. Sam probably doesn’t look all that cool about it himself. It’s a shock to hear it laid out so clearly, even as he knows it’s true. The US government has done hinkier shit for less, HYDRA or no HYDRA. Hell, the DC police have.

“I’m not being cute here,” Natasha continues. “If one of those sounds better to you, then by all means, let’s do it. But you out him as the Winter Soldier, you make him into a perfect scapegoat. And the best case scenario there is that he gets brought in by Colonel Rhodes, which means he at least gets a public trial -”

“A trial?” Steve says. The shock on his face is fast turning into savagery. “A trial? After
"You're going to go on trial," Natasha says. "You come back to the States, you get brought in just like I did. And that's fine, that's in our favor - they can't nail you and this is your chance to spike them for it. But it's not going to be a cakewalk and you'll have to work public opinion pretty hard."

Steve doesn't saying anything, but his face is doing all the talking for him. Natasha stops and sighs. "You're a noncooperative asset, Steve," she says simply. "If we don't bring in Barnes, the next nexus of conflict is you. Your best defense now is your fame. You have a lot of people who'll back you, but you'll have to be a public figure for it to stick. They won't be able to assassinate you without serious backlash."

"Uh, they shot MLK and JFK," Sam points out, since apparently they're talking worst case scenario here. One glance at Barnes shows the guy is thousand yard staring into some terrible private universe of his own, which probably isn't helped by all this talk of Steve potentially getting clapped. "Anyone remember that? Being blond and famous won't save you."

"They were civilians," Natasha says dismissively. "We're not. And they didn't have the leverage we have." She smiles grimly. "That's point two. I'm about to make Steve look like a cookie baking boy scout. Nobody's getting me on retainer anymore. That means everyone is going to have to make me a personal case as to why I should leave their dirty little secrets alone. I'm not turning a blind eye to the Pierces of the world anymore, no matter how destabilizing it is. They'll look at Steve and count their fucking blessings."

Natasha, with her rosy cheeks, pom-pom hat and lack of eyebrows does not currently paint a very scary picture, but the way she says it makes a chill go down Sam's back anyway. He's weirdly reminded of his mom and Auntie Sheila having a war talk at the kitchen table after Sierra's third grade teacher took the book she'd been reading and ripped out its pages in front of her. That had ended with the district superintendent personally apologizing to his mother, but not before three months of escalation on the school side. "Won't that just mean they go after you instead?" Sam says.

Natasha does not look impressed. "If they failed to kill me when I was internationally most wanted as a teenager, I don't see how they'll have any more success this time around."

"Ah." Sam sometimes forgets that when she says she's been doing this sort of thing her whole life she really does mean whole.

"So if they want to move against Steve, I'll move them," Natasha says. "But I'd rather not spend all my time blackmailing everyone who wants to indict us, so Steve, you need to be working the front end. Leave the security maneuvering to me. Go home, lawyer up and get yourself a media strategy. Stark will help, and Potts too, I expect. And after six to eight months -" she nods at Barnes "- we bring you in with a civilian identity."

"Six to eight months?" Steve says.

"And you'll have plenty to do during," Natasha continues, implacable. "You'll need the time to build your public image and consolidate your position for when Barnes does come home. I'll need the time to build him a fireproof background. And you need the time to deal with the triggers and conditioning," she says, nodding to Barnes.

Steve still looks like whatever machine has been winding up inside him is about to strip a few gears. "Steve," Sam says. "The important thing is to get JB healthy and healed up. Right, JB? Dig out those trigger words, get you a shirt that fits. America can wait. We can wait."
“Not if Congress issues the subpoena,” Natasha murmurs.

“So? JB can hang out in some villa in France while Steve flips off Congress, can’t he? Let’s make this two separate problems,” Sam says. “If there’s no trial for JB, then all he’s gotta worry about is keeping his head down and not getting any more bullet holes in his anything. Steve goes, talks to Congress, then he keeps his head down until the heat’s off and he can hook back up with JB. Am I wrong?”

“France is not that bad of an idea,” Natasha allows, which is as good as saying he’s right. “I can set up a couple of safehouse options. If that’s what you want, we can make it happen,” she says to Barnes.

Barnes looks just about as wound up as Steve, with extra evil eyebrows. “I won’t. Run ops,” he bites out. “Not for the CIA. No more orders. Not from anyone.” He jerks his glare over to Steve. “If you get shot. I’ll fucking kill you.”

That makes Steve give Barnes a startled, soft look that is probably not the psychologically stable response to one’s boyfriend stating that if they cap your ass he’s going honey smoked ham on the president. Barnes doesn’t see it, because he’s back to looking at Natasha. “The drugs first,” he says. “For my head. If it happens - again - I can’t - ”

He breaks off, breathing harder, his face going pale. Sam kind of feels sorry for him. You get brainwashed, blown up, ambushed and shot, you get hauled in and prodded at a horse clinic, and now people are all sitting around asking you if you want to be dead or not. That kind of thing can’t be good for you, existentially. The fact that Barnes is just sitting there and sort of vibrating is pretty incredible. Sam would’ve flipped his wig in nine directions by now.

“Don’t decide now,” Sam says. “Think on it. We’ve got a couple days, right? I mean, Stark ain’t even called yet.”

Barnes doesn’t look like he’s willing or maybe capable of tabling the issue, his hands flexing and kneading air on his thighs. He turns to Steve, abrupt, breathing heavily. “I want to talk. To you. Alone.”

“We can go in the cabin,” Steve says. He glances around like Natasha or Sam are gonna somehow be offended or try to stop him when Barnes looks like he’s a couple of bad thoughts away from a rage blowout or a panic attack.

“How about we come get you when Stark calls,” Sam says.

-o-

Steve gets them into the cabin. He takes Bucky’s shoulder, steadying, and Bucky leans just enough into it that Steve switches course from the kitchen and sits him down on the couch. He’s practically vibrating under Steve’s hand. Whatever chased him to Steve last night is still thrumming through him, barely muted; he grabs Steve’s forearm as Steve settles him, the grip bruising and then easing and then tightening again like Bucky’s not sure how hard is too hard to press but can’t risk being made to let go.

“It’s alright,” Steve says. Every time he feels the anger ramping up it keeps running headfirst into Bucky’s here, Bucky’s hurting. Sam’s right. Bucky’s the priority here. Steve can sort the rest out later. “Hey. We’ll be fine. You wanna hear another story?”

It looks like it takes Bucky a couple seconds to move Steve's words all the way through his head, but then he nods. Steve crouches down in front of him, so he’s not looming but he can still look
him in the face. “Back when I was a little twerp,” Steve begins, “I got into fights a lot. And some
of ’em I didn’t get into, they just happened, like when kids who didn’t even know me would
decide I looked like fun… Anyway,” he says, because Bucky does not look like he enjoys where
this is going, “One of those times, right before Christmas, my - well, my hat got taken and thrown
in the sewer. So when you found me - after you cussed me out, I mean - you put your hands over
my ears for the whole twenty blocks home. Just to keep ’em warm. You didn’t care how stupid it
looked, or that your hands got cold, or it was hard to walk like that. You wouldn’t let me pull you
off. And then, when I tried to complain, you started singing at the top of your lungs.” Steve
smiles, and it’s not really nostalgia he’s feeling, not anymore. Bucky’s here, now, and that’s better
than any goddamn memory. “You sang thirty-six verses of the damn beer bottle song. Three
different people opened their windows to tell you to shut up.”

Bucky looks calmer now, his eyes focusing more on Steve’s face. “I didn’t shut up,” he guesses,
his voice very nearly steady.

“Not for a second,” Steve says.

“Fuck ‘em,” Bucky says. His eyes are red-rimmed, his skin purpled and pale. “Fuck all of it. I
meant it. I’ll be him. I will.”

Steve has to take a second to parse the jump. The identity crisis is back, or maybe never left.
Steve’s answer is the same either way, but he has to let Buck take the lead here. “Okay,” Steve
says. “Whatever you want, Buck. I’m backing it.”

“Not gonna run,” Bucky says. He’s looking angrier by the moment, the kind of flat anger that sets
and crystallizes and becomes a solid permanent thing inside. “No more running. I’m done.”

“We won’t run,” Steve says, taking Buck’s hands and gripping tight on Buck’s knees.

Bucky looks down at them, then back up. “I’m not a dead man,” he says, like he’s daring Steve to
argue, or maybe someone else. “I’m not dead.”

“That’s right,” Steve says. There’s a pain in his chest but he thinks it might be relief. “You’re
right. We’re not. We’ll give ‘em hell.”

“I’m only going to pretend,” Bucky says, subsiding, almost to himself. His hands curl into fists
inside Steve’s grip. “But I. I’m - a trial -”

“You’re not going on trial,” Steve says, so venomous he surprises himself, forgetting all about
Bucky’s identity crisis for the moment. “There’s not going to be any goddamned trial. Natasha is
right. If they want me to put me in front of a judge, fine. They’ll get exactly what they want. But
you - they’re not getting near you. You’re a private citizen, coming home. No matter what name is
on your passport,” he adds, angry. That seems like the final insult to injury: Bucky had been made
to forget his own name, and now he can’t even use it. It’s being taken away again. “It’s wrong,”
Steve says. “It’s your name and your life. They have no right.”

And the worst thing is, Natasha’s right. Steve knows she is. He’s not stupid and he’s not blind,
and he saw how the machine works now just as well as in 1941. Turning away refugee ships.
Refusing to join the War until there was no choice, until the war came to them. Queers can get
married and black folks can vote but the same backdealing bastards are still in their same offices
and posts, and HYDRA flourished all the way into twenty-fucking-fourteen. And if Bucky comes
back now, instead of backpay and retirement he’s going to get trials and tribunals and the entire
horror story of his captivity dragged out for the world to see. No. He won’t have it. Steve won’t
stand for bullies, no matter where they’re from, no matter if they’re wearing his own flag.
The bitterness feels like a solid thing inside him. A trial. For what? For - surviving? There’s nothing to be acquitted of. A trial. A jury of his peers - where the hell are they gonna get those? They’d better go around all the VA bingo halls and start taking roll call. A jury of their peers. It’s a joke, see, because all their peers are dead.

Bucky’s quiet for a long minute, looking down. “Maybe I can just be. Bucky. With you.”

Steve’s knocked out of his thoughts again, back to Bucky, and it feels like the helpless smile has been wrung out of him. “You can be whoever you want with me, pal.”

“I don’t care what anybody else thinks,” Bucky says, hoarse. “Give them - any name.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m nobody to anyone else anyway.”

“That’s not true,” Steve says immediately. “You have family, and - Natasha. Sam too, there’s no way he... But you’re right. We don’t need reporters and all of that.” He hesitates. America he’d abandon in a heartbeat. There’s nothing there for him anyway, only Peggy, and she’s safe enough with Stark. But.

Sam - Sam’s family. Natasha. He can’t leave them to go back alone. He pulled them into this and that means he backs them up when they get out. “Buck.” Steve feels the muscles in his jaw jump with the strain of taking what feels like the back door out, but he’ll do it for Bucky. “If you want - we’ll go. We’ll disappear. I’ll have to go back first and sort everything out, but after - you want, I’ll fake my death too. We can go anywhere.”

“I said,” Bucky says, meeting Steve's gaze head on, “I won’t run.”

He’s still pale, still haggard, but there are spots of color rising in his cheeks and his jaw is set. “If my name, is mine,” he says, biting off each word like a separate bullet, “then I decide. What I do with it. If they chase us out of America. They’ll chase us always. If we run. We’ll never stop running.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, swallowing. Bucky's eyes are the same slate blue, even red-rimmed and burning. “Yeah, Buck. You’re right. It doesn’t matter what we tell people, you’re right. And we can always say it later. If you ever want to, when things are better - the truth doesn’t have an expiration date.”

Bucky nods, slowly, his gaze wavering and then sliding off Steve's again like he can't manage to hold it there despite himself. “So - we’ll go back to the States,” Steve says, smiling, trying to make it confident and reassuring and not like he’s a begging man. “We’ll get a nice place. Build a garage for your spaceship.”

“Brooklyn,” Bucky says.

Steve squeezes Buck’s hands automatically, the metal now just as warm as the flesh. “Yeah?”

Bucky looks down at their hands again, his hair falling forward. “I danced there.”

“Yeah?” Steve says again. He literally can’t imagine what that looked like, or if Bucky just means he remembers being the darling of every dancehall of 1942, but that doesn’t matter. “You’ll have to show me sometime.”

For a split second Bucky looks both excited and mortified by this, which means Steve will have to harass him mercilessly about it later. There will be a later. Steve smiles up at him, feeling light.
“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, but Steve can tell there’s something else he wants to say.

He chafes gently at Bucky’s hands. “What is it, Buck?”

“We’re not running,” Bucky says, low and hoarse. “But. While you’re in Congress. I can’t be there.”

Steve knew it, he knew it, but it’s still a gutpunch to have Bucky put it on the table like that. If Steve’s getting investigated he can’t risk the chance of Bucky getting caught like that, no matter how much it burns to think of another day, another week, another minute alone in a motherfucking DC apartment.

But he has to.

He’ll just have to make it fast. “I’ll take Stark’s lawyers,” he says lowly. “Peggy’s too. She’s won a few Congressional dogfights and so has he. And I’ll do what Natasha said. Whatever it takes. But. I’m.” It’s Steve’s turn to swallow, his hands clenching hard on Bucky’s. It burns to force it out but he has to, he can’t keep it in anymore. “I can’t do another year.”

Bucky’s metal hand tentatively curls around his. “Six to eight months,” he says. “After that. Start killing congressmen.”

Steve startles into a laugh. “If Natasha doesn’t beat me to it,” he says. “There might not be any left by the time I get there.” He blinks hard, willing his eyes not to water. “In the meantime, you can sit on your ass in Versailles and watch us on the news.”

Bucky’s mouth twitches in what might be the prototype of a smile. “Okay,” he says.

Steve brings Bucky’s hands to his face and kisses them fiercely, metal, then flesh. Six to eight months. He can do that. He can do anything, with Bucky at the end of it.

It’s unfair, Steve can’t help but think, even as he knows how much it sounds like a two year old whining about not getting enough candy. But it is unfair. It’s wrong. They should have time. Steve should have the time to relearn Bucky, talk to him, get to know him again. There’s so much he needs to do. He has to ask Bucky what he did all these months. He has to help Bucky clean up that disaster spaceship and buy a pair of real pants and untangle his hair.

He will. This separation is - nothing, really. Objectively. Not compared to how long they’d been apart before. And after this things will be different. Natasha thinks he can’t lie low but if Bucky needs peace and quiet then Steve will go and make some.

Six to eight months.

Bucky’s still holding tight to Steve’s hands, his right a little sweaty and his left smooth and cold. It won’t be like before. Bucky’s talking to him now. Security risk or not Steve will keep that going even if he has to bully Buck into raising carrier pigeons.

And they’re together, right now. The circumstances aren’t anything like ideal but Steve had told himself, lying awake all those nights, thinking of Bucky just out of reach: no more wasted time. Bucky’s right here. Steve will make it count. He can’t waste it. This is his chance to show Bucky that he’s got a future worth coming back for.

In the meantime, there’s still plenty to do. He needs to get Natasha to tell him about those fucking handlers, for a start.
The front door creaks open, and Sam sticks his head in. “Stark’s calling.”

Natasha has the phone on one of the stumps next to the firepit, speakerphone on. “Hello, boys and girls,” says Stark’s voice, only a little tinny. “I’m calling from a Potbelly bathroom across the street from the Federal Justice Building and I’ve got fifteen minutes before I have to go back in and do my thang in front of Senator Pain In The Ass. So tee ell dee are, some little birds have told me mission plans have started landing on some desks in the CIA ops division, and Cap, somebody’s pulled the lever on your subpoena. The good news is, I’m pretty sure I figured out how they found you. The bad news is, it’s your spaceship.”

They all immediately jerk up and look around to where the ship is at the opposite end of the clearing. Barnes, who had come out of the cabin looking somewhat less like he’d gotten belted in the stomach with a stun baton, goes the color of milk. “What kind of tracking?” Natasha says sharply.

“What? No. Slow your roll, hotshot. As I was saying,” Stark says, like he didn’t give them that damn dramatic pause on purpose, “Those AIM tryhards in those boats off Chile were working almost entirely on methods of unusual emissions and spectrum analysis. In lame speak, alien detectors. Which makes sense - the market for that crap is only growing - but anyway, the great news is, as far as I can tell, none of these radars work at a distance greater than about a hundred yards or so.”

All of them relax, though not by much. Sam’s not the only one giving the phone a biting look. Stark, oblivious, keeps rolling. “And, okay, the other bad news is, all the AIM detectors are in federal custody, so -”

“- now the Americans have it too,” Natasha says. “All the confiscated tech from the ships. So it’s not just HYDRA that can find you, it’s the CIA.”

Barnes is looking sicker by the minute. Natasha is looking uncharacteristically thunderous; then again, she was the one who got them on the mission that ended with them giving all the stolen material to the US government.

“But, hey, only from around a hundred yards!” Stark says. “So it’s way more motion detector than killer satellite in space. And that is only the max radius in uncontaminated areas, which means I’ve got the perfect solution for you, borg boy, easy peasy: move back to New York.”

Sam, Steve and Natasha all kind of screech to a halt and look up at each other like Iron Man say what. Barnes, weirdly, is looking at his metal arm, a struggling kind of look on his face. Steve looks back at the phone, frowning, not quite come all the way down from the tracking scare. “How’s New York gonna help?”

Stark very obviously wanted someone to ask. “You know the Battle of Manhattan? How we basically had to rebuild Midtown? Yeah. Point is, the alien ‘radiation’ is now splattered all over the entire tri-state area like bad touch bukkake. It’s probably gonna give us all cancer, but in the meantime, it means that any alien-detector crap is gonna be straight useless if they try to find you.”

“What,” Sam says flatly.

“Yeah. The salvage operation is still fucking going on now because to find all the alien shit you need to do it manually, and they’re still digging the occasional Chitauri kneecap out of the metro
tunnels. We could park your spaceship in the Tower lobby, Barnes my boy, and call it a really ugly art piece and not even an FBI team with a full set of scanners would be able to prove a difference.”

Barnes has stopped staring at his metal hand like it’s about to turn into a venomous spider and is looking like he would very much wants to subscribe to Stark’s newsletter, but is worried it might be full of knives down the line. “And my arm?” Barnes says, with just enough inflection to make it a question.

Stark pauses. “What about your arm?”

Barnes visibly grits his teeth. “It’s how I fly the ship.”

“You what?”

“Whoa, what?” Sam says, momentarily derailed from contemplating the fact that New York is apparently radioactive.

“It’s a matching set?” Stark continues, unheeding. “You’re telling me now?”

“Can we go back to how New York is full of alien radiation?” Steve says, proving once again that Sam made the right choice in friends.

“What? Yeah, it’s classified or whatever. Something about mass hysteria. In three years nobody has gotten sick, though, or sicker, and you better believe I’ve been watching out for that. It doesn’t seem to affect organic tissue at all. Maybe ten years down the line we all develop tentacles, I don’t know, but until then it’s just more scraping Chitauri goo off the walls.”

“Jesus,” Sam says, settling back. Well, Stark does live in New York, at least. If the rich people haven’t run off that means it’s probably safe to stay.

Steve leans forward. “How sure are you about being able to hide the spaceship?”

“Excuse me?” Stark says. “You know who was handling the majority of the Battle of Manhattan alien artifact research and cleanup? SHIELD. You know who supplied all the hazmat equipment and isolation containers for them? Stark Industries. You know who hired most of SHIELD’s science division after you three made their infrastructure go kapootle? Stark Industries. You know who now has almost all the government contracts to continue researching all the xeno shit, as well as access to all those little AIM babies’ confiscated crap? That’s right. Us again. Incidentally, I also need a couple days to retrofit the arm, thanks for telling me now it’s xeno tech too. We built the decoy, it shouldn’t be that hard to stick a Chitauri chip in the middle finger or whatever. Versatility. And I need some tissue samples. And a full scan of Buckaroo Boy, so my holograms can do him justice.”

They all look at Barnes. He doesn’t look all that much like he did in DC, in that he now looks like two Winter Soldiers wedged into one bad outfit. He seems to have spent his murder sojourn doubling in mass and hair volume. Put him in a cheetah-print loincloth and they wouldn’t even need to WitSec him: he could just hide out in the Cro-Magnon exhibit of the local Natural History Museum.

“The images of him currently circulating are a few weeks old,” Natasha says. “But they’re not that far off from the real-time version. Let’s have… no, we need Rhodes to do it. Colonel Rhodes will get attacked, or something, and kill the Winter Soldier. Once Steve comes back to the States he’ll get questioned on it, but it’ll be a standard blah blah, I’m glad the enemy was stopped by my esteemed colleague. That means you lie, Steve,” she says, a little more pointedly. “You get a
question regarding the Winter Soldier, the DC14 assailant, any guy who ever might’ve looked like he had a metal arm, you lie point blank.”

“Okay, uh, I hate to be the voice of reason here, but Steve can’t lie for shit,” Sam says.

“Hey,” Steve says. “I used to lie for a goddamn living. I have a SAG award.”

“Steve, somebody asks you about the Winter Soldier, your face is gonna do that thing where it tries to have a joy and rage aneurysm at the same time,” Sam says. “You know. That one. The one you’re doing right now.”

“We’ll pretend it’s patriotism,” Natasha says firmly. “Nobody will expect Steve to have any deeper feeling than that. They don’t know the Soldier is Barnes and they certainly don’t know the extent of their relationship - and if they do, they’ll have the same problem we have: you can’t tell this truth, it’s too crazy. You won’t have to put up any kind of front because nobody will be expecting there to be anything to front for.”


“Steve’s decided to ruin Congress,” Natasha says.

“Oh really,” Stark purrs. “Oh Captain my Captain. You just started speaking my language.”

“First we take the heat off Buck,” Steve says.

“Oh, don’t worry, Cap. We’ll have them covering their own asses so hard they won’t have time to even remember your Bucky boo. You need a lawyer? A dozen lawyers? Say the word, we’ve got stables of ‘em down here.”

“We’ll let you know,” Natasha says. “Where can we meet you? We’re in Central Asia and won’t be getting on any flights.”

“Perfect. Rhodey’s got a diplomatic thing coming up in Iceland. If you can meet us in, say -”

“Latvia,” Natasha says. “Near Riga. We can be there in three days.”

“Perfect. I’ll bring all the right toys to make the most authentic Bucky ghost ever to die convincingly on camera.”

“Thank you, Tony,” Steve says, sounding pretty normal despite the approximately twelve muscles that twitched in his face when Stark said Bucky and die. “We appreciate it.”

“You bet, Spangles. Stark out.”

Natasha leans over to collect the phone, which Barnes is looking at like he kind of wants to punt it into the sun. Steve’s back to looking at Barnes like he’s the last puppy in the shop window. “So,” Sam says. “Riga.”

They look out across the clearing. The snow is coming down thicker now, sticking easily to the ground. It doesn’t seem to be sticking to the spaceship, but their Frankencar is already starting to turn white.

“That thing is not gonna make it,” Sam says. “We’re low on gas, too.” He glances back at the spaceship again. “Can we hitch a ride in there?”

“No,” Barnes says immediately, plates rippling in his arm. Since it’s currently covered in sleeve
the effect is that there’s a couple of weasels throwing a dance party under his cardigan. He looks upset, and like he’s upset about being upset, and like he wants to complain to the manager about the situation only the manager is him and he already knows.

“I’m not sure we’ll all fit in there,” Steve says, diplomatically. The look on Barnes’ face says it’s less about fit and more about his ability to cope. Sam’s not gonna push. For all he knows the way Barnes flies the spaceship is by performing naked tantric yoga in there and Sam would honestly rather walk to Latvia.

“Fit or not, we can’t risk it,” Natasha says. “We don’t know how accurate those emission sensors are. Stark’s probably right, but we can’t afford probably. We need a car.”

“I can get a car,” Barnes says, like he’s trying to apologize for not letting them fly in his weird ass mind rocket.

“You can sit on your ass and not pop your stitches a third time,” Sam says. “Me and Steve can get a car.”

Barnes looks like Sam just told him to go sit in time out. “How?”

“Uh, we go down the mountain and find one?”

“You’re gonna walk down the mountain,” Natasha says skeptically.

“What, you want Chewbacca here to do it?” Sam says.

“I’ll go in my spaceship,” Bucky says, sounding offended, but probably not because of the Chewbacca thing. He probably doesn’t know what a Wookie is. Probably.

“How are you gonna get a car back up? Are you gonna fit a truck in there?” Sam waves a hand at the ship. “I mean, you got a secret tractor beam, you go ahead, but I figured if you did you’d’ve said so.”

“No tractor beam,” Barnes admits sullenly.

“How about we come with you,” Steve says. “Just for a little bit. Just to get a car.”

Barnes looks completely taken aback by the idea, but hey, there’s a plan. Sam kind of wants to rag Steve about suggesting a sensible compromise for once, only he’d really like to see more of this behavior and needs to do whatever he can to water this fragile little sprout of sanity. Maybe he can get one of those dog clicker things.

“Perfect,” he says aloud. “You fly us down, we grab a car, we come back up no problem. And get supplies,” he adds. “We’re gonna need way more food, just for starters.”

Barnes looks deeply conflicted about leading them to the ship, and once the hatch falls open and they head inside, Sam sees why. He wouldn’t want to take a near-stranger into his bedroom either, especially if it was trashed and splattered with blood.

Then again, maybe it looks like this all the time. Sam doesn’t think so, though: it looks like Barnes had been trying to clean up, judging by the small piles of stuff carefully sorted out from the detritus amidst the bloodstains. It’s extremely weird to think about Barnes the hulked-out murder maid service, but this is the guy who folded Steve’s underwear and paired Sam’s socks on his way through his break-in of their Airbnb.

Barnes, looking colossally uncomfortable, moves creakily over to the counter-type thing at the
nose end. He puts his hands on it, and some real grade-A alien motherfuckery starts happening.

“Ho-lee fuck,” Sam breathes, watching some fucking... hieroglyphs and shit start running up the walls.

“Wait until it moves,” Steve says, like he's some kind of specialist now about it. Sam's about to tell him that roundhousing a couple dozen aliens does not an expert make when the view outside the hatch shifts and then the hatch itself wooshes shut. For a second Sam thinks they’re not moving, but then he realizes the view outside the windshield is moving. There’s got to be dampening out the ass, bringing all the G-force and momentum down to null or close to it.

Which is, from the engineering standpoint, fucking insane, but it makes actually riding in a spaceship kind of... dull. Without the feeling of movement or acceleration it’s like being in a waiting room, all the fun stuff happening outside. Sam and Steve just kind of stand there in the strip of space available between the piles of Barnes’ stuff. Instead of being in a vehicle it’s like watching a videogame, where nothing moves except for what’s on the screen, in the weird windshield in front of Barnes. It doesn’t help that mostly what’s out there appears to be snow, and then, clouds.

Thank god it’s got to be less than ten minutes before they get to where they’re going, which is signaled by Barnes folding down into a crouch with his face buried in his hands and shoved close to his knees.

Steve zips over there and crouches next to him, touching Barnes’ shoulder. “Buck?”

“Headache,” Barnes says indistinctly.

“Are you… is this because of the ship?”


Steve looks at Sam like is this thing cooking my hubby’s already deep-fried super-cortex and keeps rubbing Barnes’ shoulder. Sam shrugs helplessly at him. Since a thorough, in-depth explanation of this spaceship’s existence and how it flies is probably about as available as unicorn spit, Sam’s just been filing it in the vast and ever-growing bin of Shit That Just Fucking Happens. The Air Force wants to give some of its pilots literal jetpacks with actual flappy wings on the ends? Okay. Captain America is in Sam’s backyard, on the run and hoping Sam can help him? Sure, totally. And Sergeant Bucky Barnes pilots a spaceship. Must be Tuesday. Sometimes manually disabling your curiosity is what gets you through.

Their personal ball of alien brain problems uncurls slightly, or at least he takes his head off his knees. “Where’d you bring us, JB?” Sam says, trying distraction.

“Cars,” Barnes says, pinching the bridge of his nose. “People. Buildings. City.”

There’s a hiss of depressurization as the back hatch opens itself, which is creepy as shit. Cold air blows in, smelling of snow; Sam squints against the sudden brightness and wipes a stray snowflake off his face. Barnes brought them to the edge of what looks like a giant municipal parking lot. Sam can see schoolbuses and what looks like a couple of mail trucks. There’s some kind of square building off in the distance through another grove of trees. If it’s a city it must be the outskirts. There doesn’t seem to be anyone around.

Sam jumps out of the hatch, his boots crunching lightly on the scattering of snow. Steve follows, helping Barnes over; he’s blinking unhappily and generally looking like someone who needs to be
in a dark room with a cold compress for several days. “How about you take a break here and we go look for a car to steal,” Sam suggests.

Barnes’ response is to use Steve’s forearm as a crutch to lower himself to the spaceship floor. “We’ll be right back,” Steve says, his hands lingering on Barnes, but he does let go and step out to join Sam in the parking lot.

They crunch over the thickening snow, walking past a couple of sedans and a couple dozen mail trucks. Sam’s starting to think they’re gonna have to grab one of the schoolbuses when they get to the snowplows.

These are not the kiddy snowplows Sam would see in VA and DC. These are monster trucks with shovel knives rammed on the ends. Mountain winter must not fuck around in these parts, and neither do those plows. The tires on the nearest one are waist fucking height. It looks like an ATV from hell.

Steve glances at him. “Really?”

“Why not?”

“I mean…”

“It’ll be perfect,” Sam says. “Nobody pulls over a snowplow. Especially when it’s snowing. Damn, I am getting so good at this spy brain stuff.”

Steve laughs. “There’s all those stores just across the street over there,” he says. “I hope they sell something useful.”

“Okay, you go see if they have stuff, I’ll tell JB we hit bingo,” Sam says, knocking on the hood of the truck. “And maybe see if we can hotwire this monster.”

Steve jogs off across the lot, the snow already piling on his jacket. Sam traipses back over to Barnes, who does a terrible job of looking like he wasn’t T minus five seconds to falling asleep sitting up. He blinks hurriedly at Sam’s approach. “We found our ride,” Sam tells him. “Wanna bring the ship over there?”

Barnes goes to the console again, leaning on the wall to get himself to it, and does whatever it is he does to make the ship drift across the lot to the snowplow. Sam walks along behind it on foot, unabashedly staring: it’s eerie how smoothly it moves, like it’s gliding on invisible rails or suspended in some kind of fluid. Barnes brings the ship to a halt right next to the schoolbuses. It looks deeply out of place next to the cheery yellow.

Hopefully nobody’s gonna come out here in the time it takes for them to do the deed and get away with it. “So we’re taking this snowplow,” Sam says, gesturing to its diesel-powered majesty. “Can we drive it back?”

Barnes’ face develops whole new lines as he frowns in concentration. He pulls out a smartphone from somewhere in the Limited Too ensemble and prods it a couple of times, then holds it up to show Sam. “No,” Barnes says. “Because we’re here, and... the safehouse is... here.”

That is a whole damn lot of room between Point A and Point B, which they traversed somehow in under twenty minutes. Sam is gonna have to double down on his curiosity override. “So we gotta get the spaceship to haul this thing, is what you’re telling me,” he says.

Barnes nods slowly. “Snow is good cloud cover,” he says. “Nobody will see.”
That’s true. Visibility is damn near null already, and that’s just here on the ground. Sam has to double take at the swirling white before he realizes the monstrous approaching shape is just Steve, trotting up to them with his head hidden by his arms piled high with... stuff.

“Wow, you don’t look suspicious at all,” Sam says, as Steve dumps it all next to Barnes on the spaceship floor.

“The cashier did ask what it was for,” Steve says, unconcerned, and methodically starts stripping the plastic covers off of what looks like the entire linens section of whatever Kazakhstani Target he came back from. “I told her I was on vacation with my wife and kids. They speak English everywhere now, have you noticed?”

“Yeah, it’s in all the schools now,” Sam says. “And a lot of people have internet.” It looks like Steve didn’t look very hard at what he bought or just didn’t care, because the duvet he’s opening is very clearly a children’s twin bed set patterned in Winnie the Pooh. Sam’s got a decent idea of where this is going and it’s gonna be hilarious. “So am I your wife or your kid in this scenario? Never mind, you’re right, stupid question.”

Steve grins to himself, shaking Eeyore and Piglet from their packaging and into Sam’s hands. “How are we doing this?” he asks, jerking his chin in the direction of the snowplow.

“Airlift,” Sam says. “We’re too far to drive back. We’ll have to figure out how to hitch that thing to the bottom of the spaceship.”

“They might sell hardware,” Steve says, thumbing over his shoulder at what must be the direction of the store as he unwraps another blanket. This one’s lime green and paisley. “There’s all kinds of stores over there. I can probably find something we can use.”

Barnes frowns up at them, his eyebrows all thinky. “Ship doesn’t have attachment points.”

“We’ll rig something up,” Sam says.

Barnes looks dubious. “Maybe. I can -”

“You stay here, Buck,” Steve says from behind a massive blue duvet. “You need rest.”

Barnes looks betrayed. “I can hel - glrph!”

He goes down heavily under the duvet Steve drops onto his head. “Yeah, you thought,” Sam says, unimpressed. “You sit your ass in here and bind some tissue together. Me and Steve got this.”

The duvet makes an angry noise and starts to scoot, but Steve grabs down and seizes one bootied ankle. “Let me help you with that, Buck,” he says cheerfully, and proceeds to fold Barnes up like a tortilla.

In a couple of deft moves the duvet becomes one extremely swaddled supersoldier. Sam has a brief flash of worry that maybe it’s gonna make Barnes claustrophobic, but Steve is finished so quickly he only just manages to open his mouth, and anyway, the sounds now coming from the duvet lump are just good old-fashioned rage.

“My ma used to wrap me like this,” Steve tells Sam conversationally, as the lump struggles furiously but only succeeds in rocking from side to side. “Whenever I wasn’t supposed to get up. Then she taught Bucky how to do it, and let me tell you, he was way more liberal with his application than she ever was. Not that I’d ever stoop to payback. Gimme your arm, Buck.”
The lump growls. Steve wiggles his fingers, hand extended. “Come on. Reach up. There you go. Now the other one.” Steve catches Barnes’ flailing hands and maneuvers his arms outside of the blanket, completely immune to the steel-melting glare Barnes has leveled at his head.

“I’m not a baby!”

“I know you’re not,” Steve says, but as soon as Barnes said it his face went scrunched and unsure.

“You used to say that,” he says uncertainly. “To - me.”

“Yeah,” Steve says warmly, picking up another two blankets and wrapping them firmly around Barnes. “When I was being a horse’s ass about doing what’s good for me. The sooner you heal, the faster you’re up again. There’s nothing else you need to do right now.”

Barnes stares at Steve for another moment, then slumps over, visibly giving up.

“I told you he’s the smart one,” Steve says to Sam. “Here, Buck.” Steve pulls one of Natasha’s pistols out of the back of his pants - Sam makes a mental note to buy him a real goddamn concealed holster before he shoots himself a new butthole - and checks the safety before handing it to Barnes. That makes the glare dissolve briefly into surprise, but Steve doesn’t see it because he’s dragging his shield over with one foot, along with some of the grocery bags.

“Chocolate,” Steve tells Barnes, holding up a plastic bag in one hand. “Juice,” he holds up the other. He puts both into the bowl of his shield and gives it a little spin. “You need fluids. Take little sips every little while so you don’t just go running for the loo every five minutes.”

“Hey, no, he can’t have just chocolate,” Sam says, belatedly remembering that he’s got to be the voice of medical sanity here. “Give him a fucking vegetable or something, Rogers, jesus.”

“There’s a fruit cup in there,” Steve says, unconcerned. “There’ll be vegetables when we get back to the cabin. Now -” Steve reaches over and selects two paperbacks off the top of the nearest stack. “- Crime Against PASSION or Mistress of WEREWOLF CASTLE?”

Barnes, after long beetle-browed deliberation and suspicious little glances at Steve, picks the werewolf book. Steve smiles and adjusts the blankets one last time before standing up. He seems to have gone through the shock of having Barnes collide with them remarkably fast, though on the other hand, he’s had the past ten months to deal with it. The initial medical scramble, subsequent gooeyness and further sleepless mania, once heated to boiling by the talk of what to do about their future, has now congealed into a hard, cheerful rage. Sam can see how it might even be mistaken for happiness by anybody who didn’t know better.

Barnes can definitely tell that’s rage. He’s not afraid of it, though, which is great news for Sam considering he’s thought out all the ways this can go tits up, emotionally speaking. Barnes, who had flinched and shrank during Steve’s rant about trials, is back to visibly fighting an inner struggle not to just attach himself to Steve like a big hairy backpack. This Steve doesn’t scare him.

Then again, it doesn’t scare Sam either. He’s missed this cheerful bastard Steve Rogers. He’d gotten so little of him before everything went to shit.

“Yell if you need anything,” Steve tells Barnes. “We’ll be right outside.”

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Barnes huddles deeper in his paisley prison and waits for Wilson and Steve to come back. Motherfucker is a satisfied hum at the back of his head; as far as he can tell it’s counting how many molecules of what make up their surroundings. He follows the path of the thought and gets
presented with a dizzying matrix of data which, he realizes, corresponds to the nearest schoolbus, as seen through the kind of numbers lens that would make a mathematician cry. At least he thinks it’s numbers.

He shakes himself out of it, but it doesn’t help make his thinking all that much clearer. Steve told him to eat chocolate, and right now that’s about the extent of his ability to perform. There is a lot of it in these plastic bags. There’s a fruit cup too, as promised. It’s cherries and tangerines and pineapples in syrup and comes with a little plastic detachable spoon.

He takes the cup out but doesn’t make it as far as opening it. His body feels like a garbage bag and all the garbage fumes have collected up inside his head. The shield is lying in front of him, a cold chunk of metal that Steve had just plopped down and filled with grocery bags like it wasn’t his primary weapon. Belly-up like this Barnes can only see the very edge of dinged blue paint, dull with lack of polish. He carefully pushes a bag aside to get a better look at the grips, their leather stained dark with sweat.

Blood too. Steve used to bleed all over it, Barnes remembers. When the serum kept trying to heal away his calluses and he kept ripping his hands open left and right until his body somehow got the point. He’d - Bucky had - he’d used to bandage Steve’s hands. He’d bandaged Steve’s hands about as many times as he’d had hot meals. Then one day he didn’t need the bandages anymore.

Which is a good thing. Barnes gets a flash of shortass Steve and physically shudders when he imagines what it might’ve been like if it had been him here and now instead of Big Steve. Parts of Barnes are still registering surprise that Steve hadn’t needed to be tied to a millstone to prevent him from suplexing the entire CIA one agent at a time.

Barnes can’t think about a trial. That’s as far off in the future as dinosaurs are in the past. The last… seventy-two hours… have been terrifying and maddening and overwhelming beyond belief, but that describes literally everything that’s happened to Barnes in this brand new life. He wants to get off the roller coaster ride. Every day can’t be fireworks like this. He’ll have a goddamn heart attack within a year.

He can’t go after HYDRA anymore, that much he knows, but it’s not the killstroke he’d feared it was. His plan to ally himself succeeded, even if mostly by accident. Widow will go after the handlers. Steve is at his back. Widow knows what to do about the trigger words, and Wilson is such an easy doctor, and Iron Man Tony Stark is faking Barnes’ death.

It all seems too easy. It all seems unreal. But then, Barnes has been doing everything by himself. What takes one man an hour two men can do in twenty minutes, and with ten men in two, and with the Avengers there’s no problem to solve in the first place. The small problems wilt before they can even show up. That is the whole point of allies. That’s the whole point of team.

Widow - Natasha - Widow - she wants to help him. She will help him. He recognized the look on her face, when she was talking about becoming worse than Steve. They had worked together, been partners, and Barnes - the Soldier - whoever - he’d liked her. He trusted her. The irony is a bitter kind of smile. Of course all that opens up in him when she talks about mass political destabilization, and not friendship and loyalty like when she did last night.

But she’s lit with something nuclear now, something that’s always there but kept tamped down, and that, he remembers. When she was a child, he thought it was patriotism. The glory lies they’d been fed, and how could he fault her for believing? But no, it ran deeper than that, always did, and this is what her engine was all along. She had always tried to do what was right, only in the beginning she hadn’t known what that was, raised neck deep in lies. That’s why she offered to disappear him, even if it hurt Steve. Giving him the option was the right thing to do.
Wilson and Widow and Steve, all doing what’s right. And Barnes: doing what’s right too.

He has his new mission. Become a person. Become Bucky. Become a civilian. He’ll get the trigger words out. It’s doable. Widow did it, and Barnes did break a lot of his own conditioning, and this is just one more step on the long damn checklist of shit he has to unfuck, thank you HYDRA. He can only imagine how much barfing this is gonna entail.

But he can do it. And his new mission will probably only help. In a way, this interval will probably be a good thing: Steve’s already so hard to look at, and Wilson is just so - solid, and Barnes keeps expecting Widow - Natasha - Widow to be even shorter. A cover might be - good. A cushioning layer between him and the rest of the world. Steve calling him Bucky is about all he can handle. If everybody else starts in too he might completely lose what he oh so generously calls his grip.

When Steve said they won’t get a hand on you he had looked exactly as terrible as he’d loomed in Barnes’ memories, so long ago. And it was a shock, in that moment, to realize that Barnes liked this too. It’s the other side of the supernova smile. He’s got no idea how he long can withstand it, right now, but it was the same feeling inside him, watching Steve clench his jaw and set himself like a blast door coming down.

And it’s unraveled something in him. Whatever woke up inside Barnes in that tin bathroom has set up house and grown. It’s turned into something vicious, unmanageable, alive in his chest, like a separate creature, like if he lets his guard down his very ribs will snap open in a giant maw and gulp Steve down whole. His whole body wants to munch down on Steve. It feels gruesome. It feels too big.

And if he bugged out after barely twenty minutes with Steve in the bathroom, he doesn’t know what he’ll do next. It’s only Motherfucker’s awareness of bio-cluster-designated-Steve that lets Barnes have him out of eyeshot now. This will buy him time. He’ll pull himself together. He can’t do anything about his first impressions but he can at least make sure that’s not all there is to him. He’s got six to eight months of mission prep time and he’s can’t afford to waste it. He’ll get used to living in houses and cooking his own food and thinking of himself as Bucky.

Because the future will come. They’ll… go to Brooklyn, get a place, build a garage. For the spaceship. Steve seems to have no problem writing Motherfucker into this utopia he’s describing, but Barnes suspects that Steve is applying his problem-solving skills in the usual way and completely ignoring any and all fine detail. It makes him prime officer material and puts him in desperate need of an XO. Wilson and Widow are good but they’ve got their own priorities. It’s on Barnes to do detail.

Motherfucker is a problem. Barnes doesn’t know how they’re going to stash the ship in Stark’s tower, least of all how it’s gonna play out when Barnes is in Timbuktu or god knows where else and has a flashback or nightmare or just a mother fucking bad day. He’s going to have to turn it off. The thought makes him want to crawl into a bunker and never come out, but - he has to. If he’s going to be Barnes pretending to be Bucky pretending to be a normal citizen, his cover will have to be perfect and not just because of the CIA camping out on his doorstep. He can’t go back on what he said. He won’t. Bucky Barnes is his, and that’s who he’ll be. This is the rest of his life.

And it can’t be pretending. He can not leave room for lies.

Barnes can do this without nightly mortal combat with something that might be half a ghost. There’s got to be a way. Maybe it’s time, and a stress-free environment, and more therapeutic techniques than he’s managed to cobble together out of the internet. Maybe it’s an exorcism.

Thinking through all of this feels like going three rounds with an angry crocodile. His eyes feel
crispy with the need for sleep, but he manages to wrestle his phone out. He types, *what to do if there's someone else in my head.*

He nearly falls asleep while the page loads, but eventually it comes through and he pinches himself awake. A lot of the top results are psychology articles, which seems promising until he skims through and realizes it’s all armchair advice on how to stop thinking about your ex. He adds *medical* to the search terms, and the results become mostly about schizophrenia. When he squints at the commonly used medications some of them seem familiar, so christ, maybe he *is* just fucking schizophrenic and all ‘Bucky’ is is a manifestation of one of the many, many neurochemical imbalances in his head. Maybe HYDRA had been medicating him for this all the fuck along.

Then again, it does say antipsychotics are also used for reducing anxiety and aggression. That was probably higher on their list of concerns than whether he was quietly hallucinating or not. And again he’s up against the same stumbling block: who the fuck else has had this particular flavor of crazy? Who else has had the original occupant of their body so mechanically rewritten, over such a span of time? And if god forbid there is someone else, what are the chances they wrote it down?

Fine. He’ll have to make it up as he goes along. As fucking usual.

Barnes tosses the phone down, scrubs his eyes and slumps back in the blanket cocoon. Then he gropes around until he gets the hard lump out from under his side. It's the little fruit cup Steve brought him.

Barnes eats it. It’s delicious.

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Steve trots off into the swirling snow again and reappears twenty minutes later with an entire spool of industrial chain over his shoulder. “What the fuck, did you pick that off a *tree*?” Sam demands incredulously, from the roof of the truck.

“I told you, there’s all sorts of stores right over there,” Steve says. “The hardware was sold at the grocery. I think these are the only shops in town. What’re you doing up there?”

“Figuring out attachment points,” Sam says. “Gimme that chain. Did you steal this?”

“No, I paid,” Steve says. “I was the fourth guy in there buying hardware, too. Is today a weekend?”

“No idea,” Sam says. Days of the week are one of the things that have been happening solely to other people pretty much since they started this whole HYDRA-whacking world tour. “I’m not taking my phone out to check. Toss some of that up here, let’s see what we can do.”

It’s harder than it looks, since they essentially have to create an airlift harness for this thing without having ironclad knowledge of where the weak points are. Steve has ideas on how they should attach the chains. Sam has ideas on how Steve is a fucking moron, and presents them along with his engineering degree as counterargument. The sullen lump just visible in the mouth of the spaceship rustles occasionally as it absorbs another piece of chocolate and ejects the wrapper.

Steve eventually stops arguing about how he “knows geometry” - Sam’s not sure Steve knows what the word means - and accepts the love of tensile calculations into his heart. They need to cut a couple of lengths of chain for Sam’s configuration to work, but Steve solves that problem by fetching his shield from the spaceship and using it to slam through the links with a couple of dull chunking noises. Then he carefully brushes off the edge and returns it to Barnes’ side. Sam doesn’t hear any conversation, so either they’re talking via asshole smile and rage glower or
Barnes is ignoring Steve in favor of the mysteries of _WEREWOLF CASTLE_. Either way Steve comes back grinning, tossing the chain up to Sam and handing over the carabiners and clips.

They truss the truck to Sam’s satisfaction. “Now the spaceship,” he says, clambering down off the side of the plow.

Of course, when they get back over there Steve has to detour inside and check that Barnes hasn’t vanished or dissolved or managed to lose another pint of blood or two. And he hasn’t, miracle of miracles. Barnes is asleep, burrowed deep in his blanket taco, the visible third of his face gone flushed and pink.

Sam is vaguely horrified to find he kind of wants to pinch his cheeks. Since Barnes currently looks like a lumberjack at the tail end of a weeklong meth bender, the fact that Sam finds him _cute_ is probably indicative of serious brain damage.

Steve, of course, is looking down at this tableau like Barnes is a whole litter of kittens with a velvet bow on top. “Can you check his temperature?” Sam says, in an attempt to get back to purely medical assessment.

Steve crouches down and sticks a hand in there and presumably presses it against some suitable bit of Barnes. “He’s hot,” Steve reports dubiously. “But it’s probably the blankets.”

“Loosen him up and check again in five minutes,” Sam says. “We are not risking a fever. C’mon, let’s let him sleep while we do the ship.”

Barnes doesn’t so much as twitch when Steve extracts his hand. Poor guy must have crashed hard. Sam wouldn’t wake him either except for how he’s their ride out of here and right now they’re sitting ducks with the evidence of grand theft snowplow right there practically giftwrapped.

Trussing up the spaceship does not go faster, because unlike the snowplow it has _zero_ places to secure any chains off of. Sam finally just has them make a shitty net, and sends Steve back to the hardware store to find some industrial-strength carabiners. There aren’t any. Sam does end up digging out his phone, because the thing that saves them is a goddamn YouTube tutorial on DIY lobster fishing.

Finally, after the last junction on this stupid metal doily is secured, they stagger back to the spaceship. The Barnes lump hasn’t moved an inch. As they approach it emits a noise like a horse trying to clear a blocked nostril, which is pretty alarming until Sam realizes that’s just snoring.

“Christ,” Sam says. “You wanna give him a poke?”

“Let’s give him ten more minutes,” Steve says, because of course he does. “He’ll probably wake up on his own anyway.”

“How has he not woken up already,” Sam mutters. “He needs to see a sinus doctor.”

Steve glances sharply at him. “You think so?”

“Well. I mean.” Sam gestures vaguely. “Probably not as much as he needs to see, like, literally every other kind of doctor, but yeah, that’s the sound of some fucked up sinuses.”

“He snored before,” Steve says, brow wrinkling. “But... not that bad.”

“It’s not urgent,” Sam says, before Steve can start mentally scheduling medical appointments. Sam had honestly meant it as more a joke than anything, but then again, who’s to say Barnes _doesn’t_ need a sinus doctor. Steve goes over there anyway, crouching down and making minor
adjustments to the blankets.

Sam steps further into the ship, glancing around some more. There’s a gun rack and all the blood, yeah, but it mostly just looks like a bargain book bin threw up in here. He picks one up off the top of the nearest pile. The cover says NIGHT of THE Highlander. The cover is just a set of abs over a couple of inches of plaid that is probably meant to be kilt. It looks like one of those eight thousand interchangeable novels that his mom always reads at the beach, only about a million times worse because it belongs to Bucky Barnes. Introduction to Neurology, says another, which is a lot better, only right beneath it is The COWBOY And The COURTESAN.

Steve stares in adoration at his grunty lump of Buck for a while, then glances around. He must mistake Sam gingerly replacing the books for cleaning up because he nods approvingly and starts scooping stuff up himself. He frowns at all the blood on the floor and walls; once he’s stacked his armful of books he spits on the edge of his sleeve, wraps it around his hand and starts scrubbing at the edges of a bloodstain.

“Dude, gross,” Sam says.

“I don’t have a handkerchief,” Steve says absently.

“Well at least don’t use spit. Pour some water or something. Melt some snow.”

“Good idea,” Steve says, ducking outside and coming back with a sloppy snowball. It drips down his hand as he starts scrubbing at the wall. Sam sighs, picks up a stray chunk of sleeping bag, fills it with snow and starts his own scrubdown.

They work side by side for a while, Sam half thinking, half examining the wall for hints of how those weird hieroglyphs moved around on it. Steve’s methodically removing blood spatter, carefully nudging aside stacks of books and then replacing them when he’s done. He doesn’t look angry or upset, just intent, so hopefully whatever he and Barnes talked about in the cabin hasn’t lit any long-term fuses Sam needs to know about.

In the short term, it seems like Steve’s winding up for a big old fuck you to whatever the United States might or might not want, and Sam’s under no illusions as to whether that shit has consequences. And if it comes down to criminal charges, Sam knows who’ll be the one getting picked out of a lineup. Maria Hill or no, Sam’s whole family is probably already on like nine government watchlists.

But Sam’s always been the guy who backs his people up. Natasha was right. Sam’s mom was, too, when he called her way back at the beginning of this. Sam’s not gonna go back to the VA, and he’s not gonna go back to the quiet life, either. If Steve hadn’t shown up when he did Sam probably would’ve had another month before he started calling his sister and seeing if she needed a paramedic out in whereverthefuck she was where they didn’t have hospitals or clinics or toilets. If Mom and Dad and Sierra were here to talk about it, he knows what they’d say. They’d tell him if he knows what’s right then that’s what he’s got to do.

Well, Sierra would probably say some version of you scared bro? Sam’s learned to view her sisterly advice as the devil sitting on his shoulder. Besides, he thinks, lightening up, this still won’t be as bad as the Science Fair Incident of ’95, which his parents regularly bring up at family dinners to augment Sierra’s allotment of reproving glances and pointed remarks. Sometimes Sam thinks she moved to Uganda just to spare herself the annual Wilson Family Cookout and Life Choice Concrit Symposium.

So all that leaves is Steve’s slight tendency to go a little monkey-poo when J.B. Barnes is out of eyeshot. Natasha’s made a decent effort at hammering the concept of consequences into Steve’s
head, but it can’t hurt to check in a little. “You gonna be okay, man?” Sam asks, nudging Steve with his elbow. “And don’t front, we all know how fine you get when that guy back there disappears on you. Hell, the whole damn world knows.”

Steve glances over at him, slowing down his scrubbing. He doesn’t look angry anymore, or at least not in the way he did when Natasha was talking and Steve looked like his brain kept running headfirst into brick walls from his inability to just find something to punch. Now it’s that conviction Sam saw at the beginning, that hardening behind his eyes that says he knows what he has to do and whether he likes it or not is irrelevant.

“I don’t want to do the politics,” he says. “But…” He looks back at Barnes. “Natasha was right. He deserves to have something to come back to. A real life, without - reporters and cameras and bastards on every corner hounding him. If I can set that up for him, I will. And you,” Steve says, looking at Sam again. “We come back, god forbid any of it drops on you, but either way I’m gonna help.”

Sam nods, looking back out at the snow. It’s probably some kind of joke that he feels pretty relieved to see his immediate future full of lying to Congress. It might not be a fun future, but it’s definitely a solid one. “It had better drop on me,” he says aloud. “If they want to try us for saving the world then you bet your ass I wanna fuck them for it. When I said yes to you I knew what I was doing, Rogers. You won’t get rid of me now.”

Steve throws out a massive, dampish arm and slings him into a crushing side-hug, then, startlingly, kisses Sam’s temple. It’s like all of Sam’s hug lessons have hit home all at once. “I better get some of those lawyers though,” Sam says, laughing, hugging him back. “I better get those good lawyers, you hear me? I better get lawyers out the ass.”

“Lawyers as far as the eye can see,” Steve promises. “Though we might end up just sitting at home watching those TV shows we don’t understand, if Natasha gets going.”

“Hey, you never know,” Sam says. “We might have to go on the run from the government again.”

“We? Again?” Steve says. “Last time you were on the run for maybe five minutes.”

“Five minutes!” Sam says, outraged, and would’ve kept going only the horrible sawing noises behind them stop. They turn around and the Barnes lump convulses, the thunderous snores turning abruptly into pained, gaspy coughing.

Barnes comes awake like a cat dumped out of a hammock, and it might’ve been funny except the guy is clearly fucking terrified. And the ship’s reacting too, the faint whirr of its engine suddenly amping up. Sam braces, dearly fucking hoping it doesn’t have any protocols that tell it to laser the inside of its own cabin.

Steve’s over there in a flash, and somehow has Barnes upright and standing in seconds even if it is only by Steve holding him under the elbows. Barnes’ head whips back and forth, his eyes wild. Sam’s just thankful the gun is somewhere back on the spaceship floor and not in one of Barnes’ spasming hands.

“Hey,” Steve says, in a voice Sam has literally never heard him use before. “Hey, pal, you’re alright. Look at me.”

Barnes looks at him, and doesn’t immediately decide violence is the answer. Steve folds him in, one hand on the back of Barnes’ head. As far as Sam can tell it’s like hugging a wooden board in a wig, but Steve isn’t deterred in the slightest, and after a second Barnes manages to grab hold of the back of Steve’s jacket. Steve isn’t the world’s best hugger by any stretch and Barnes looks like
he might actually be the world’s worst hug-ee, but by their standards it’s probably amazing.

And now Sam’s depressed himself. With hugs.

They stand like that for another minute, Steve mumbling whatever positive little nothings he’s got into Barnes’ ear. On the one hand, Sam feels a little useless just standing here, but on the other, it is great news that Steve can effectively calm Barnes down. “You alright, Buck?” Steve says, drawing back just enough to see Barnes’ face. “Bad dream?”

Barnes nods, his crazy eyes returning to more or less normal levels. “Eat some more chocolate,” Sam suggests. “I’d say walk around a little, but, well. Snow and GSW and all.”

“Can you fly us back?” Steve asks, rubbing a little at Barnes’ shoulders. “We can get some hot food going.”

Barnes nods again, and Steve helps him to the console. Sam and Steve link the two haphazard nets together and climb back in, using the roof of the snowplow to get back into the ship. “Aight, man, moment of truth,” Sam says. “Will this work or do we have to hitch Steve to a cart and make him take us up the mountain. Can you keep the hatch open?”

Barnes nods. This time when the ship rises it’s obvious: Sam can hear the clink and groan of the chains going taut, and when he cautiously cranes his head out he sees the slack disappear and the snowplow, thank the baby jesus and Sam’s engineering degree, comes off the ground.

“Yesss,” Sam says under his breath, giving a totally age-appropriate fistpump. “Take that, Professor Cannizzaro, who’s got a less than satisfactory grasp on tension calculations now. Alright, Barnes, we good to go? Nothing uh… feels weird to you?”

Barnes grunts and shakes his head, not even looking back at him. “If anything feels hinky let’s try and land before we accidentally drop a four-ton snowplow through some poor guy’s bedroom ceiling,” Sam says. “We’re not gonna find a good way to recover from that one. And we probably shouldn’t top one fifty with this thing. Aerodynamics, we do not have anymore.”

Hatch closing,” is Barnes’ response. Sam gets his head back just fast enough to not get his nose whacked by the zip of the hatch. Barnes listens, though, because it’s a lot slower coming back than it was getting there. Attaching the snowplow has turned the spaceship from a hawk to a hippopotamus. Without any windows to look out of all Sam’s got to look at is Steve, who’s watching Barnes. For Steve boredom is clearly not going to be a problem, but, Sam thinks, if they’re gonna be in here for much longer he’s gonna need a pack of cards or something.

Steve texts Natasha incoming, so they aren’t met with a hail of gunfire when they wobble in over their cabin clearing. She comes out as Barnes squints and frowns his way into parking the ship; there’s a couple of snapping and crashing noises below them that indicate a couple more innocent trees have fallen victim to the cause, and then a bone-shaking thump that must be the snowplow making contact with the ground.

Barnes winces a little at that one, but they make it to the ground in one piece. When they climb out, Sam sees that Natasha’s got the kind of look little girls get when they’re taken to meet their favorite princess at Disneyland. “That is a monster truck,” Natasha breathes.

“You’re not driving,” Sam says immediately.

“Yet,” Natasha says, which doesn’t bode well for Future Sam’s blood pressure.

Barnes clambers slowly out of his alien tow truck. The third-day stiffness must really be hitting him because he’s moving like his joints are made of rice krispies. “You need to go inside and
“C’mon, Buck,” Steve adds, holding an arm out, and Barnes steps towards it, letting Steve herd him through the cabin door.

Natasha looks at Sam. “How’re they doing?”

“It’s been best case scenario all the way so far,” Sam says. “I can not believe things are working out.”

“Avenger luck,” Natasha says. “It drops you five hundred feet deep into a shithole and then shoves a rocket booster up your ass to get you out.”

“Graphic,” Sam says. “C’mon, help me get all these chains off.”

“Are you kidding me? We’re making Steve do it,” Natasha says.

They go back into the cabin, and the second they step out of the entry hallway they’re pinned by Steve’s gaze. He looks like he’s trying to calmly and politely inform them that if they make any noise louder than a mosquito burp there will be capital C Consequences. He’s on the couch. Barnes is behind him. He’s got Steve in what is probably a very loving chokehold, held to his chest like a big muscley body pillow.

Natasha communicates via hand and eyebrow gestures that they are going to very quietly pack up the bedroom. Sam puts all his energies into keeping a straight face.

They don’t head out until late afternoon. Natasha uses more hand gestures, these ones much more threatening, to make Steve disengage from Barnes and go outside and get both spaceship and snowplow free of chains and ready to rumble. When they’re all packed up Steve transports an extremely groggy Barnes into the plow, complete with blankets, and labrador-bounces in right after. Sam climbs behind him; the cabin is not large, and the backseat is literally wall to wall supersoldier. There’s a complicated moment where Steve visibly tries to figure out which spot will give him the best Bucky-tending vantage point and Sam prepares himself to be physically lifted, because Steve’s definitely in that mood.

Luckily he’s saved by Natasha coming around the other side of the cabin. “Steve, you have to drive,” she says.

“What? Why?” Steve demands, but quietly, because Barnes lost the struggle to stay awake again the second Steve set him up in the back.

“Because a big white guy will be the least conspicuous driver,” Natasha says. “Bad enough that you look like an extra from a boyband-themed porn parody. The rest of us don’t pass at all.”

Steve grimaces but clambers out of the cabin. Natasha takes his place, and since she’s approximately the size of one of Steve’s arms the backseat is suddenly a much more comfortable fit. She settles on Sam’s other side, putting him in the middle and leaving Barnes to his corner. Thank god the more upright position means he’s not snoring anymore.

“You should grow a beard,” Sam says, looking away from Barnes as Steve straps himself into the driver’s seat. “It covers up JB’s face pretty well.”

Steve sighs. “When I grow a beard, Bucky calls me Ginger Rogers.”

“No,” Sam says, sitting up straight in glee.

“Well now you have to grow one,” Natasha says.

“I have to do no such thing,” Steve says with dignity, but he does turn the collar of his jacket up. Natasha eyes him like she’s gonna rub Rogaine on his face while he sleeps, but then Steve turns the ignition on the truck and it’s too loud to think.

Sam does, however, hear Barnes emit the panicky snort that means he’s come awake, and so does everybody else. Thankfully the engine noise dies down after the first roar of ignition, and this time Barnes comes down from DEFCON 1 without Steve needing to hug him through it. He doesn’t look great, though, and Sam’s not sure he can handle however many hours next to a Rottie supersoldier with chihuahua levels of anxiety.

Then he’s struck with divine inspiration. “Hey, man,” Sam says. “You got your ipod? You wanna put on some music?”

Barnes looks first enlightened, then confused, then panicked. “It’s in the backpack,” Steve says, reading Barnes’ mind without even looking at him. “It fell out of your pocket when we were getting in and I didn’t want it to fall out again.”

Barnes finds the backpack somehow in his blanket swamp, his face smoothing out considerably when he extracts the ipod. Steve gropes around and eventually produces an aux cord, which Barnes plugs in with the care of a man administering cough medicine to his sickly child. “You put any new tunes on there?” Sam asks.

Barnes looks at the ipod, then at Sam, kind of sidelong, then offers it up.

It’s not like Sam’s gonna refuse, if only because he’s got a macabre interest as to what kind of death metal Barnes has pumped on there. Then again, he had shown a preference for Kelly Clarkson. Maybe it’s just gonna be Kidz Bop Albums 1 through 43.

Sam swipes it open. GUN NOISES, says the first playlist. Sam scrolls down. GLASS BREAKING. SIRENS. Natasha is shamelessly reading over his shoulder. Sam, out of morbid curiosity, selects SIRENS, and some trap song he’s never heard before starts thumping.

“Oh, the air horns,” he says aloud. “Aright, okay.” The Jamaican air horns are followed up with, yep, that sound effect certainly does sound like glass breaking. When Sam checks he sees this song is on the other playlist too. He honestly can’t tell if that means Barnes enjoys it or not. “You like this stuff, man?”

Barnes stares back at him like an owl woken up at the crack of noon and told to start teaching trigonometry. Between the hair and the blankets there’s not much that can dispel the resemblance. “I like music,” he says, like Sam’s the slowest kid in owl trig.

“You got a favorite?” Sam tries.

Barnes holds his hand out. Sam hands the ipod back. Barnes fiddles with it for a moment, eyebrows scrunched in deep concentration, then hits play.

Out comes… dubstep.

Steve nearly swerves at the first robot farting noise. Sam feels his whole face lock up in an attempt not to have an expression. “Is this what they play over the PA system in hell?” Natasha says wonderingly.
“You don’t like it,” Barnes says, watching Sam’s face closely.

“No,” Sam protests, even as his grimace betrays him. “It’s… just… loud.”

“I like it,” Steve says loyally, even as his shoulders climb steadily to his ears in an attempt at self-protection. “It’s - unique.”

“You don’t like music,” Barnes says flatly. Steve visibly swells with joy, the same way he does whenever Barnes gives any indication he remembers he has a past, let alone a past with him. Then he remembers he has to argue. “I like music!”

“Not the right way,” Barnes mutters.

Steve practically swoons. “Whoa, eyes on the road,” Sam says. Natasha snickers. Barnes fiddles more with the ipod, and the horrific robot grinding noises die off. Sam tries not to look too visibly relieved, only, as the next piano strains start up, he realizes he no longer has that problem. *If Everyone Cared* starts playing, and Chad Kroeger’s dulcet Canadian tones fill the snowplow.

“I have met the Winter Soldier,” Sam says very calmly, after nearly a full minute of this, “and he listens to Nickelback.”

“What’s wrong with Nickelback?” Natasha asks.

“Isn’t this from your ipod?” Steve says.

“I didn’t put Nickelback on there!”


“Your friends suck, Steve,” Sam says.

“Aw, Sam, don’t be so hard on yourself,” Steve says. Sam leans forward to punch him in the shoulder, but lightly and slowly, because the second he wound up Barnes’ head swiveled around like an exorcist doll and fixed him with the kind of laser-sight look that shouldn’t be possible on any organic lifeform. Sam is worried he’s losing his grip on the fact that Barnes is still a completely psychotic motherfucker with approximately ten billion hair triggers, around 40% of which are probably filed under ‘people hitting Steve’.

Not that Steve and Natasha don’t recognize that. They just don’t seem to be capable of putting it in context. Which, Sam figures, their baselines are so skewed to begin with that all the fucked-up starts looking fine and in fact kind of sensible. In Captain America and Black Widow’s world, being half a sneeze away from extreme violence at all times is just a given. In fact, it’s a highly valued life skill.

Sam sighs. That’s the Falcon’s world now, too. And because the Falcon is Sam Wilson, part of his superhero agenda will be finding out how to convince Captain America and the Black Widow they should maybe try some therapy sometime. He’s sure there’s gotta be someone out there who can handle Steve: he’ll just sit there for his whole hour projecting a forcefield of Awkward that could kill small animals and look nobly disappointed as an answer to any kind of personal question. A Hollywood therapist, maybe. Whoever’s headshrinking Tom Cruise has almost certainly dealt with worse.

There might not be anyone who can handle Natasha. He doesn’t even know where he would start.
with Barnes. The guy seems to be coping, but Sam also hasn’t been around him all that long. It’s equally possible Barnes has been spending his downtime completely catatonic or literally drinking the blood of his enemies.

In the meantime, the next town is more than two hours of mountain road away, and it turns out Natasha wants to show him her memes.

“Join the Air Force, they said,” Sam mutters as Natasha swipes to another image in her evil iPhone meme folder and sticks it under his nose. “It’ll be fun, they said. It definitely won’t get you on a road trip of vengeance with the world’s dorkiest assassin and two nonagenarians with rage issues, they said - ”

“I don’t have - ” Steve begins, then reconsiders. “Yeah, okay, maybe I do.”

“Always did,” Barnes mutters. Steve literally lays his cheek on the headrest and sighs, because he’s one feathered wig and an artfully ripped bodice away from going full harlequin heroine over his goddamn cyborg boyfriend.

“No one’s ever called me a dork before,” Natasha says thoughtfully. “Well. Not anyone still living.”

“You don’t scare me,” Sam says. “I know what you’re about now. I’ve seen your memes.”

Natasha sniffs. So far Barnes’ playlist has taken them through Nickelback, Whitney Houston, Kendrick Lamar, Britney Spears, and several artists Sam is not familiar with but who probably have names like DJ BootyBangerzz and Trap Lord Homicide. Sam will cop to the Kelly Clarkson, and, okay, yes, the Britney - they’re good workout songs, okay - but he is reaching his limit on music that is just demon voices screaming about unimaginable sex positions followed by bass-boosted lawnmower noises.

“Hey man, you heard the Black Eyed Peas yet?” Sam finally tries, during a momentary lull between autotuned yodeling. “There’s this one song, it’d be right up your alley, you’ll love it.”

Barnes looks at him with the scrutiny of the extremely drunk trying to read a text from their grandmother. Sam thinks he’s gonna refuse, but then he offers the ipod again. In return Sam very kindly does not immediately shut off the trap nightmare playing - a squint at the screen shows that the title of the song is, and he could not make this up, PU$$YRICH - but the second it winds down he hits play on Let’s Get It Started.

Barnes’ eyes widen. He looks like any reservations he might’ve had about Sam’s tastes have been summarily done away with. Sam gives himself a mental pat on the back. It turns out Barnes has preserved all of Sam’s playlists while making his own, too, so it’s pretty easy for Sam to pick the music. He puts on Dani California next because it’s on his unofficial Car Full Of White Friends playlist, and if you squint and turn your head and maybe concuss yourself a little then this whole clown car adventure could technically qualify as a road trip with his pals. Then again, between Mr. and Mr. Nineteen Forty Sad and Miss KGB Most Wanted he suspects the cultural familiarity might be lost on them.

Barnes is rapt, though. The look on his face is so openly absorbed that Sam forgives him for putting dubstep on his ipod and then actually playing it. It’s not his fault. It’s probably a symptom of having your personality put in a Nazi blender and he shouldn’t be shamed for it.

Sam deejays for a while, Barnes listening intently to each song until they stop for a bathroom break and Barnes carefully recollects the ipod, looking suitably enlightened by his Falcon-guided tour of quality tunes. When it starts to get dark they switch over, Steve climbing into the back
looking overjoyed to the sound of Natasha swearing as she adjusts the driver’s seat for her definitely not Steve-sized legs. “Hey, Buck,” Steve says all goooey, like they haven’t all been in the same damn car this whole time. Then he says, “Wait, hold on,” and goes to dig out his duffel from where it’s wedged between the seat back and the wall of the cabin. “Here,” he says, extracting a couple of paperbacks that he must have taken from the spaceship.

Barnes takes them, and he’d probably have a gooey look on his face too if his face had been capable of it. Reading sounds like a pretty good idea, actually, and Sam might’ve asked to borrow a book only he catches sight of the top cover and it’s got what looks like Bruce Willis in a spray tan, a Fred Flintstone outfit and a mullet wig. Sam decides he can do without that in his life.

Eventually, though, he feels the boredom seep in far enough that he takes his life into his own hands. The book Barnes is reading, at least, doesn’t have any semi-naked men on it, just what looks like a bunch of runes and a sword. Game of Thrones shit. Seems pretty safe. “What are you reading, man?”

Barnes doesn’t look up. “Time-traveling homosexual Viking werewolf erotica.”

“…Oh.”

“Could be worse,” Steve says on his other side, back of his head leaned against the seat so he can stare at Barnes without having to strain his neck. Sam’s pretty sure Barnes has the book in front of his face partly in self defense. “These other three books are gay pirate werewolf erotica.”

Sam makes a noise of exquisite agony. “Why?”

Barnes pointedly turns a page. Natasha glances back at them. “Everyone gets bored sometimes.”

“Not that bored,” Sam says, in pleading tones. “Never that bored.”

Steve leans forward pulls the duffel into his lap and starts pulling out more books. “Let’s see,” he says. “NIGHT of the Wolf Pack, Hot Rod Hamptons: Full Moon Thunder, LAID by the LAIRD…” Steve holds up A SIBERIAN werewolf IN Paris. “Buck? Not that I’m judging or anything, but I gotta be straight with you, I’m getting a little worried about how many of these books are about werewolves. And… Scotsmen?”

Barnes squints at him. “They’re the most interesting.”

“It’s a trope thing,” Sam says quickly, because he knows Steve is one wrong suggestion away from acquiring a tartan kilt, some fake wolf ears and an even faker Scottish accent in the pursuit of love. “A disproportionate number of romance novels are about scotsmen, and after the whole Twilight thing, werewolves.”

Barnes turns the squints on him. “The whole twilight thing?”

“No,” Natasha says, without looking back at them.


He holds up a book for Sam’s consideration. Sam stares. “What?” Natasha says, craning her head to see through the rearview mirror. “What’s that one?”

“It’s called ‘The Bike That Fucked Me’,” Sam says flatly. “There isn’t even a bike on the cover.”

“The author’s name is Ann L. Probé,” Steve says cheerfully.
“Y’know, sometimes I wonder if I’m in a coma somewhere, hallucinating all this stuff up,” Sam says. “Then I remember there’s nothing in my brain capable of dreaming up something like ‘Captain America’s love bunny is a famous assassin who reads things like ‘THE VAMPIRE WITH The GAY DRAGON TATTOO’, unironically, and listens to Ludacris.’”

“What’s wrong with Ludacris?” says Natasha.

“Why would I do something ironically?” says Barnes.

“Love bunny?” says Steve.

“Y’all heard me,” Sam says, pulling the hood of his sweatshirt up and cinching the drawstrings shut. The universe is telling him to take a nap.
They stop for the night in a big hotel attached to the city airport. Driving into the car park is a challenge - for a second there Sam’s not sure they’ll get in under the ceiling clearance - but after an alarming scraping noise they pull through. Natasha gets them the rooms, then brings them inside via a back door and a maintenance hallway. Barnes looks particularly zombified under the greenish fluorescent lights, leaning on Steve’s shoulder, and luckily the car park seems deserted, only a single battered sedan near the ground floor entrance. There aren’t even any security cameras.

Sam’s not shocked, considering the entire town seems to consist of the cluster of buildings around this sad ass airport. The four of them are gonna stand out like a couple of dildos in a donut box, but so will anyone else who might come after them. Sam trusts Natasha’s judgment, even if she does seem a little disappointed that she didn’t get to go all Vin Diesel in their monster snowplow.

“You’re sighing like that because we didn’t run into any HYDRA cars we could smush,” Sam says. “Aren’t you.”

“I’d never,” Natasha says, but she does give one more wistful glance over her shoulder at the snowplow as they enter the hotel’s back hallway.

“Speaking of smushing,” Sam says. “If you call the ship, JB, is it gonna slam into the ground and leave a giant hole like last time? Because if it is, I think we gotta find it a landing strip a little further away from civilians.”

Barnes considers it, face scrunching up. “No,” he says. “It can come up slowly. I was just. Confused. That time.” His mouth turns down further. “Sorry.”

“You were out of it,” Steve says, rubbing his shoulder. “Nobody got hurt.”

“Yeah, we just thought it was a meteor coming down to wipe away all life on earth,” Sam says. “Pretty cool once in a lifetime experience. Or at least it better be.”

“We’ll do that later,” Natasha says. “When most people are asleep. Come on, I got us connecting rooms.”

The rooms are on the top floor, but the hotel has a freight elevator even if it looks and operates like it’d gotten built when Lenin was still in short pants. It does have a security camera, but its lens looks like somebody regularly comes in and spits on it, so Sam’s not too worried, and more importantly Natasha barely gives it a second glance. When they get to their door she immediately takes her backpack full of laptops and goes to the adjoining room, probably to do womanly things like powder her nose and hack into the security system of the entire hotel-airport complex. Sam beelines for the bathroom, because bitter experience has taught him that if Steve goes first he’ll be in there for nine thousand geologic years and between the two of them the supersoldier can probably stand to hold the pee.

When Sam comes out of the bathroom, Barnes is on the bed and has six or seven chocolate bar wrappers arranged in a ruler-straight line in front of him. Steve is sitting across from this exhibit, his head bent close and listening with complete seriousness.

Barnes appears to be giving some sort of dissertation. “This one is not as good,” he says, pointing
at one wrapper. “Chalky. Not sweet. This one has nuts. This one has -” he struggles with the word for a moment, then says something that sounds Russian.

“Cream?” Steve hazards, squinting at the wrapper.


“Condensed milk?” Sam offers, unwilling to interrupt this show but unable to help himself.

“Yes!” Barnes looks triumphant. “Milk from a can.”

“Oh,” Steve says appreciatively, like they’ve just proven the theory of relativity in front of him. “I get it. What about this one?”

Sam is distinctly reminded of watching his dad ask one of his four year old nieces about her stuffed animals and get taken on a forty-minute safari of all their names, ages, professions, hopes and dreams.

“This one is the best,” Barnes says. He carefully picks up the wrapper and holds it out to Steve. “Try.”

It turns out there is a small piece of chocolate still lurking in the depths of the wrapper. Steve picks it up, and then Barnes’ hand shoots out and grabs Steve’s wrist, halting the chocolate an inch from his mouth. “Not the whole thing,” he says, and then tips his head towards Sam. “Share.”

Sam has no choice but to come aboard this carousel when Steve says, “Sorry, you’re right, sorry,” and breaks the little piece of candy bar in half to hold out to him.

Sam takes the chunk and puts it in his mouth. It is, as promised, pretty tasty. “Wow,” he says, then, feeling like it’s not enough, “Yum. Super good.”

Steve looks like he’s struggling not to laugh, but then he eats his own piece and his eyebrows go up. “Wow, that is good.”

“I said it was,” Barnes says, in tones of follow my judgment and I will lead you not astray.

“You did,” Steve says. “I’ll get you this one. There was that convenience store in the lobby, they looked like they might have it.”

“Take your phone, don’t leave the hotel,” Sam says, because Natasha’s not there to do it. Steve shows Sam his phone, gives Barnes another one of those looks where he tries to climb inside Barnes’ soul with his eyes, then abruptly ducks in, kisses the top of Barnes’ head and goes for the door.

Barnes is left blinking owlishly at Sam, looking like a couple of important internal components just got turned inside out. “I know,” Sam says sympathetically. “Steve just has that effect on people.”

Barnes nods like this is a critical and revelatory observation. Then he refocuses on Sam. “Wilson,” he says. “Can I tell you a secret.”

“Oh Jesus god,” Sam says. “Sure. Hit me. That’s a euphemism.”

Barnes gives him a withering look, then reintensifies. “I didn’t really show somebody in Buttfuckistan YouTube and money,” he says. “Well. I showed me YouTube. But nobody else made your mac and cheese. I did it. Alone.”
“Uh,” Sam says. He doesn’t know what he expected, but this wasn’t it. “Wow. Thanks.”

“How was it?” Barnes says, looking dangerously invested in the answer.

“It was - great. Really good,” Sam says, hoping he doesn’t sound like he’s lying just because he’s worried the guy might do something drastic if told his fledgling culinary skills are not up to par. And he isn’t lying. “I really liked it.”

“Worth the trade?”

“Yes,” Sam says, a little surprised to find he means it. “Wait, how did you make it? You got some kinda Easy-bake oven up there in that spaceship?”

“I broke into a university cafeteria,” Barnes says. “In Germany. On their website menu it said they served it. The packages had instructions.” He frowns. “My first idea was Youtube and money. But. They don’t sell bacon bits in Kazakhstan.”

“Yeah, they wouldn’t,” Sam says, thinking of the number of mosques they’d driven past. “Probably wouldn’t cook with them either.”

“I’ll get you the ipod,” Barnes says, the intensity now tripling. “A new one. In the mail.”

“That’s okay, man,” Sam says, slowly, trying to follow the conversational hairpin and parse why, exactly, Barnes is hung up on this. “You don’t have to. It was a fair trade.”

“I said I would,” Barnes says.

Sam is probably gonna have to respond to that only Natasha barges in through the connecting door, an open laptop in one arm and two phones held precariously in the other. “You were right,” she says with relish, probably talking to Barnes, using her foot to drag the chair away from the hotel desk. “You said they’d told all their guards, so I looked for communications that had gone out as mass messages to multiple personnel. They weren’t even trying to hide it.” She seems to forget she was going for the desk and props her foot on the chair, balancing the laptop on her knee. “Somebody got smart. They found out your ship is extraterrestrial. Those detectors Stark talked about - they started mass-producing the earliest working prototypes as fast as they could and distributed them to all their active cells. And then they sent out the trigger words.”

“So they’d know if he was close by,” Sam says, finishing the thought. “And then be able to... neutralize him.”

“Exactly. Not the best, as defenses go, but not... worthless...”

Natasha trails off, her eyes scanning whatever’s on the laptop in front of her. “What?” Barnes says, prying himself up and shuffling over to her.

Natasha smacks her palm over the screen. “Don’t,” she says, sounding sharper than usual. “These are all kill switches.”

Barnes takes a healthy step back. Sam goes over there. From beneath her palm several lines of text are visible, looking like an email.

-will induce an aneurysm. Once down make sure it’s dead, then get the body to cold storage as soon as possible. Further shipment instructions to follow. The asset was slated for retirement in any case. We’ll get more use from tissue specimens at this point, and would have even if we’d done this ten years ago. If the Americans had listened we wouldn’t be dealing with this now-

“I got a nosebleed,” Barnes says haltingly. “And. Dropped my rifle. Fell over. Muscle weakness. Disorientation.” His eyebrows meet in the middle to make one bushy angst caterpillar. “They weren’t trying to capture me. They were shooting to kill.”

“That sounds about right,” Natasha says. “Well. The good news is I think you’ve done some deconditioning of your own. Or your brain healed because of the serum, or the effect wasn’t strong enough. Either way, it didn’t do what it was supposed to.”

“Or they pronounced it wrong,” Sam says unhappily.

“No, that wouldn’t be it. It has to be the right sounds in the right order. The brain doesn’t recognize it as a trigger otherwise. It’s done on purpose,” Natasha says. “And that’s why trigger words are unusual phrases or words that don’t come up often. Otherwise you’d react every time somebody said ‘apple’, or whatever.”

Barnes backs up until he can lower himself to sit on the far bed. “I… something happened. With the ship,” he says. “In Chile. It was like -”

He struggles for a moment, mouth opening, before giving a frustrated huff. He gestures to his head, smacks his fists together like a couple of rocks and then intertwines his fingers. “Me and Motherfucker. Like that.”

“Wait, you really named it Motherfucker?” Sam says.

Barnes, astonishingly, rolls his eyes. “No, I named it Princess Buttercup,” he says, still in his zombie monotone.

“So you… uploaded yourself to the cloud?” Sam says, instead of trying to deal with that or ask any dangerous questions like why Barnes might have associated his alien ship with words like “mother” and “fucker”.

Barnes makes a face like a cat that’s just licked a lemon. “More downloaded it into me.”

That sounds like some real ass Matrix shit that Sam, with two semesters of physiological psychology, is not equipped to have a full opinion on. “Well… at least it messed up your conditioning?”

“If the kill switch failed, you can probably withstand deconditioning without the drugs,” Natasha says thoughtfully. “They’re really only to slow down the psychosomatic effects of the triggers. No reason not to get them anyway, though.”

“Yeah, about that,” Sam says, since it’s past time he floated this concept and tried to get it some traction. “Since it’s not an urgent life or death thing anymore, I would take it as a personal favor if you didn’t go doing the whole… shooting up and playing chicken with an aneurysm in the woods all by yourself.”

Natasha inclines her head. “It’d be easier all around if you hold off until you’re back with Steve,” she allows, looking at Barnes. “We’d have to see about having the doses adjusted for your metabolism regardless. If you want to do it sooner I’d have to courier you the drugs myself, but that’s not a problem unless you want to maintain comms blackout for longer than a month or so.”

“And that whole thing, that too,” Sam says. “I don’t think comms blackout is gonna... work. If you just drop off the face of the earth again, JB, Steve’s gonna discover whole new levels of
anxiety and it’s not gonna be the quiet kind.”

“I’m not gonna drop off,” Barnes says. “I’m.” He stops, then looks at Natasha. “You’ve been people,” he says.

For a second Natasha looks as surprised as she ever gets. “… Yes,” she admits.

“I’m gonna be Bucky,” Barnes says. “I have to get it right.”

Hoo boy. “For Steve?” Sam says carefully.

Barnes jerks a hand irritably. “He already thinks I am,” he says, like this is an annoying personality trait along the lines of forgetting to put the toilet lid down and never putting away the laundry. “He told me go be whoever. But I’m gonna be Bucky,” he stresses. “I’m gonna do it right.”

“Okay,” Sam says, because Barnes seems to be looking for a response here.

“I don’t care if it’s bad for me,” Barnes says, looking at Sam or at least Sam’s ear, almost challenging. “I’m doing it.”

“I... don’t know if it’s bad for you,” Sam says slowly. “Brains aren’t cut and dried. Pretending to be... yourself... well, I mean, isn’t that what everybody does? We all do what we think we should, in accordance with our self-image and beliefs. And, y’know, fake it ‘til you make it. We’re all doing that and anyone who says otherwise is lyin’.”

“For all intents and purposes, you are James Barnes,” Natasha adds. “All intel confirms that you’re not an imposter and you aren’t lying.”

“And there’s no one correct way to recover,” Sam says. “I mean, shit, I did a lot of controlled pyrotechnics after - my partner died. Just going out in my parents’ backyard and…” He makes a little explosion sound, his hands shaping the boom. This stuff is easy to talk about - this he'd said almost word for word with plenty of other vets at the VA, in his early days where he was just going to groups instead of leading them, all of them trying to find a way to talk about some of the shit they did in a way that would at least sound funny instead of pathetic. “It helped,” Sam continues. "A lot of the standard stuff also helped, a lot, don’t get me wrong, but some days -” he shrugs. “You just gotta burn shit.”

Then he adds, “Just, y’know, the smart way,” because at the end of the day he needs to be responsible about telling unstable supersoldiers that arson is a valid coping strategy. This shit is why he ended up a counselor instead of just a dude in the audience. “Like, gloves and buckets and shit. As safely as you can.”

Barnes looks between the two of them, and Sam can’t really say he looks vulnerable because that face is about as hospitable to vulnerability as the lunar surface is to kittens, but he doesn’t look like as rigid as he usually does, if no less defiant. “I’m crazy but. I’m getting better,” he says. “I’m gonna get better.”

“That’s great, man,” Sam says. “I mean it. And hey - that reminds me. I was gonna ask if you could help me with something. I been thinking about it and I don’t think I can do it all by myself.”

“What,” Barnes says.

“It’s for Steve,” Sam says. He has been thinking about it, because yes, dammit, just because he doesn't have a VA hall anymore doesn't mean he's not a VA counselor. It's not a hat he can take off and he wouldn't want to if he could. He became a counselor to be better than he was, to help
himself and his friends, and these beautiful lunatics are his friends. Barnes too now, god help him. Sam never before would’ve said he comes cheap, but so far his going price is apparently however many euros it takes to make mac n’ cheese in goddamn Germany.

So here they are. “Here’s what I need you to do,” Sam says. “Whenever you can, take a photo of the dumbest thing you see - and I mean dumbest. We’re talking Darwin Awards here - and send it to Steve. And then, right after, and this is the critical part, send him: that’s you. Got it? Natasha, you too. I think between the three of us we just might be able to get daily coverage.”

Natasha’s mouth is twitching. “I think I can help you out with that,” she says.

Barnes looks between the two of them again. “What’s Darwin Awards.”

“Olympics for stupid,” Natasha says.

Barnes considers this. He nods gravely. “I will do it.”

“I appreciate it,” Sam says sincerely. “It’s going to bring a lot of good into the world, I can already tell.”

“Winding Steve up is always for the greater good,” Natasha says cheerfully.

“How did you know. About Steve’s ear,” Barnes says.

“What?”

“You said, put your tongue in his ear, he’ll scream. How did you know.”


“Steve never screams,” Barnes says darkly.

“You just have to find the right leverage,” Natasha says. “How did you find him, anyway? In Prague. How did you find us?”

“Oh,” Barnes says. “Accident.”

“... Accident,” Natasha repeats.

“I needed supplies,” Barnes says. “And you said, they’re in Czechia. So I went to Prague. I was gonna look at your bank statements.” This he says to Sam. “To see where you were. But then. I walked around the corner. And there was Steve.”

“Then you - broke into our Airbnb,” Sam says incredulously.

“Yes,” Barnes says. “When you dropped off your bags. And were coming down the stairs. I had to hide.”

“You were right there?”

“Yes. Tailed you for seven hours forty-nine minutes. You compared every food in Prague to mac and cheese.”

“Accident,” Natasha says again. She’s making a face like she dodged the poisoned arrows, climbed the waterfall, outran the boulder and pried open the sacred casket to find only a half-eaten bag of Cheetos. “An accident.”
Barnes looks at Natasha, his eyebrows coming down even further. “Like... Sarajevo,” he says, apropos of whatever internal reference card is being painstakingly dug up. “With the tie pins. Sixteen bodyguards. Yes?”

Natasha looks at him sharply, then sits back in the chair and sighs. “In Sarajevo, we had a very limited window of opportunity, and we thought we lost the target,” she says, obviously for Sam’s benefit, since he never got his invite into the top secret super spy society and she’s nice like that. “Then the next night we see him walking into a strip club right across from where we were waiting for exfil. Total coincidence. Only two bodyguards with him, too. It went from a high-level hit to a disaster to one of the top five easiest kills I’ve ever done. And taught me better operational control,” she says, almost like an afterthought.

Barnes gestures. “Reality,” he says with great judgment, “is fucking stupid.”

“Amen,” Sam says as the door opens behind them. Steve comes sidling through, laden with more shopping bags than is probably reasonable for a guy who just went to a budget hotel’s convenience store. “Hey,” he says, ostensibly to the room but mostly at Barnes.

“My trigger words are fucked,” Barnes says immediately, his attention likewise narrowing down to the square footage between Steve’s terrible haircut and even more terrible sneakers. “They’re broken. They were supposed to kill me but they didn’t.”

“What?” Steve says, thumping the bags down on the floor. Sam sympathizes. It’s not how he’d have broken the news.

“I was supposed to have an aneurysm but I didn’t,” Barnes repeats.

Steve does not look like he is ready to receive this information first thing after spending thirty minutes curating chocolate. “Now?”

“In the mine,” Sam says. “When he got shot.”

“Aneurysm,” Steve repeats.

“According to communications I intercepted, the Winter Soldier’s trigger words were understood to be kill switches,” Natasha says. “Given the nosebleed, that’s most likely accurate -”

“Nosebleed?”

“Only a nosebleed,” Barnes says, in what could be a reassuring tone if it was taken to therapy for three thousand years. “And. Kind of a reboot. Barely worked. Brain’s too full of alien shit now. I think.”

Steve sort of runs his hands over Barnes’ shoulders, half a stroke and half checking for injury. The hug training doesn’t seem to have fully taken in regards to Barnes, because Steve oscillates between touching him like he’s either a favorite stuffed animal or the literal Mona Lisa. “Well,” Steve says finally. “Better alien shit than Nazi shit?”

Barnes nods decisively, looking up at Steve or at least Steve’s forehead. “This is good,” Natasha pitches in. “That means if he wants to go through with the full deconditioning he can put it off until he’s back with you, in a controlled environment with more available resources. And you can play spotter.”

“Yes,” Steve says immediately. “Let’s do that.”

Barnes, looking up at Steve, must decide it’s not worth it to die on this hill, because he nods.
“What’d you buy?” Sam asks, because despite that Steve looks dangerously close to swaddling Barnes in blankets again or maybe strapping him into a full-body collision suit with matching crash helmet.

Steve glances around and looks down at the dropped bags like they’re stray animals that crawled into this room all by themselves. He visibly recalibrates. “Food,” he says. “Antiseptic, clothes - I got you the chocolate, Buck. And these.”

Steve pulls out a stack of shiny new paperback novels. Sam catches a glimpse of embossed text over a man in a spray tan, a bunch of belts and nothing else. “Oh, and waterproof bandage covers,” Steve says. “There’s a real bathroom here, Buck. You can clean up properly.”

Barnes is busy looking over the paperbacks like each one is a solid brick of gold and he’s responsible for checking the quality. They must pass muster because he gathers them up and pushes them towards Steve. “Thank you,” he says gravely. "These are good."

“Not to interrupt,” Natasha says, in a tone that says she will use any interruption necessary to prevent any discussion about spraytanned ab literature, “but we need to bring the ship over. Steve, you and Barnes go up on the roof and land the spaceship. Put in on the top of the car park.”

“Are we taking the tracking risk?” Steve says, shifting attention admirably when Barnes is still right there expressing what can be called appreciation.

“That’s why we’re putting it on the car park,” Natasha says. “So if anybody comes around to find it, we’ll see it. I got us top floor rooms for a reason. We’re going to see if their tech is any better than Stark thinks they are. Better to find out now instead of in Brooklyn.”

“You’ll think they’ll try it now?” Sam asks.

“It’s their best option,” Natasha says. “We’re on defense, on the move, in a nice little out of the way place like this. The longer they leave it the more time we have to call for backup and outmaneuver them. If they can, they’ll try it now. I highly doubt it’ll come down to a shootout, but if it does this place is remote enough to mitigate civilian casualties. There’s only three other rooms occupied in this hotel.”

“Good,” Steve says. “Let them try.”

“If they do,” Natasha says, fixing Barnes with a look, “Soldier. In an emergency, if HYDRA shows up, can we rely on evacuating in the ship?”

Barnes’ face deadens all the way back down again. “In an emergency,” he says, “we fucking kill them all. And the ship helps.”

Natasha looks satisfied. Sam can’t say he isn’t either. The spaceship seems less like a state of the art combat aircraft and more like a drunk hippo on a really thin leash, held by a guy whose mental and physical wellbeing can most generously be described as doing its best. But it’s way better than nothing. If HYDRA or AIM or whatever they’re calling themselves sends in a Russian merc team with AKs then hell to the fuck yeah Sam wants Barnes to go Death Star and laser them into oblivion.

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Steve considers his shield but in the end just takes a Colt out of his duffel, using the hip holster Wilson hands over with a pointed look. When Barnes tries a similar pointed look at the hotel stairs, Steve just pushes the elevator call button on the landing again. “We’re not taking the stairs,” he says firmly. “You need rest.”
Barnes narrows his eyes but acknowledges that he has neither the inclination nor energy to argue with Steve where one of the outcomes is Steve physically carrying him down to the ground floor. Barnes gets in the elevator, but he keeps his face down and away from the shitty cut-rate camera in the elevator corner, pulling on Steve’s shirt until he stands the right way to keep his face out of frame too. That makes Steve give him another stupid-looking smile, like Barnes gave him a present by physically dragging him to better opsec.

Steve brought him books and chocolate. He knows for sure that’s what Barnes likes, so that’s what he brought him. He’s doing the same thing Barnes is, grasping at what little intel he has and running with it as far as he can. They’re exactly the same.

Does Steve also think he has nothing to give.

The open-mawed feeling is in his chest again, pointing him at Steve. Barnes glares at his own shoes. None of the sex memories are being helpful at all. Most of the time Bucky’s sex was initiated by rolling over on the mattress/cot/bedroll and sticking a hand into the pants/shirt/Captain America getup, but he can’t exactly do that now, can he, brain. He knows what he wants and he’s trying hard not to be scared of it which isn’t helped by the fact that he has no idea how to get it. The most he can do is bonk himself helplessly against Steve like a malfunctioning bumper car and hope he takes pity.

And he - it’s not sex he wants. He’s - pretty sure. He is ninety-five percent sure this is not an urge that’s coming from his dick.

He sidles closer to Steve and grabs hold of his belt.

“Buck? What’s the matter?”

Barnes’ brain, having identified the belt as the closest most convenient handhold, now appears to have stalled out entirely. He yanks his hand back and steps away, but Steve just turns towards him fully. He’s smiling. “You wanna come hold my belt?”

Barnes transfers his glare to him. Steve looks like he’s trying hard not to let the wattage of his smile exceed the hardware capacity limits of his face. “You wanna come hold my hand?”

Barnes stomps back over and grabs a belligerent handful of belt. “No.”

“Ohay,” Steve says. Barnes must be doing something right, because that stupid clown grin is only expanding. “You know, it’ll be easier to walk if we hold hands.”

The elevator gives a rusty ding and opens on the ground floor. Barnes stuffs his metal hand into Steve’s sweaty palm and tows him out of there.

That lasts for about eight seconds, because he’s still a half-healed gutshot wreck and Steve is not an easy man to tow. Steve just steps up and puts his arm around Barnes again, easy as anything, taking some of his weight, and keeps them going, out of the hotel and across the street that separates it from the car park. Barnes tries to focus on not tripping and sending both of them headfirst into the asphalt.

The car park structure also has an elevator. They take that to the top, where the rows of parking spaces are about half full. “On top of the elevator bank,” Steve suggests, his arm still around Barnes. “If we put it on the lot somebody might run into it. You’re gonna make it invisible, right?”

Barnes has the brief mental image of parking Motherfucker in the handicap spot and then saying no no, it’s alright, officer - I’ve only got one arm. He nods with his mouth shut tight to prevent
any undignified hysteria noises from getting out and focuses on the task at hand. It's not quite right, either. He's got two arms. One of them just got added later than the other.

Motherfucker’s been pingin him all day, but he knows how to make it stay put now; it thrills up in his head as it feels him pay attention to it. He closes his eyes and feels himself go heavier against Steve as he thinks about Motherfucker’s trajectory, that strange not-quite-a-map unrolling in his head. It’d make more sense for the ship to come in in a parabola, arcing up high and then coming back down like a missile. Less chance of being seen that way. He can… probably swing that.

_Slow_, he thinks at Motherfucker, imagining a gentle drift through the sky instead of the desperate _now_ he’d flung at it on the mountain. _Very slow._

“Couple minutes,” he mumbles to Steve.

Steve rubs his shoulder. “Can you say that in English, buddy?”

“What?”

“I don’t know that one, pal.” Steve’s voice has gone strangely gentle. “I’ve got English, French, some German. Anything else and we’ll have to get a dictionary.”

Barnes turns enough to squint at Steve. “What are you talking about?”

“There we go,” Steve says, looking weirdly relieved. “You weren’t speaking English there for a minute.”

“What,” Barnes says flatly. Christ, he’d thought language roulette was _over._

Steve starts rubbing his shoulder again. “Does that happen a lot?”

“I don’t know,” Barnes presses his flesh hand hard to his eyes. “When I talk to civilians. It comes out right. The right language.”

“It’s alright,” Steve says. “It’s only happened once so far, that I’ve seen. When you came in all drugged. That time I’m pretty sure it was Russian. And right now you were - talking with the ship, right? It makes sense your brain might get confused what language you’re using.”

“I couldn’t tell,” Barnes says unhappily.

Steve pulls him in further, into a sideways half-hug. “It’s okay,” he says, his voice sounding even deeper this close to Barnes’ ear. “You brain’s healing, right? It’ll go away. And in the meantime I’ll learn some new languages. Finally become an educated man, just like you always wanted.”

Barnes grunts. The frustrated, inarticulate urges are back again, this in the form of wanting to pull Steve’s shirt over his head like a blanket. Where is this shit _coming_ from? As if that’s a viable solution to _any_ problem, let alone this one. For god’s sake. It wouldn’t even keep off _rain._

Luckily Motherfucker chooses then to come gliding down, its pings doubling in frequency as it feels itself getting closer to him. _Good,_ Barnes thinks at it, then _SLOW I SAID SLOW_ when its _!!!!!!_ translates into a burst of speed.

Steve looks up then, even though the ship is invisible, though it makes sense that Steve can feel the same vibrations he can, if the faint engine sounds he’s hearing isn’t just more of his alien psychic brain bond and just the physical effects of the serum. Barnes shuts his eyes and tries to think through Motherfucker’s brain and brings it to a stop at the corner of the car park, coaxing it
foot by jerky foot to the top of the elevator bay. This must be what it’s like to try and drive an airliner by remote control.

"It’s done?" Steve asks when Barnes opens his eyes; he’s looking almost but not quite at Motherfucker’s back end.

Barnes nods. “Let’s go back inside,” Steve says. Barnes nods again. Then, “Wait,” he says, and disentangles to go and get his bag of hair stuff. If he doesn’t get a real bath soon he might as well just bury himself in dirt and become a fucking turnip.

Steve trails after him, making a noise like he might say something when the hatch opens for Barnes, and he thinks briefly that it must look ten kinds of strange to see him walk into something invisible, the hatch opening like a dark hole onto thin air. It brightens inside as he goes, the grey lights responding automatically even though he knows his way blind, even with everything so recently shaken around.

Picking up the hair bag uncovers his security mods laptop. He crouches down next to it - which is a bad fucking idea that takes nearly a full minute and ends with him gasping, clutching the wall and sitting on his ass - but he’s thinking. He might be a grade-A homeless looney tune with a brain made of warm tuna, but he \textit{can} give Steve things. Better security, for one.

He climbs back out of Motherfucker with the hair bag and the laptop under one arm. Steve takes both immediately, and Barnes lets him; it’s humiliating that carrying that for less than a minute made him feel like lead weights were hanging off his shoulders, but it’s what he has to work with right now.

He can pay some of it back, at least. “Gimme your phone,” Barnes says, as they go back through to the elevator bank.

“What for?” Steve says, but he’s already reaching in his pants.

“So I can show you how to put security on it,” Barnes says.

Steve brightens up considerably, then gets a look on his face like he’s about to be clever. He holds the phone to his chest, like he’s holding it back. “On one condition,” he says.

Barnes eyes him warily. Steve is still smiling, but the bastard will absolutely press an advantage if he gets one, and Steve tends to press where it hurts whether he means to or not.


Steve nods at the hair bag. “Let me wash your hair.”

Barnes’ body, entirely without asking, shivers from head to toe, and not just from relief either. “Fine,” he says roughly. It comes out sounding way too much like \textit{yes please}.

Steve looks like he just singlehandedly liberated Paris. He floats back to the hotel room, where Wilson and Widow are in the other room, audible through the half-open connecting door. Steve sticks his head in there to prove they haven’t been ambushed by Nazis and Barnes continues on to the bathroom.

He has to sit on the toilet lid when he gets there. Wilson and Steve have been applying the painkiller on some sort of shared mental schedule, so he hasn’t had to even think about looking for any himself. It doesn’t do anything for the fatigue, though, or the pervasive stiffness. At least he can walk. He could probably fight, even, though he’d pay dearly for it after.
That's unlikely to happen, even if only because it’d be a tie as to whether Wilson or Steve would knock him out first to keep him from reinjuring himself. Barnes hadn’t expected Wilson to be more than nominally invested in his wellbeing, but he keeps seeing the occasional flash of a look on Wilson’s face like Barnes is some kind of small but horrifically poisonous baby animal he isn’t supposed to find cute.

Barnes startles when there’s a knock on the bathroom doorframe, despite the fact that the door is open. Steve pokes his head in and holds up the bag of hair stuff. “Hair or phone first?”

They’re already in the bathroom, and Barnes feels like he’s starting to itch on the inside as well as the outside. “Hair,” he says decisively.

Steve comes inside and hands him the bag. Barnes starts taking everything out and lining it up on the counter, the motions familiar, almost a ritual now from all the bathtime nights in motel bathrooms. He doesn’t use everything every time, but taking it all out has been really good practice for making choices out of seemingly infinite options.

Steve goes and comes back with the waterproof bandage covers, setting them down next to the products with his eyebrows rising. He picks through bemusedly, occasionally holding up a bottle or jar like it’s some mystery artifact dug up from some strange archaeological site. Steve probably still washes his hair with hand soap. “You bought all this?” Steve says.

“Yeah.” Barnes thinks about telling Steve about the salesgirl, about how he thought he was killing her and fucking her at the same time. About still not knowing whether or not that - memory - was real. About dealing with what was real, learning how to fix his behavior, and how to apologize, and the fact that he could have those thoughts now, that there was room in his head for something besides survival and the mission. About how it was probably what made him listen when Widow said you’re killing innocent people.

That’s probably a talk for another time.

Steve gestures at his chest, and Barnes unzips the sweatshirt and unbuttons his cardigan. Steve crouches down to put the waterproof cover on him, his face serious as he carefully smoothes the edges of the adhesive on Barnes’ belly. His hands look dark against Barnes’ skin, more tanned than they actually are, but then again Barnes would make a sheet of paper look swarthy right now. He hasn’t exactly been putting himself under the sun.

It never even occurred to him to care before, but now he wants to cover it up. His stomach is practically blue even without the bruising and random patches of regrown hair; his veins all stand out like strange lumpy wires in his forearm and neck and legs. He looks like something that crawled out of a crypt. And Steve’s touching him, carefully taking the purple cardigan off like Barnes doesn’t look like the larval stage of something that lives under a rock.

He’ll have to fix that too, while he’s away. He’ll sit in some sun. Wear something that isn’t denim or canvas or Kevlar neck to ankles. That’s what normal people do. Normal people also wear shoes that aren’t reinforced boots, though Barnes suspects he’s going to have to work up to that one.

Steve’s in just his jeans now, folding up their clothes at the sink. “You wanna get the water running?”

Barnes nods, levering himself up, but then he has to stop, looking at the shower. They’ll be naked in there, together. It’s not really a consolation, somehow, that Steve won’t complain if Barnes decides to bring along his shower knife.

And Steve kept trying to talk to him about sex, which Barnes is certain about even if he’s still not
a hundred percent clear on the details of that conversation.

Better to tell Steve now and avoid a repeat. It’s important to communicate clearly about things.

Barnes has stood there for too long. “Buck?” Steve says, putting his hand carefully on Barnes’ metal bicep.

“I can’t,” Barnes says, and stalls out. He tries again, not entirely sure what he’s trying to convey but knowing it’s important. If he’s going to be Bucky Steve has to know this sooner or later. “I can’t really. My dick doesn’t work.”

Steve’s hand twitches on his arm, a movement so small Barnes wouldn’t have felt it if he hadn’t been looking at it. “That’s. Fine,” Steve says, sounding like he’s trying to be calm and comforting and failing, like a killer robot trying to read a bedtime story to a nervous toddler. “Buck, we’re - this is just a shower. Nothing else. I was gonna just stay out here. I can wash your hair from outside the tub.”

That’s not what Barnes meant at all. He doesn’t think they’re gonna fuck now. Steve’s already so wound up about the gunshot wound he only fucked Barnes in the first place on accident. And what does he mean, from outside the tub? Barnes has an extremely clear idea of what Steve washes my hair means, he realizes, and it’s Steve standing next to him, letting him use his brand new shoulders as a chin rest. Barracks showers. Officer showers, where they went when everyone was asleep. Because Bucky was a sergeant, and couldn’t wash there during normal hours, technically.

If Bucky got that, he gets it too.

Barnes looks at Steve, then pulls back the shower curtain and points. He doesn’t think he can explain it in any way that won’t come out word salad and in any case talk doesn’t seem to be making it through Steve’s skull at the moment.

Unfortunately Steve continues to look conflicted. “I just want you to feel safe.”

Barnes might’ve laughed, only if that happens he’ll start and never stop again. In some ways, he thinks, Steve is a hapless fucking idiot. “What the fuck do you think you’re gonna do to me, pal.”

Steve twitches a little. “I already… I mean, the day before, in the hotel -”

Barnes narrows his eyes. He suspects this is going to turn into another confusing roundabout conversation where Steve sticks his foot in his mouth up to the hip. “Are you gonna wash my hair or not,” Barnes says.

Steve shuts his mouth. “Yes,” he says. “Yes. I will.”

They start the shower. Steve covers the spray with his hand until Barnes has his back to it, angled so his injured side is shielded and turned away. Steam starts to fill as Steve strips his pants off, then his shirt. He’s got long rangy thighs like a racehorse, stuck on top of gigantic bony feet and equally sticklike calves. Barnes squeezes his eyes shut briefly, sorting through images superimposing behind his eyes. Tiny hips, tinier waist, still no ass to speak of. Shoe size the biggest thing about him, besides maybe his nose. Short Steve, Big Steve. Hasn’t changed.

Steve turns to step into the tub, naked now, and there’s the difference. From neck to navel it’s just miles and miles of meat interspersed with the occasional nipple. His ribcage is huge, like his racehorse legs only grew out that long because they had to match his racehorse lungs. There’s some golden fuzz between his pecs and more cropping up below his bellybutton, going redder the further south it goes. He’s as ginger as ever between the legs, practically orange, and there’s no
sign of the ball-shaving adventure, though Barnes supposes it’s been more than long enough for everything to grow out.

“Which of these goes first?” Steve asks, apparently oblivious to Barnes’ staring, offering up an armful of hair bottles.

Barnes has to blink a lot. He knows this. “Conditioner,” he manages. “To detangle. Start with the ends.”

Steve puts all the other bottles down and unscrews the conditioner top instead of just popping open the little thing in the lid, but then he dumps out a bunch on Barnes’ head and it doesn’t matter. His hands are so big that the two of them cover practically Barnes’ whole skull. Steve strokes carefully down his scalp, over his ears, and Barnes feels an alarmingly large portion of his thought processes fizzle out into nothing. It’s terrible. It’s beyond stupid. This sort of thing shouldn’t be possible with ears.

Steve shifts closer. They’re almost the same height. Steve’s face is right there, mouth slightly open in concentration as he works the conditioner into Barnes’ hair. Steve’s hair is too long, flopping everywhere, and his eyebrow hair goes every which way. His eyelashes are longer than they look. They go blond at the tips and that makes them nearly translucent, invisible unless you’re close up. Unless they’re made up. Barnes knows, suddenly, exactly what that looks like.

“You,” he says, trying to sort out the memories, the knowledge. “You did makeup. Sometimes. There was… lipstick.”

Steve looks at him, big-eyed, his hands slowing down. “You remember that?”

Barnes grimaces. “Some. There’s a lot of. Pieces.”

“Yeah,” Steve says softly. His hands start moving again, massaging; Barnes’ brain skips some tracks and makes his eyelashes flutter. Steve keeps talking like it’s nothing. “Yeah, there was lipstick. I started running with some Village folks when I was seventeen, and, well, one thing led to another. I dressed up a few times, went to some bars. I figured, I’ll never be a real man anyway, so why not go the other way instead. Why not try.”

“You liked it,” Barnes says. He doesn’t know what to say about not a real man, or even what to think about it. Steve’s the realest thing in the world.

“You liked it,” Barnes says. He doesn’t know what to say about not a real man, or even what to think about it. Steve’s the realest thing in the world.

“Yeah. It was nice, you know? Everyone was real nice. It was fun. And when I showed you, you uh. You thought it was pretty swell too.”

Barnes closes his eyes. He knows what Steve’s talking about here. The memory had come back, or the knowledge, or enough bits that he knows it’s kicking around in his head. “There was a woman. She…” He frowns, bringing his hand up to rub at the growing ache in his forehead. Steve’s hands have slowed down again. “She put lipstick on me?”

“Peggy,” Steve says. “Peggy Carter. That was, ah. Our first time all together.” He’s going a little pink but his smile is fond, going sweet. “She’s alive, you know. I called her just last night. She’s - ” here Steve breaks off, his face doing something complicated like he wants to laugh but also slap himself for it. “She has Alzheimer’s. So she has a lot of memory problems too. But she’ll remember you, I bet. I promised her we’d come visit.”

“Carter?” Barnes says. That’s sparking off something, a sense of confidence, wariness. Awe. A memory: a square-jawed woman in a petticoat smashing an SS officer across the face with her own shoe and then following him down to the ground, hitting him again and again and finally
choking him, bearing down with her bare hands. “Crazy,” Barnes says, marveling. “Fucking
crazy.”

Steve laughs. “That’s right,” he says. “Peg is - she’s really something. She was the first girl I was
serious about. First one who was serious about me, rather.” Steve’s smiling again, a softer version
of the supernova smile but no less bright. “She told me she wanted me when I was… well, before
the serum.”

“You were short,” Barnes says. The knowledge is opening up as he says it. “This short.” He holds
his hand out flat.

“Maybe not that short,” Steve says, but he’s still smiling.

“I wanted to be blond,” Barnes says. The path of the memory in his head is narrow but it doesn’t
fracture, just keeps going, unrolling. “Like you. I wanted to look like you. Or. I thought I did.”
These memories are curiously almost seen from outside himself, like Barnes is looking at Bucky
looking at a younger version of himself. All of them looking at Steve, shiny and blonde and
looking out at the world like do I need to pick up a brick. “He didn’t know what it meant.”

Steve starts stroking the suds out of Barnes’ hair, but his face has gone all complicated again.
“Why do you think it’s different?”

Barnes drags his attention back from the droop of Steve’s fringe in the mist of the spray. “What?”

“You said he, just now,” Steve says, almost gently. “Like you said before. That you aren’t Bucky.
Why do you think you’re someone else?”

Barnes looks down, at where their feet are nearly ankle deep in water from the hotel tub’s less
than stellar drainage. Steve doesn’t sound accusing, or angry. And he meant it when he said call
yourself Marlene, anything. Barnes knows he meant it. How can he explain. ‘I just know’ sounds
stupid to him even in his own head, but - what can he say? I know I’m not Bucky, because if I
was, I’d stop fucking haunting myself?

His arm calibrates, the plates rippling open and then snapping shut in a wave, like a cat stepping in
a puddle and then shaking off, outraged to find it full of water. “How do you know,” he asks,
slowly. “How do you know who you are?”

Steve’s hands slow again, his eyebrows drawing down. “Me - personally?”

“Yeah.”

Steve takes the question seriously. Barnes doesn’t know why he expected anything else. Steve’s
hands are still moving in his hair but much slower now, just an automatic sort of stroking on either
side of Barnes’ neck. “I guess I just know,” Steve says finally, his face serious. “That’s not very
helpful, huh.”

Barnes shakes his head, but just a little so he doesn’t dislodge Steve’s hands. He’s relieved, he
thinks. At least Steve is on the same track. “Me too. It’s. I know.” His right hand rises up to
gesture, half hopeless. “I just know.”

Steve stands there thinking for a while, his thumbs stroking against Barnes’ neck. “I get what
you’re saying,”’ Steve says finally, and he gently draws his hands down Barnes’ shoulders and
arms. “But. Look. I can only speak for myself. And I don’t know what it’d be like, if I had my
memories taken. But I know - Buck, if I’d lost my memory, and - did things I wouldn’t have done
before, and if a hundred years passed… would I still be me?”
Barnes stares at him. That's - it's a stupid question. It's not a question. It's - he can’t not. He can’t imagine a, a Steve without Steveness, a sky without sun.

“You’re no different,” Steve says, squeezing gently at Barnes’ arms. “I’m not gonna tell you what to do, but - when you say you’re gonna be Bucky, to me, you already are. Even if you change, that’s still you. I’m not the same guy I was ten years ago. Nobody is. And,” he hesitates, then plows on, “I don’t want to tell you how to be, but I gotta say, you really haven’t changed that much. Fundamentally, I mean. You’re still…”

Steve’s mouth curls up in a smile, small but warm. “You’re still trying to take on everything yourself, and do it all, until something hits you hard enough that you don’t have a choice about getting help.”

Barnes blinks, feeling like he’s been shaken out of a daze, then narrows his eyes. “Same as you,” he says pointedly.

“Yeah, we’re a matched set,” Steve says, atrociously fond. “I meant it about your name, you know. If it’d feel better for me to call you anything else, just say the word. Don’t feel like you have to go around with a name like Bucky just because I thought it was the funniest thing in the world when I was nine.”

“You?” Barnes says, caught off guard. “You gave the name?”

“Yeah,” Steve says. “You were Jamie to your family and James at school. I was pretty much the only person calling you Bucky.”

“Oh,” Barnes says. That’s - that feels bigger than it should be, that Steve gave him the name. That it’s something Steve gave him, not an immutable iron part of Sergeant Bucky Barnes.

Barnes has to look down again, at their submerged feet and wet hairy shins, at their bellies, where he looks like a plucked chicken next to Steve’s reddish gold. He doesn’t know if he agrees with all of what Steve said about being yourself, but it’s not like it sounds wrong, either. He can’t deny part of him wants it to be true: that he’s not an imperfect copy or a diminished replacement, just a different version. That he is a point on a smooth evolutionary line, instead of a series of stuttering breaks.

Steve is giving him the name again, freely. Barnes has just as much a claim to it now as Bucky - Bucky the first. After all, how many Jameses are there? How many Steves? It’s not like there’s a limited supply in the world. Plenty of people share names all the time. Why shouldn’t there be another one? To Steve they might be the same, and for Barnes - it doesn’t have to be a theft.

If he can tell it to the ghost, somehow.


“Is that what you go by?”

Barnes opens his mouth, but he doesn’t want to lie. He’s introduced himself as… himself before, but Steve calling him Barnes would be… not right. “It will be,” he says, finally.

“Alright,” Steve says softly. “Bucky it is.”

He checks the bandage cover to make sure nothing is seeping through and proceeds to wash down the rest of Barnes. He probably doesn’t mean for his touches to be as - as heavy as they are, not with weight but with the way he moves, like he’s constantly in the middle of unwrapping a precious gift. His hands slide over the backs of Barnes’ ribs and down to his hips, slippery with
leftover conditioner, his face intent, touching like he wants to be able to carve him out of marble later, like he wants to know him blind.

Barnes gets another full-body flash of Steve’s… everything, the entire image, data parcel, whatever, that Motherfucker caught up the instant he smacked against their hull. Steve doesn’t have that for Barnes. This is the closest he can get.

The thought makes Barnes step forward, just a bit, leaning into Steve’s touch. Steve looks startled and then gooey, his hands sliding back up, and he steps in closer too. He palms more soap and rubs down Barnes’ flesh arm all the way to the palm, spreading the fingers and massaging his wrist, his knuckles and joints. He’s gentler with the metal arm; it sealed up against the water so Steve’s palms slide slick over the seams, holding his forearm in the spray to rinse off the soap. When his hands come back up Steve’s eyes are on Barnes’ shoulder.

“This looks rough,” Steve murmurs, tracing his fingers carefully around the scar tissue on Barnes’ left pectoral. His face is serious, the lines on the side of his nose more apparent, the water clumping his eyelashes and making his eyes look more blue. He looks sad.

“It’s healing,” Barnes offers, hesitantly. It’s getting easier and easier to tell Steve things, to watch his face change. “I think.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Couldn’t feel my nipple until last week.”

Steve glances up in surprise. “Really?”

“Really.”

Steve looks back down at his chest, and his expression changes, just a bit, and Barnes has a moment of something like vertigo where he very clearly recognizes Steve’s I want to put my mouth on that face. In the next second the tips of Steve’s ears go pink, and Barnes feels his own ears start to heat up even as the familiar prickling dread gathers in his core. His body tenses and his right side reminds everyone that it very recently got a piece of metal slammed through it at very high speed. The pain makes his fists clench and his heart rate speed up and he clamps down on his breathing with a vengeance. If he panics about his penis in front of Steve he might as well just fucking die.

Luckily Steve glances up in the same second and looks equally mortified. “We’re not doing that,” he says, sounding a little strangled. “We are - not ready for that.”

He looks like he might try and extract himself from this shower again, so Barnes grabs onto his arm. “Don’t,” he tries. Steve seems to do better with one-syllable commands. “Stay.”

Steve stays. His face keeps doing an unhappy twisting thing though, like he’s got words wanting to come out and they’ll just hang out in his mouth tasting worse and worse until he speaks them. “I - look, I really am sorry,” Steve says. “I know it doesn’t feel like a big deal to you but it is for me.”

For a second Barnes has no clue what tangent Steve’s happy little mind could have possibly skipped to, but then he realizes he’s talking about the ass humping again. “You were asleep,” Barnes repeats, but things are making a lot more sense now. Steve thinks he hurt him, and… alright, if Barnes thinks about it from Steve’s perspective, it kind of makes sense. If Barnes woke up and found out he’d somehow fucked Steve without his conscious mind ever having been involved he’d probably have a fun little panic attack. Steve is handling this pretty well, considering. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”
“I tried to make it with you while you were gutshot and not even stitched up,” Steve says flatly.

“You were asleep,” Barnes tries again. This is the other other flipside of Steve’s unshakability: when he’s got some dumbass fucking thing stuck in his head the only way to get it out is with an ice pick. “It’s fine.”

Steve doesn’t look like it’s fine. He’s got a face on now like he’s found something Not Right and he’s got to set his teeth in and shake. “It’s just - you said we had sex. And when one person isn’t awake, that’s not really…”

It takes a second to sink in, but when it does the penny drops like a bowling ball through butter. “I know what rape is,” Barnes says sharply. Does Steve think he doesn’t understand. “It wasn’t that.”

Steve’s eyes widen and his mouth pinches. For a second it seems like he doesn’t know what to say, or there’s too much to say but none of it can come out. Then his expression firms. “Buck,” he says. “I think we might be... reading from two different hymnals, on some things. I just want to make it clear there’s no obligation. Even if you’re going to - be Bucky, that doesn’t mean you have to sleep with me, or anything else.”

“I’m your, your person,” Barnes says, maybe more belligerently than he should, the words running together, not coming out properly. “I can have sex with you if I fucking want to. You -” he stumbles - “don’t want to?”

The thought is sudden, searing in its clarity. Barnes has been a fucking idiot. That’s why Steve’s been backtracking so hard, talking about how horrible it was to hump Barnes in his sleep. “You don’t want me.”

Steve stares at him, shocked, and then his face goes - angry. “Buck,” he says, grabbing on tighter, closer. “Of course I want you.”

“It’s not - your fault,” Barnes tries. “I don’t - look like him -”

“You bastard,” Steve says. “It was never - I don’t care how you look. Who fucking cares how you look. I always want you. I don’t know how not to. You moron,” he adds more thickly. “All I do is want you. It’s been - such a fucking -”

He breaks off, breathing heavily, swallowing like it hurts. Barnes has never seen him this worked up. He doesn’t know what to do. “Fuck me or don’t, I don’t care,” Steve says. “I just want to be with you. Every damn day I’d - I’d think, what I wouldn’t give to talk to you. See you. I can’t stop. I tried. I’d have jumped off the train after you. I wish I had.”

For a second there Barnes can’t even process what Steve said, because it’s in the same class of statements as “of course I don’t need a helmet” and “let me just look down the barrel to see if it’s loaded”. He can hear what Steve is saying. He can hear what Steve didn’t say. He just can’t believe it. This is - this is gold medal stupid. This is world record dumb. This is that Darwin stuff Wilson was talking about. It’s got to be a joke.

He pushes back from Steve, staring. Steve’s face is blotchy and mulish and says it is very much not a joke at all.

Barnes smacks him on the arm. “Ow!” Steve says, surprised, then “Hey!” when Barnes smacks him again, this time with his left hand so it stings more. “Buck!”

“You are stupid,” Barnes hisses, all traces of pathetic feeling gone. “You are a stupid motherfucking idiot. You are dumb. You don’t get to kill yourself. You fucking kill yourself and I
will come after you and drag you out by your naked fucking balls.”

“I wasn’t! I didn’t want to - kill myself -”

“Try and lie to me again, Rogers.”

Steve at least has the dog conscience to look a little guilty. “You moron,” Barnes tells him. “You dumbfuck. Jump after me? What the hell are you talking about? If you wanted the most dramatic way to commit suicide why don’t you go hang yourself off the Statue of Liberty! Rogers! You stupid fuck! Why are you looking at me like that!”

“I’m not,” Steve says, his voice gone all knotted up. “I’m not, it’s just, it’s nice to be yelled at again.”

Barnes’ brain examines this and realizes it has no choice but to categorically reject all the word noises coming out of Steve’s mouth. “I am gonna give Wilson a big stick,” he says furiously. “And every time you even look like you’re having a stupid thought he’s gonna hit you with it. Hard. And then you will say, thank you Wilson, for enforcing the law of Bucky, and thank you Bucky, for enforcing the law of god. You imbecile. And I thought I had brain damage!”

Steve lurches forward and grabs him, and Barnes struggles automatically for a second before realizing Steve’s trying to crawl into him and also he’s crying.

The desire to dribble Steve’s skull like a basketball until the bad thoughts fall out evaporates and gets replaced by panic. An almost cartoonish Oh No blooms inside his head. If Steve’s hurting bad enough that he can’t pretend his emotions are just some distant atmospheric eruptions to be viewed through binoculars, then he is hurting bad, and Barnes is the one who did this. He has to fix it. He reaches up and pats cautiously at Steve’s hair, the plates sealing so the strands don’t catch. He tries to stroke like Steve did, slow and careful and reverent. Steve’s grip tightens, burying his face in Barnes’ neck. He’s swallowing over and over. The thought Steve doesn’t cry echoes like a commandment in Barnes’ head, immutable, and - Steve didn’t cry at his ma’s funeral, he didn’t cry when he got his nose broken when he was nine, Bucky only ever saw him cry twice and both times it was in fury, like he was mad at his own eyes. Right now it’s not like that. It’s not very obvious crying, probably someone who wouldn’t know him would just think he was breathing hard and swallowing a lot but Barnes can tell, Steve is crying, he broke Steve.

Then Steve starts saying, “Sorry, Buck, sorry,” and trying to pull away, which Barnes puts a stop to immediately by clamping down with every muscle he has and ramming Steve’s face back onto his soft shoulder. Steve makes some choking noises and then hangs on twice as hard. Barnes doesn’t know if it’s grief crying or anger crying or the kind where you finally skid around the corner and slow down and realize everything inside you is detonating. Either way all Barnes can do is grip harder. He can’t imagine letting go.

The tears keep coming. Barnes’ brain activates emergency systems around minute three. As overwhelming as hugs are, he suspects it’s different for Steve and also it’s clearly not enough. He doesn’t know what to do. In the romance novels the suitors always comfort the crying heroine by kissing her and sweeping her up and then making mad passionate love under the stars/upon silk sheets/in her childhood bedroom. Barnes is not up for kissing nor sweeping nor mad passionate anything, and even if he were his body is unlikely to cooperate. And then his own eyes start to prickle, out of sympathy or guilt or just because they feel left out. What the fresh fucking hell.

He has to be logical about this. He has to get a grip. When Barnes needs to stop crying he takes out the ipod or reads a book. Steve doesn’t like music. They don’t have any books. Barnes needs to tell a story.
Easier said than done. What’s he got to tell? I got tortured, here’s how? He should just make something up.

“When we go to Brooklyn,” Barnes starts, haltingly. “When we live there. What... floor will we live on.”

Then he shuts his eyes in abject mortification. What floor will we live on. His imagination is fucking fired, which won’t be any great loss because it’s clearly a nonfunctioning component anyway. How far can he pull the brain damage excuse before even he starts wanting to smack himself.

“I guess - the top,” Steve says, giving one big wet sniff. “With roof access. For your ship.”

Maybe he’s so addled with grief that he doesn’t recognize how stupid the question was. Barnes has to take the opportunity and run with it. “Maybe - a yard,” he tries. He gets the feeling Steve would want a yard. “Or. A roof garden. So we can pretend it’s. A really... big... plant.”

That’s so stupid Barnes want to fill his mouth with glue so he can never talk again, but it makes Steve cough up a laugh. “We’ll say I took up sculpture,” he says, wiping at his eyes with one hand. “Plant some bushes around it and call it my art. Put one of those little plaques next to it. If anyone comes around asking I’ll talk about postmodernist immediatism and psychogeography until they go away.”

Barnes understood about ten percent of that, but it does bring up the damn alien problem. “Fuck,” he says. “The radiation. Does that mean we have to live in Manhattan.”

“Fuck no,” Steve says, sounding much more himself, swiping at his nose. “I’ll bury a Chitauri corpse in the backyard. The way Stark was talking they’re still finding them under every other bench up there. They won’t miss one or two,” and Barnes barks a laugh, the two of them sounding like hacking pelicans together.

“God I missed you,” Steve says, his eyes back on Barnes' face, not quite crying anymore but not better either. “I missed you, Buck, I missed you so fucking bad,” and Barnes tries to open himself up further, bring Steve closer, say with his body what can’t make it out of his mouth.

He has to cover the bases, though. “Don’t try to kill yourself,” he says, but under his breath so Steve doesn’t malfunction again. “I mean it.”

“I wasn’t gonna,” Steve says mutinously, but he’s still sniffing so Barnes ignores him and squeezes him tighter.

“We’re just getting this fuckshit sorted out. Don’t. Don’t fucking try it.”

“I said I wasn’t gonna.”

“If you do. What do I come back to,” Barnes says, which makes Steve jerk like a kicked dog and upgrade his cling to more of a strangle.

“I won’t. I swear I won’t,” Steve says, and Barnes shuts his eyes and hangs on right back. It didn’t feel good to say but he had to say it. He has to make sure. Sometimes Steve’s big beautiful head needs a chisel and not just anyone’s will do. Steve’ll listen to him. Barnes will make sure of it, until Steve doesn’t feel like dying is an option anymore.

This is something Steve needs, too. He can give this too.

-o-
Steve manages to pull himself together enough to get them out of the shower and into some towels. Buck keeps looking at him from the corner of his eyes like any minute now Steve is gonna come apart again, but he also doesn’t let go, so Steve can’t feel bad enough about it to regret it, even if he should. Buck’s got enough to deal with without Steve’s kick-line of issues coming down on top, no matter how good it is to have Buck’s eye on him again. He sticks close all through toweling and reapplying pants, and puts his hands on Steve’s shoulders when Steve crouches down to check out his bandages again.

The waterproof cover held, so Steve leaves the bandages on and carefully wipes away the remaining droplets of water dripping down from Bucky’s hair. The conditioner did get a lot of the tangles, but somehow that only made it look bigger than before. Bucky tolerates Steve giving his head a final pass with the towel and rubbing more carefully at his beard, all the while with his metal hand locked around a handful of Steve’s pants behind his knee.

“Let’s go to the bed?” Steve suggests, and Bucky nods, turning to collect up his hair things.

“I got you some more clothes,” Steve says when Bucky comes shuffling into the bedroom. The convenience store did have a clothing section, where the only pants were women’s leggings, size small, and the only shirts were a couple of vomit-colored sweatshirts with PARIS embroidered across the chest, next to an appallingly twee applique patch of the Eiffel Tower. But the sweatshirts were fleece-lined and zip-up, so Steve bought the biggest one and told himself it was practically a disguise in and of itself. Absolutely nobody is going to think Winter Soldier if they see that coming down the street.

Bucky’s face very clearly says it belongs as an item of cat bedding, but he lets Steve help him into it anyway. He sits on the edge of the bed and Steve climbs up behind him. Bucky turns slightly, tracking him, so Steve settles more to his side, more in his field of vision, and Bucky hands him a steel comb and a bright orange bottle of something called detangler.

Whatever is in there smells pleasantly fresh and makes Bucky’s hair slide easily through the teeth of the comb, though Steve still has to be careful and pick it apart with his hands when it snags on a knot. Bucky’s kind of sinking under his hands, his spine unbending and his shoulders going down. Steve hadn’t expected a Sergeant Barnes Special to hit him over the head like that, and while it’d been a dizzy mix of relief and familiarity to get yelled at Steve has to say this is - better. He doesn’t like it when Buck’s mad at him, he’s just missed it the way he missed all of Bucky.

And this is the new after, Steve thinks, where before Buck would let him make it up in kissing and now he’s letting Steve comb his hair. It feels good to do it. It feels good to touch Bucky slowly, calmly, helping him with this thing and feeling Bucky so close, his hair cool and smooth between his fingers and his big body between Steve’s knees. He works methodically, one section at a time, until he parts the hair over the nape of Bucky’s neck and sees the scars again, evidence of surgeries over and over, cutting into Bucky’s skull. A lot of the scars overlap.

Fucking trigger words. Steve had read the files, what was available. There hadn’t been anything about the words. He thought he knew the kinds of things they’d done to Buck, that he had been prepared for what Buck might be struggling with, but it’s like there’s always a step further down to go.

Of course, you wouldn’t put that kind of information in files, he thinks bitterly. If you’ve managed to shove a control switch into - into someone’s mind - you keep that to yourself. Otherwise someone else might use it against you. And now the spaceship, too. It’s saved Bucky’s life but Steve can’t help but think of how Bucky has had to curl up like a pillbug every time he kickstarts the damn thing. He bends down and presses a kiss to Bucky’s head, the damp skin and wet hair cool against his mouth. Bucky’s brain is in there. Steve wishes, absurdly, that he could cup it in
his hands, as if he could smooth away everything HYDRA did if only he could hold it in his palms like a pet rabbit.


“Fine,” Bucky says hoarsely.

“Do you get headaches?” Steve asks quietly, starting to comb through Bucky’s hair again.

Bucky shivers again, and this time it takes Steve a second to realize it’s suppressed amusement. “Sometimes I don’t get headaches,” he says, sounding so much like himself that Steve’s hand catches in his hair.

“Buck,” Steve says, and then manages to wrench himself back to something like a reasonable train of thought. “We should get that looked at. In a way that doesn’t involve lying in another damn metal tube, I mean.”

Bucky shifts uncomfortably. “It’s a lot better now.”

“It was worse before?”

Bucky shrugs. “Everything was worse before,” he says.

“Are you okay, Buck, really?” Steve’s mouth twists. What a fucking question. “Physically, I mean. You’re eating alright, aren’t you?”

It’s true what they say: sooner or later you turn into your mother, Steve thinks, but Bucky considers it seriously. “I throw up a lot,” he says haltingly. “Less now. I googled it and it says that’s bad because it brings stomach acid to my esophagus. But I guess I heal fast enough it doesn’t matter.”

Steve can’t help but pull Bucky to him, and despite twitching a little bit Bucky lets him. A second later his metal hand fumbles against Steve’s side before getting a fistful of pants over his thigh. Steve kisses the top of Bucky’s head again. “What else hurts?”

“I’m a lot better now, Rogers.”

“What else,” Steve repeats, in a different tone. “If you keel over because of some injury you’re ignoring, what do I come back to?”

Bucky actually looks shocked that Steve could use his own point against him, which has happened every single time it happened despite the fact that Steve had done it all the time. But he concedes this time too, his face settling, thinking about it. “I think. Only my brain,” he says, like he’s beyond disappointed that he’s got a couple problems here and there despite surviving literal decades of horrific torture. “And all the ways to be normal. I think it’s gonna be for the best,” he mutters. “Me having time before I go back to… society. I gotta learn how to be a person. I can’t be just some crazy you bring home.”

“You’re not,” Steve says immediately. “You are a person. Who cares if people think you aren’t normal. We aren’t.”

Bucky gives his left eyebrow a flat look from three inches away. “Widow told you. It’s gonna be a circus. I come back with you now. Like this. Then what?”

Steve feels his fists clench even as he knows it’s useless. He does know. There’ll be an uproar when he returns, even if it’s just people starting to see him around DC or Brooklyn again. How
will Buck be able to settle down in the middle of that? And if Bucky already feels - off balance, it won’t help.

Steve swallows hard. He remembers his ma’s funeral, feeling each helping hand like another weight on the debt he already couldn’t repay. He remembers those weeks staying rent-free in the Barnes home when things had gotten bad, tiptoeing through the rooms, feeling half criminal and half ghost. He doesn’t want Bucky to feel trapped or cornered. If coming home with him now will make Buck feel like a - a headcase, like hard charity, then Steve won’t make him go.

“Call me,” Steve says, and he knows he sounds too grasping, too desperate by far. “Write me letters. Emails. I don’t care. Anything. Whatever you want. But don’t shut me out. Don’t you shut me out.”

“I’m sorry,” Bucky says, trying to look more at Steve's face but not quite making it. “I didn’t know. I remembered - wrong. I didn’t know. I’d have - come sooner -”

“Don’t apologize,” Steve says fiercely, pulling Bucky closer even as the horrible little part of him inside says make him promise, make him swear, now’s the chance, whatever it takes. He buries it hard. “You’re here now. That's what matters. You'll be here.”

Bucky tugs back enough to look up at him, straight on, his eyes huge and blue. “I’m coming back,” he says, like he thinks maybe Steve doubts him. He swallows. “Six months, I’ll come back.” He knocks his fist against the center of his chest this time. “This. This wants to eat you.”

“Good,” Steve says, savagely. “Good. I - the same. Me too.” He has to squeeze Bucky again, burying his face against his wet hair. He wants to say, Buck - let’s just do it. Let’s disappear. And Bucky will go with him. That's no the problem. The problem is Steve wants to think that he can, that all it’ll take is putting his shoulder to the wheel, but - what if he can’t? What if all it takes is one time, one security camera catching a frame of his face when he inevitably makes a scene? And he will. Buck’s life on the line or not, he will. Hasn’t everything proven that to him again and again? He has this second chance. For once in his life he has to make the decision that’ll be good for Bucky.

Steve had been pretty shit at taking care of him, before.

He’ll do better. He’ll work harder.

Bucky shifts in his arms and Steve reflexively tightens his grip, then loosens it the second his brain catches up with his body. Bucky doesn’t seem to notice, twisting up so he can face Steve and put his lips on Steve's.

It barely lasts any time at all, just a fast, prickly press, and immediately after Bucky ducks his head and emanates the deeply embarrassed aura of a cat that just misjudged its step and cartwheeled down three flights of stairs. It’s so exactly like the first time they kissed - the first time as teenagers, anyway, everything before the age of twelve didn’t really count, they’d married each other approximately fifteen times as eight year olds in the park - and Bucky had gone for Steve’s mouth and more or less bounced off it. At least this time he doesn’t immediately try again and smear the entire bottom half of his face against Steve’s.

It feels like whiplash but no less real for it. He pulls Buck closer and Buck immediately hides by pressing his forehead to Steve’s shoulder. Steve feels lightheaded with joy. “Can you believe,” he murmurs in Bucky's ear, ”that three different girls in the tenth grade went around telling everybody you were the best kisser in school? Me neither.”

Bucky socks him in the meat of his thigh. Steve squeezes Bucky like an oversized teddy, hiding
his grin in Buck’s hair. “It’s ‘cause you got all your practice on me,” Steve tells him confidingly.

“Is that why I’m so bad at it,” Bucky says, and Steve feels if he gets any happier it’s going to start coming out of his eyes and mouth and skin like some kind of slime. He’s going to spit confetti.

“Feel free to keep practicing anytime you like,” Steve says, putting his cheek on Bucky’s head. “I’m easy.”

“Nobody god or man ever looked at you in your goddamn life and thought easy,” Bucky grumbles.

“Well don’t go spreading it around, Barnes,” Steve says. “I got a reputation to keep. This here’s just for you.”

Bucky squeezes him back. It’s not the effortless embrace he used to give, the way he made all contact casual, comfortable, but it’s perfect. He's alive and it's perfect. Steve wouldn’t care if Bucky only ever wants to hug upside down and in clown costumes now. He’s aware that probably means he has pathetically low standards, but those judgments are made by people who don’t have a Bucky.

“I’ll fix your phone,” Bucky says into Steve’s shoulder. “And set you up secure email. And I’ll show you how. So. We can talk.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, reminded of the bed beneath them, the walls, the phone. Real life. “Yeah. Thanks, Buck. Here, let me pull it out.”

They detangle, Bucky moving just as slow as Steve, which is probably as much stiffness as it is any potential reluctance to let Steve go. Steve finds his phone and brings Bucky his tangle of cords and the laptop he’d brought out of his ship, and Buck spreads it out between his legs, taking the phone and plugging it into his computer.

“If you have to burn this phone,” Bucky says, in his this is how to do algebra voice, “here is what you do to secure a new one. Watch.”

Steve does his best to pay attention, thankful that his serum memory can compensate for the fact that he keeps getting hijacked by every inhale of Bucky’s scent and every motion of Bucky’s hands over the keyboard. The keys look tiny next to his fingers. His hands used to be a little smaller than Steve’s, even when he was a head taller, but Steve reckons it’s not true now. The metal one’s definitely bigger.

Steve watches the light of the screen turn Bucky’s face blue, reflecting off his expression going serious, intent, and picks up the comb again. Can’t hurt to do another pass.

Bucky allows it, scrolling through Steve’s phone. He occasionally hits a key on the laptop, but Steve can see progress bars on little download windows and figures they’re gonna sit for a little while. He strokes his hands through Bucky’s hair and tries to remember all the braiding Becca had them do for her and the twins when they were little kids.


“These ladies are funny,” Bucky says, showing Steve one of the photos in an unfamiliar app. It takes Steve several seconds to identify it as the Korean group chat Sam had muted for him ages ago. The photo looks like a cartoon of some kind of root vegetable with a face, making a pained expression at the lines of Korean text around it.

“I can’t read that,” Steve says, a little apologetically.
Bucky frowns at it. “Oh.” He brings the phone down, swipes his thumb across the screen a couple of times and then holds it up again. It’s a contact page, and the number Steve memorized as Bucky’s has been saved under Marlene.

Steve’s honking a laugh before he can catch the sound and make it a little less like a choking goose. Bucky’s so serious now, and every joke comes out unexpected enough that Steve feels like he’s doing a spittake every time. “That’s funny,” he says. “Marlene, huh?”

“Yes,” Bucky says. “That way. If you answer the phone in public. You can say it’s your girlfriend.”

“Well,” Steve says, because he’s not really sure he can lie in that way about Bucky, even if it is such a tiny thing.

“While I’m dead,” Bucky clarifies. “Fake dead. Until I come back as Widow’s civilian.” He frowns. “I don’t know what she’s going to do for my identity but it’s probably going to make her laugh a lot.”

“That sounds about right,” Steve says. “I’ll have to watch out that you don’t get named Abe Lincoln after all.”

“Ha.” Something on the laptop beeps, and Bucky checks it. “Here’s a list of drop emails,” he says, and shows Steve a text window with a list of ten or so. “Memorize them.” He holds up Steve’s phone. “If one or both or all the lines go down, I’ll contact you. Do you have a stable public number.”

“Yeah, here,” Steve says, remembering, and goes digging in the pocket of his discarded pants. “Here, for you - you can reach me at this number too, and this email. It’s secure.”

Bucky takes the note carefully, looking it over. “How long has this been in your pocket?”

“Way too fucking long,” Steve says. “Since Prague. I wanted to give you candy, too, but Sam ate it.”

Bucky huffs. “I don’t know if we can send packages. But. Maybe. Widow said she might do a back and forth.”

“Okay,” Steve says. “Hey. If you decide to do the deconditioning early after all. If you need to. Let me know, okay? I… maybe we can figure something out.”

“Okay,” Bucky says, looking at him. “And you.” He licks his lips, not quite looking uncertain but not sporting the patent Barnes Knows Best look on his face. “If things get. Bad. We’re a team now. You have to let me help.”

Steve kisses Bucky’s temple, helpless, and stays there, breathing in. “I promise.”

The laptop beeps again. Bucky reaches for it while trying not to move his head, so Steve pulls away a bit to let him move. He checks the bars, then disconnects the phone and hands it over. “It’s done?” Steve says, taking the phone and watching Bucky delete the emails and then the text window.

Bucky shuts the laptop. “It’s done.”

It’s late. They go to bed. It feels surreal, to bed down next to Buck. The softness of the hotel bed, the length of Buck’s hair, the new, fresh smells of his soaps and shampoos, all of it blending
together with the distant whirr of the hotel’s air systems, the faint sounds of cars outside the window. Steve can hear Sam and Natasha getting ready for bed through the wall, the door left cracked between their rooms just in case anything happens in the night. In front of him is Bucky, arranging himself on the mattress like it’s an unknown lifeform ready to swallow him at a moment’s notice.

He’s in Steve’s sweats again, his thick limbs stretching the fabric in new ways. His hair spills down between his neck and shoulder when he stretches his arm out to turn out the light, and then he’s just a presence, a scent, a warm shape moving to lie down in the dark.

Steve finds Buck’s metal hand and brings it to his face. He wants to kiss Bucky so bad but Buck hasn’t leaned in for it. Everybody keeps telling Steve not to push. He won’t. But Bucky seems to like touching Steve’s face with his metal hand, and he hasn’t pulled it out of Steve’s grip once. Whatever sensations he gets from it seem to be positive. Whatever he’s feeling seems to be worth it.

Steve presses Bucky’s hand against his cheek. Bucky moves his thumb, just a bit, but it’s enough of a stroke for Steve. The Bucky moves his thumb more. Steve closes his eyes. He thought he’d lie awake all night staring at Buck but sleep presses on him like a ten pound eiderdown, all the usual tail-chasing thoughts quiet, absent. Bucky’s right here and he’ll be here again and he wants Steve, wants to come back to him.

They’ll be alright.

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He dreams.

He’s in the heart of the city, surrounded by lights. The night sky is above full of radio/radio/heat/photons/radio and below him even more, energies of all kinds, a feast of elemental data. Nothing comes back null. People, walking through the streets, sleeping in their homes, electricity sparkling in their heads. In their hearts. He is idling in neutral, aware but not awake, no mission, no order to fulfill. The ebb and flow of electromagnetism washes across the planet in waves of invisible light.

Steve is there. The crystalline web of him moves to him, through him, inside him where his sensors don’t go and different senses take over. He can feel skin, and he can feel matter, and he can feel the pulse of blood and flicker of brain and heart. All of Steve, all his alloys and suspended particles and lights.

This memory will never corrupt or fade. None of him will, not anymore. Every part of him, every moment, everything he is now has been recorded in the core, and it can pass untouched through the heart of a collapsing star. His biological components might falter from time to time but they are not alone, they are not left to struggle by themselves anymore. In calm they see each other clearer. He sees himself clearer. He is bigger than he ever imagined. There’s more in him than he ever dreamed. His own crystal web, his own constellation, his own potential, unfolding like a flower, on and onward, light without end.

He comes to blinking, eyes wet. He doesn’t even know if he can call it waking up. The echoes, the knowledge, the senses more than his own are still inside him, more than a dream.

He turns his head to look at Steve, the motion automatic. Steve is a protruding nose and a tuft of blond half under the pillow, curled around Barnes. He inches out from under Steve’s arm one muscle group at a time, less from stealth and more from the fact that his body still feels like a couple of sandbags tied to some stilts. He’ll be right back, anyway.
He shouldn’t just up and vanish on Steve, though. He casts around until he finds the hotel notepad, then writes with ship on one of the stickies and carefully presses it into Steve’s palm. Steve doesn’t even twitch. He’s out so hard there’s a whole wet patch of drool at his mouth on the pillow. He must have been running on fumes for a good long while, if his body’s taking every opportunity to drag him down to dreamland. Barnes doesn’t doubt that if he was well rested he’d be lying here awake already, counting Barnes’ eyelashes under his breath. Barnes gives Steve’s ankle an automatic pat on his way out.

He creeps up to the roof, in the greyness before dawn, and goes blindly to where he can sense Motherfucker. It’s strange as fuck to - know it, see it, without using his eyes. He sits down beside it. It felt him coming and pinged him a couple of times coming up, but now it just hums next to him. It felt him coming and pinged him a couple of times coming up, but now it just hums next to him, content.

Barnes still doesn’t know how much of the… emotions crap is his own brain projecting, or… interpreting, whatever. He doesn’t know how much he actually understands versus what he just thinks he does. It really isn’t human. It’s probably not a person. And whatever he thinks of as person might not apply to it anyway. To Motherfucker his body isn’t much more than a sort of biological placeholder and it hardly notices the snowplow parked inside the garage beyond an unconcerned registry of a nearby unexciting set of molecule configurations. It barely notices the building. Its radiation intake isn’t impeded by the sun not being fully up; the background levels are incredibly low anyway, not even a trickle, but what’s there is scattered around, the particles bouncing into it from all over. It’s not - hungry, or lacking, or any other word Barnes can think of for describing discontent.

If it sits for a few months in some building in Midtown, it’s probably not going to feel any different. It wasn’t bothered by him making it stay up here. It doesn’t quite seem to understand things like time passing, even when it’s awake. And if Stark starts poking at it, trying things, Steve will be there. Steve will say, no you fucking don’t, if Stark tries to pick it apart.

Barnes leans his forehead against the cold metal hull. Motherfucker echoes the touch and passes it back to him, the sensors registering and returning like ripples in a pond. When it’s so quiet like this he can almost imagine it possible to keep it awake while he lies low and waits for Widow and Steve to make his continued existence possible. They haven’t had that many chances to just - be, when all’s said and done. He’d either been trying to figure out what the fuck was going on or shunting from mission to mission. There had always been something else going on, even if that something else was oh god what the fuck is the spaceship doing in my head now.

This was different. It had been beautiful, like seeing whole new kinds of stars. All of it, evaporating upward, the noise of a planet drifting up like steam.

He hasn’t slept much with Motherfucker awake after that deeper merge in that firefight over the ships. Only twice. It had been confusing and fragmented and alien both times, but neither of them had been nightmares. Two is barely a sample size, but it’s more than nothing.

It had been far from bad, dreaming starship dreams.

It feels like something ripples in his attention, and Barnes realizes the Steve-marker in Motherfucker’s senses is moving. Two minutes later the rooftop door whacks open, startling him despite the forewarning, and Steve comes out shirtless, looking like he skipped the elevator and came up the stairs at Mach 2. He catches sight of Barnes and simmers down some. “There you are,” he says, coming over.

“I said I’d be here,” Barnes says. “I left the note.” He should’ve probably left more than a note. He needs to chivvy Steve’s crazy thoughts along out of his head again. “Did you cross the street
It’s Steve’s turn to narrow his eyes. “Let a guy have a neurosis or two, Barnes,” he says, coming over. “Can you blame me?”

Barnes can’t. He’s reminded, again, that for better or worse Steve doesn’t have a Motherfucker, to tell him all about his surroundings and let him know where the collection of molecules known as Barnes is at any given time. He looks up at Steve, who’s stopped over him, a complicated look on his face. Barnes reaches up.

Steve pulls him to his feet, bringing Barnes into a hug. “What’re you doing up here?”

Barnes thinks, talking, then, well, not quite. He gestures vaguely at the patch of nothing where Motherfucker is. “It can’t come with me,” he says. “While I’m out. So we have to stash it. Probably with Stark.” He rubs at his face. “Probably have to fly it to a rendezvous before I turn it off.”

“Turn it off,” Steve repeats, lines appearing in his forehead. “You’d be able to bring it back on from… wherever you’ll be, though. Right?”

Barnes shakes his head. “I can’t wake it up unless I touch the console. I think.”

“You’re not sure?” Steve says.

Barnes shrugs, scowling. “Maybe I can. But don’t know how. Didn’t come with a manual.”

“So if it’s off, you can’t remotely turn it on again,” Steve concludes. “And unless it’s on, you can’t call it to you?” Barnes nods. Steve frowns. “You can’t turn it off, Buck.”

“It’s in my head,” Barnes tries to explain. “I can feel things - through it. It’s - a lot. Too much, sometimes.”

“The headaches,” Steve says. “How bad is it?”

Barnes knows how to describe that headache isn’t quite the right idea, but he doesn’t know how to explain the dog and pony show Motherfucker has been running with his brain as the main stage. He still doesn’t even know what fucking happened. “I don’t need it,” he says instead. “It’ll be a distraction. It’s not worth it.” He hopes.

Steve’s mouth and eyebrows have joined forces to create a deeply unfair expression of unhappiness. “What if they are tracking the arm, and you need the ship to get away?”

Barnes manages not to flinch. Steve makes a very good point. Barnes doesn’t care anymore if Motherfucker is colonizing his brain with alien robot space nodes. It helped him throw his programming and changed his brain enough that their killswitches didn’t work. That’s worth a couple headaches.

But. It’s not just him anymore. If he wants the team to look out for him he has to look out for them too. Keeping Motherfucker awake might make it safer for Barnes, but there’s a very real chance that it’s a danger to others. What if he has a nightmare and it laser-murders everybody in a ten mile radius? He can’t guarantee it won’t happen.

“If it’s in the arm they’d have found me already,” he says out loud.

“Not if the trackers only work at close range,” Steve argues.
“Then they have to get close range first,” Barnes says. “I’ll stay on the move. They didn’t catch me before the ship either.”

“They didn’t have the detectors developed then,” Steve says. “Buck, I can’t let go on this. I - if it wasn’t - I lost you, Buck,” he says, and he’s keeping a lid on it but there’s a raw edge there that feels - permanent. “If we can do even one thing that’ll help prevent it happening again, I have to make it happen.” He’s looking Barnes in the eye, his face wide open again, horribly unguarded. “Please.”

Barnes looks at the ground. Instinct tells him if he looks directly at Steve now his argument will stop meaning anything and he needs to be able to think. But. It’s Steve. It’s Steve arguing for more failsafes.

“You keep it on,” Steve says, sensing his advantage. “You keep it awake, or - responsive, whatever. Just in case. If you need it, you need to be able to call it.”

Barnes chews the inside of his mouth. He has to do his part too and make sure Steve doesn’t fuck the details, no matter how strongly he feels on it. “If I freak out,” he says. “At all. It’s gonna bust out of Stark’s lobby and come to me.”

“Good,” Steve says. “If you’re in trouble, you need your ship.”

“Usually the trouble is I get a flashback because I smelled the wrong damn thing in the street or something,” Barnes says sourly. “It’d be false alarms every week.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Steve says. “I’d rather a hundred false alarms than one situation where you needed help and didn’t get it.”

Frankly me fucking too, pal, Barnes thinks. But it’s not just about him. “When I say bust out. I mean it. It’ll go through walls. And then - secret’s out.”

“Let me deal with that,” Steve says. “The way they talk on the news Stark is always blowing things up. We’ll say Hulk threw a tantrum, or one of Stark’s suits malfunctioned, whatever. I don’t fucking care, Buck. Keep it on.”

“What if I panic,” Barnes says. “And it hurts somebody.”

“Let me handle it,” Steve repeats, taking Barnes by the shoulder. “We’ll figure out how to make it safe. We’ll put it in a warehouse or something. Hell, Stark will invent a force field.” His hand feels enormous so close to Barnes’ neck. “All you have to worry about is taking care of yourself. Your only job is getting better.”


“We should talk to Natasha about it either way,” Steve says. “She knows about our rendezvous details. You’re probably right about having to fly it there.”

“Okay,” Barnes repeats. It’s - good. To not get stuck in details sometimes and have a captain that says, okay, we have a bigger picture. These are our priorities. He can deal with being a super extra special flavor of nuts: after all, he’s already been doing it. It won’t be all that different, probably. He’ll just have a more long-distance relationship with his crazy.

And this way he’ll be able to check on Steve.

Put like that, it seems like a pretty reasonable risk to take.
“Alright, man, how are we doing this?” Sam says, hands on his hips.

“Either you seal it up or clear it out,” Natasha says. “Even if Stark promises not to take a poke you don’t want anyone in there on accident.”

Bucky considers the open hatch of his spaceship. They’ve moved it to the second floor of the car park, so there’s at least nominal cover for the pre-rendezvous prep Natasha led them out here for. “Clear it,” he decides.

“Cool,” Sam says. “We can just put it all in a box and drop it off at the nearest used bookstore.”

“Not everything,” Bucky says. He looks at Steve, and his face doesn't quite make all the same expressions anymore but Steve can see the question there anyway. Steve nods. “I’ll hold onto it. Whatever you want to keep.”

“Great,” Sam says. “Been awhile since I helped a buddy move. We can even have a pizza party after. Belarus has pizza, right?”

“None that you’d want to eat,” Natasha says, and leads them off to gather necessary supplies.

Steve and Bucky are tasked with breakfast, which means they shuffle to the tiny cafe in the hotel lobby and Steve pays the iron-faced grandmother behind the counter after Bucky, watching him fail to read the menu for ten minutes, goes over and orders sandwiches for him in Russian. Natasha and Sam come back towing four giant suitcases, two of which are covered with an astonishingly hideous render of Mickey Mouse.

“They were on sale,” Natasha says, to Steve’s look.

“Because half of Mickey’s face looks like he stuck it in a blowtorch?” Steve says. Whatever method had been used to apply the image to the suitcase’s plastic shell had clearly run into serious difficulties in production.

“Probably,” Natasha says, taking Steve’s half-eaten sandwich out of his hand and biting off half of it. “Yoo’ be duh coowest kid going twoo customs.”

“Guess that means we need to do something else with the guns,” Sam says. “Mickey’s not scary enough to keep out TSA agents.”

Bucky looks back into the cabin from where he’s sitting in the spaceship’s mouth, then back at Natasha. “You want them?”

Natasha, still savaging Steve’s sandwich, looks briefly startled, almost caught. She forces down her mouthful and hastily wipes her chin, somehow managing dignity. “Yes,” she says, almost formal. “Thank you.”

Bucky nods and looks at Sam. “Do you want some too.”

“Nah, man, I’m cool,” Sam says, because he’s an example and a paragon. Steve couldn't even fake that kind of graciousness in a thousand years, let alone have it as genuine as Sam's. “Thanks, though. I’ll be on the same plane Steve is and you can’t mail guns.”

“Eh,” Natasha says, making a tilty hand gesture.

“Correction: we are not mailing these guns,” Sam says.
“I’ll keep them in Riga,” Natasha says cheerfully. “It’s good to have a weapon stash wherever you go.”

They sort things into suitcases. Books go in one; guns go in another. They might as well have gotten another one just for knives, because Steve just keeps finding more. There’s a flat fixed-blade one doing duty as a damn bookmark. “I swear your knives are having little knife babies every time we aren’t looking,” Sam says from where he’s surrounded by books outside the mouth of the ship, which is more or less exactly what Steve was thinking. “This is like bedbugs.”

“You can have them,” Bucky says absently, from where he’s sorting out something near his armory corner. Then he looks over at Steve, considering, and beckons. “I have things for you too,” he says.

Steve follows Bucky to his gun rack, where Buck pokes a stack of ammo cans with his foot. “Here.”

Steve crouches down next to them. “This isn’t bullets, is it?”

Bucky snorts. “Notebooks,” he says, then, “You can read them,” looking only halfway like he regrets having any words come out of his mouth.

“I don’t have to,” Steve says automatically.

“They’re not diaries, Rogers,” Bucky says, then mutters, “I can barely read them. They’re mostly from. Bad days.”

Steve looks up at him. Bucky’s giving this to him for a reason, and telling him about it too, instead of handing him a couple of locked boxes. “You want me to?”

Bucky shrugs, looking uncomfortable and turning away to pick up some more books and carry them over to one of the suitcases. That’s a pretty clear answer, if Steve’s going by the old Bucky lexicon, which seems more and more applicable with every day. He sits down and opens up the ammo boxes.

Right on top in the first one is a misshapen, fractured little electronic thing that Steve, after some turning back and forth, recognizes as a shattered ipod. He carefully sets it aside - Bucky clearly doesn’t think it’s trash - and keeps going. The notebooks below are exactly that: cheap things, cardboard covers and lined paper, almost all spiral bound. There’s a lot of them, stacked into the ammo cans six deep.

Steve pages through slowly. The notebooks are… a mess. More than a few have bloodstains on them. One stinks of ammonia, another of gunpowder. When he sees dates they’re all out of order. Around half of it seems to be in Russian, though Steve catches sight of German and French and an Asian alphabet he doesn’t recognize at all. When he tries reading a few of the more heavily populated pages he might as well be a dog trying to read the Rosetta Stone. And he’d thought the documents Bucky had left them on the USB drive had been incoherent.

It’s one thing to know that Bucky had to be pretty bad off, to stay away for so long, and another to hold the proof of it in his hands. Bucky had always been proud of his writing. In school his penmanship and essays got held up as examples to the class. If it had been Steve, with his memory shredded and barely able to string a sentence together, he wouldn’t have wanted to show up before Bucky either. It’s not that he can in any way imagine Bucky capable of disdain, but Steve, he’d feel… ashamed.

The vicious little bits of him that think things like why’d you fucking run from me and why didn’t
you come back sooner are quieter now. Steve wishes they didn’t exist at all. But they’re hooked directly into the parts of him that look at things and say this isn’t fair, and then, this isn’t right. But at least he can see this, see all Bucky’s journals, and think, I understand. It’s not your fault. Things just turned out like this. Buck didn’t mean to run away from him any more than Steve meant to let him fall off the train.

“Steve?”

The world snaps back into focus. “What?”

Bucky’s standing right in front of him, one of the Mickey luggages at his feet. “It’s this,” he says. “My stuff. To hold onto.” He grimaces. “I can’t pick it up. Wilson yelled at me when I tried.”

“Really?”

Bucky grimaces deeper. “He yelled with his eyes.”

“He does have very expressive eyes,” Steve allows. Then he says, “Is this all?”

The luggage is barely full. It’s a few books, a handgun, some sealed boxes of smartphones, some ammo and the bag of things for Bucky’s hair, currently empty since the products themselves are down in the hotel room. “And the laptop. And the new books you bought me,” Bucky says.

“And I’ll get new things. More clothes.”

“Okay,” Steve allows. He stacks the journals back into the ammo, levering himself to his feet and putting it all in the luggage next to the rest. He looks down at it all again. Still not even close to full. You can’t take much, he supposes, when you’re on the run.

When Bucky’d shipped out for Italy he’d handed Steve his two favorite ties, for wearing, his dirty picture collection Steve drew him, because that definitely wasn’t staying where his sisters or ma could find it, and a stack of cash Steve never spent. He’d thought he’d be back, and he’d been trying to prove it, a little, Steve thought, by those things, telling the universe, look, it’s not goodbye, I’m coming right back. It’s not the contents of a will, it’s not his earthly possessions, it’s just a few useful practical things, here, hold onto this for me, just ’til I get back -

Whatever Bucky sees on his face upgrades his expression from concern to panic, and Steve turns his face away, clenching his jaw down hard. “I’m fine, it’s nothing, it’s just -”

Bucky lunges at him in a haphazard hug, hitting Steve mostly sideways and kicking an ammo box onto Steve’s foot. “Don’t cry,” Bucky says, sounding bewildered.

“I’m not,” Steve says, blinking fast, willing his tear ducts to reverse flow and then weld themselves shut to prevent repeat performances. What is wrong with him. He doesn’t know what Sam or Natasha are doing but he prays they’re on the other side of the ship having some amazingly absorbing experience with sorting books. “I swear. I’m not.”

“I’ll check in. Once a day,” Bucky says, holding tight to him. Steve squeezes his eyes shut. “At least once. I’ll. Send you photos.” He makes a dissatisfied noise under his breath. “Can’t send face photos. Not while I’m supposed to be - dead. Security isn’t perfect. Your phone is a primary target.”

“Okay,” Steve says, pressing his face tight against Bucky’s cheek. He sounds kind of congested, but at least the damn waterworks have been held off. What the hell is wrong with him. Bucky did come back, and before that, Steve came to him, and in any case Bucky is here now. Steve needs to be making it good for him now. “Send me photos of other stuff,” he says, dragging his mind back on task with both hands. “I’ll send you things too. And I can - I’ll use your phone for talking to
you, and my other one for - everything else. Like a decoy. Will that help?"

“Probably,” Bucky allows, gripping just as tight.

“I’ll talk to Natasha,” Steve promises. “She’ll teach me how not to accidentally text your location to the President.”

Bucky snorts, his grip shifting slightly but not pulling away. Steve feels the horrible disintegrating thing under his ribs again, no matter how much he tries to force it away. He wants to say, one more day. Isn’t there more he can give Bucky? Isn’t there more Steve can do? Let there be one more day.

But that’s crying two-year-old thinking again. The war, the Captain America shit, HYDRA, now this - the world has caught them up and refuses to let go of them, and the only way out is through. There are no shortcuts. The faster Steve does this, the faster Buck can come home.

If there’s a more bitter sentence than it’s for the best, Steve doesn’t know it. It’s all the worse when it’s goddamn true. It is for the best. If the world looks at them and says, this is how it has to be, Steve needs to be in a position to say no.

They go back in and finish up inside the hotel room, where Natasha checks things on multiple laptops and has Steve pour bleach all over the bloodstained blankets they’d brought with them along with everything else that might be used to confirm their identity. Sorting through, Bucky holds up his body armor, grimaces at the shredded hole in the side and looks at Natasha. “Do we need to give this to Stark.”

She glances over. “I'll ask,” she says. She looks Bucky over more fully. “Do you have a civilian disguise?”

Bucky looks down, then pinches his horrible PARIS sweatshirt and holds it out at her. Natasha nods approvingly, then says, "Wait here,” and disappears for thirty minutes. She comes back with a hiker’s backpack, out of which she pulls a pair of jersey shorts, black leggings, a red bandana and a bunch of colorful string bracelets.

"Jesus," Sam says, looking it over. "Is there some naked hippie grad student knocked out somewhere in the hotel right now?"

"None of these items will be traced back to us,” Natasha says soothingly, which doesn’t answer his question. “Here,” she says, putting it all in front of Bucky. “For extra cover, dye your hair blond and get dreadlocks.”

Bucky wrinkles his nose. “That’s not clean,” he says, but goes inside the bathroom to change clothes.

When he comes back out Steve can’t deny the disguise is effective. “Damn,” Sam says, surveying the results. “Hey JB, say g’day mate, I’m from Worralorabunga.”

Bucky shows him his metal middle finger. “You need papers?” Natasha asks, and Bucky ends up pulling out another ammo box and showing her the stacks inside: passports, documents, different bundles of cash. “Hm,” Natasha says, and picks through, but it all must pass muster because she nods and gives it back to him, and he puts it in the backpack.

Bucky’s belongings still end up seeming pathetically small, even though objectively Steve knows that’s a pretty big pack. There’s his change of clothes. A handgun and a bunch of knives. A medical kit that Sam had approved and stocked with all the remaining doses of Steve’s special painkillers. The bag of chocolates and the cigarettes Steve gave him. The hair stuff. Six books.
“You need anything, you tell me,” Steve says. “I mean it. Anything. I’ll mail it to a post office box. Set up a dead drop, or something.”

“Don’t pretend you know spy words, Rogers,” Bucky says. Steve can’t help but hug him again, thank god this time without any of the hysterics. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Natasha and Sam very politely pretend that they suddenly need to go have a private conversation with each other somewhere in the adjoining room. They’re true friends.

Bucky holds him back just as hard. He’s solid. He’s here. He won’t be, soon, for a while, but he’s coming back. He is. It’s not war this time. Steve’s not some wet-eyed green behind the ears shrimp, running reckless with his thumb half up his ass. And Bucky thinks this is the right plan. Buck’s always been tougher than Steve, but if Buck can do it, so can he.

“The faster we do it,” Bucky says in his ear, reading his mind, “the faster it’s done.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, making himself let go, one finger at a time. Bucky’s right. It’s not fair to Natasha and Sam to keep subjecting them to Steve’s opera of tragedy, either. “Let’s get it done.”

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Barnes catches him when Steve’s out taking their bleached stuff to a dumpster, a phone in his hand. “Wilson,” Barnes says. “I need your number. For the Darwin Awards project.”

“Oh, hey, yeah. Absolutely,” Sam says, pulling his own phone out. “Have at it, man.”

Barnes takes it, putting the number in, then looks up and makes something remarkably close to eye contact. “In return. I need you to help me too.”

“Okay,” Sam says cautiously.

“It’s about Steve.”

“Sure,” Sam says, less cautiously.

“If he even looks like he’s gonna do something stupid. Smack him. And then tell him, call Bucky and say thank you.”

“Oh,” Sam says, only half joking. “I’m supportive and all, but -”

“It’s so he doesn’t kill himself.”

“Ah,” Sam says. “When he looks stupid, you said?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be smacking him all day, then.”

“Use your best judgment.” Barnes holds the phone out back to him. “Widow. I mean Natasha. Will tattle to me too.”

“You talked to her?”

“She’ll know. I am an extremely valuable asset in managing Steve’s decisions and mindset. And she has plans.”

“Ri-ight,” Sam says.
“She’ll use it wisely,” Barnes says, in what’s probably supposed to be a reassuring tone.

“I know she will,” Sam says. “She knows you’re his friend. Our friend too.”

Barnes looks at him more sidelong, then cautiously offers his hand in a standard handshake position. “Thank you,” he says, formal.

Sam shakes it. “Back at you,” he says. “I’ll see you soon, aright?”

“Yes,” Barnes says. Then: “One more thing.”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

Barnes steps forward until his mouth is pretty goddamn close to Sam’s ear. “I know you’re lying about your car,” he murmurs, and as he steps away he gives the world’s most rigid wink.

-o-

They rendezvous with Stark and Rhodes in the shipyard, which is half modern working harbor and half a huddle of miserable wooden jetties that look like they were built back when joining the Crusades was a valid career option. The only security on the shipyard is a tiny guard booth at the parking lot entrance and a chain link fence, which Barnes and Widow both examine suspiciously for a few minutes, looking for the catch. “It’s not even electrified,” Barnes says finally, after giving it a cursory pass with his metal hand.

“You two are so fucking paranoid,” Wilson says, but he sounds fond.

“And very alive for it,” Widow says. “Come on, up.”

Climbing over the fence makes Barnes feel like a newborn kitten, but he makes it without falling on his head or Steve carrying him like a fucking baby, though that’s probably because Widow distracts him by making him haul the suitcases up one by one. And then they’re in, which sounds extra stupid in Barnes’ head considering the only “barrier” between “out” and “in” was just a bunch of inconveniently tangled wire.

It feels silly, the four of them trooping through the darkness, the suitcases trundling along, Motherfucker scudding behind like an erstwhile balloon. Wilson glances up at it occasionally and Steve too, with Widow pointedly not. He feels an absurd flare of protectiveness for her, there and gone, leaving imaginary sunspots in his brain; he still expects her to be much younger at odd moments and it keeps running head on into his threat estimate of her now. She’s arguably the most dangerous person in a fifty mile radius and he keeps expecting her to mutter darkly about the injustice of pimples.

“Feel like I should be holding a can of spraypaint right now,” Wilson says as they approach the floodlights near the main docks. “Or a kilo of cocaine.”

“The suitcases full of guns aren’t enough for you?” Steve says.

“The Mickey thing kind of ruins it.”

“Speak for yourself,” Widow says absently, her phone in her hand and her eyes scanning the sky.

Barnes looks up too. Motherfucker ripples at him, then gives him !!!!! and recognition and a database match for a couple of specks far above that are - right. The Iron Man suits, a fractal set of alloys and composites and a soft center core of biological tissue. A few seconds later Barnes hears the whine with his ears, and Steve looks up with him, pulling the suitcases to a halt. It doesn’t
sound anything like Motherfucker but nothing like a jet either: these are unique engines, the combustion reaction scrolling across a part of Barnes’ brain that can understand maybe half of it.

They touch down: the red and gold robot and the grey and red and blue, their eyes glowing almost white as the brighter lights from their hands and feet shut off. And then - a brief startled ripple of biocomp and conductivity from Motherfucker - a third figure touches down, more abruptly this one without any robot suit, and it’s - a massive blond man in a stylish wool coat and leather pants. It might’ve been a fashion statement if not for the businesslike belt and well-worn kneepads, and the coat flares open to a hammer on his belt, a strange large-headed one almost like a cartoon mallet. He straightens up, showing off an amiably handsome face with a matching blond beard, and Wilson gives a noise of surprised recognition to his right.

Barnes recognizes it too. That’s one of the aliens. Barnes backs up, then backs up further. Behind him Motherfucker rises over his head, his arm calibrating in sync with the flux of its fields.

The red and gold faceplate snaps open. “Look who I broooought!” Stark sing-songs, flourishing both arms at the blond man.

*Thor, the alien,* strides right up and swings his hand out to Steve - who steps up to meet him with a forearm grip in a kind of proto-handshake. “Good to see you again, my friend,” *Thor* tells Steve, sounding - pretty fucking human, if vaguely British. “And who are your companions?”

Stark doesn’t let Steve answer, clanking over and looking right at Barnes. “This is our buddy Thor,” he says proudly. “Thor, this is Steve’s buddy Barnes. Now Thor, riddle me this: what the hell is that thing?”

Stark points a red and gold finger directly up at Motherfucker’s nose. Thor frowns at Stark, but turns to look at the ship. Barnes resists the urge to show teeth. Motherfucker shimmers behind him, fields calibrating uncertainly.

“That... is a Niðavellir mining scout,” Thor says slowly, frown deepening slightly. “How did you come by this? Have they made contact with Midgard while I was gone?”

Everyone looks at Barnes. “Found it in a cave,” he says flatly.

“Seriously?” Rhodes says. “’It fell off the back of a truck’, that’s what we’re going with?”

“*Mining scout*?” Stark says with dangerous fascination.

“Sindri’s children are famous craftspeople,” Thor says, frown easing off. “One of their inventors gave us the frumuvöxtur and the life-chamber, and warriors all over the realms wear their armor. My best set was Niðavellir make,” he says happily. “Short little bastards, but they get the job done.”

They all stare at him. “They send their scouts everywhere,” he adds. “You can be out and about, exploring new realms, thinking you’re the first to set foot on this land, and bam! Niðavellir team in the next cavern, digging around. Collecting their little samples. They search for resources and new materials they might work with, I’m told.”

Well. Barnes understood barely half of that, but at least Motherfucker isn’t some kind of planet-ending death laser by design.

“They create magnificent weapons,” Thor adds.

Never mind.
“And the arm?” Stark says. “Show him the arm, Soulja Boy. He says it’s how he flies the ship,”
he tells Thor, as Barnes refuses to pull up his sleeve. “Come on, show him. They look similar,
don’t they? Look at that hand, there it is.”

Barnes makes the hand into a fist. “Tony,” Steve says warningly. To Barnes, he says, “Thor’s a
friend. I told you about him, remember?”

Barnes does not remember, but like hell is he admitting that here and now. But Steve means it.
And Barnes does want to know what the hell is going on with the arm.

He jerks his sleeve up just enough to show to mid-forearm, trying to indicate with his face and
body that if this alien lays a finger on it he’ll have it fed to him. Thor doesn’t seem bothered by the
hostility, not even leaning close to look at it. “Yes, that looks like Niðavellir make,” he says,
glancing it over. “It’s linked to the ship, you say? Well, that’s not unheard of. I met one once who
had her eyes replaced with these golden - well, these things that helped her control her weapon.
Beautiful thing, it was. And the weapon too.”

“Are they likely to come looking for it?” Widow asks.

“Doubtful,” Thor says. “They travel in swarms and most of the craft are automated and linked. It’s
like bees, really. They can lose a few and keep trundling on. Their big freighters, though, those
you don’t want to raid on, even if it’s just some harmless fun.” Thor frowns disapprovingly, like
it’s such a shame these Sindri people can’t take a little light piracy or a joke. “They take their
sample collecting very seriously.”

“Speaking of freighters,” Stark says. “We’re supposed to be escorting Thor to - honeybear, where
were we going again?”

“Iceland,” Rhodes says wearily.

“Yeah, that. But there’s a cargo ship over there carrying a bunch of SI containers, and what do
you know, I’d say they’re just about the size of our Nida-whatsit here. We can have it back to
New York in six weeks with no one the wiser.”

Steve looks at Barnes. “Where do you want it to go, Buck?”

Barnes wishes everybody else would disappear or fall down a hole or wink out of existence just
for a couple minutes. “You don’t have a place yet,” he mutters. “So. Wherever you are.”

“You’re giving it to Steve?” Stark gapes. “Where are you going to keep it? How will you -”

“In your tower, Tony,” Steve says calmly. “Where it’ll be undetectable. Just like you said. Then
when everything’s died down and Buck comes back we’ll move it over to our place.”

“Move it to your place,” Stark repeats. “In your little red wagon, I bet. Where in your outer-
borough hovel will you have the space to keep a twelve foot long spaceship? Not to mention the
discrepancy in radiation distribution -”

“Fuck the radiation,” Steve says, just as staidly as before. “We’re moving back to Vinegar Hill if I
have to mount a Chitauri head on our door and call it a war trophy.”

“Well, geez,” Stark says after a second. “If you feel that strongly about it.”

“We do,” Steve says. “Any special instructions for it, Buck?”

Barnes looks back at Motherfucker, humming above him, not understanding what the hell they’re
talking about. “It likes being in the sun,” he says. “Don’t shut it up in the dark.”

“Okay,” Steve says, his face going all soft again.

“And. Give it radiation.”

“Radiation?” Stark squawks, popping up again like a horrible metal jack in the box. “What do you mean, radiation?”

“That’s what it eats,” Barnes says belligerently, rounding on him.

“Eats? This thing eats?” Stark demands. “Is it alive? I don’t do alive. Is this a vehicle or not, Winterboy?”

“It’s an AI,” Barnes growls, because that’s as good a term as any. “You don’t need to feed it. You don’t need to do anything with it. Don’t do anything with it.”

“Yeah, you just want me to chuck a nugget of plutonium in there every so often,” Stark says.

Barnes drags his hand over his face. “It doesn’t need - you don’t - the sun gives off radiation.”

“We’ll take care of it,” Steve says. “I’ll send you updates on everything we do. Stark. You said you needed to take scans to...” He gestures at Bucky. “...fake the body?”

“Of course we need scans, we’ll do the scans, it takes two seconds. I have extremely important questions - ”

Rhodes sighs. “Take the scans, Tony, we’re on a deadline.”

“You all have no appreciation for scientific principle,” Stark says, but he holds his arm out and a blue field of dots springs into a sort of cube. “Step into the magic box, Winter, let’s please these heartless slavedrivers.”

Thor, Barnes notes, is standing to the side with his arms folded and looking on with an expression that says he’s too polite to show amusement. Barnes glances Steve, who nods, and steps into the box. It’s just light. Nothing touches him. The flare of a scan starts up.

Motherfucker scans it right back. Barnes is left blinking from double afterimages, one in his retinas and one in his head. “Uploading,” Stark says. “Perfect. There we go. And buddy, let me just tell you, you do not look a thing like Bucky Barnes.”

“What,” Barnes says.

“Shut it, Tony,” Steve says.

“What? It’s a good thing. I’m saying nobody’s gonna look at you in your fresh new life as Cap’s fresh new wife and think oh my god, Cap’s got some kind of fetish, he’s shacked up with the doppelganger of his dead sergeant -”

“Tony,” Colonel Rhodes says.

“What! What! I’m just trying to be helpful, I’m just being reassuring -”

“What do you mean I don’t look like Bucky Barnes,” Barnes demands.

“He means Bucky looked like he weighed about as much as one of your legs and didn’t have your flair for hair,” Widow says. “It’s a good superficial cover. Don’t go shaving or short-cutting
anytime soon.”

“Oh.”

“See? See? Reassurance. He is reassured. That was a helpful and necessary observation, which - ”

“Stark,” Barnes cuts him off. It seems as good a time as any. “Can I talk to you over there for a minute.”

“Whoa,” Stark says. “Is this a pistols at dawn thing? I mean, buddy, if it pissed you off that much, I’m sorry, I’m just calling it like I see it here -”

“No. I need to tell you something.”

Stark rocks back a bit and gives him a canny, sharp-edged look that’s as arrogant as it is incisive, and Barnes is reminded that he can afford the idiot patter. It’s barely a split second of assessment on Stark’s part. “Well alright then, spaceman,” he says. “We can have a little tete-a-tete right over there.”

Next to him Rhodes looks skyward and briefly closes his eyes. “Sergeant Barnes, I understand the urge, but please keep in mind maiming him will cause more problems than it solves.”

“I’m not gonna maim him,” Barnes says. “I want to talk.”

“Be my guest,” Stark says grandly. “I love talking. Lead the way.”

Barnes nods at Steve, who nods back, and heads off into the dark. He’s still limping a little, which he can’t help but will maybe help him, at the moment. Stark follows, clanking and whistling between his teeth. Barnes doesn’t go too far, staying in eyeshot but not fully out of Steve’s hearing range, though he doesn’t expect Steve will try to listen in deliberately. It’s not Steve’s hearing he needs to be out of, anyway.

It had occurred to Barnes, in the same place in his brain that feels like it does combat calculations, that he has something Stark wants. He has goals and now he has leverage. And he isn’t gonna look a gift billionaire in the mouth, no matter how annoying the noises coming out of it are.

Stark pivots on his heel, faces Barnes and flourishes, holding his arms out like a presenter. “So what’s this, Bucky bear? Are we telling secrets? Am I finally gonna find out freaky deaky shit Steve is into?”

“No,” Barnes says. Ignoring most of what Stark says seems to be the universal best practice. “I need a favor.”

“A favor,” Stark says delightedly. Nobody in their right mind could possibly look that happy about being asked to do something, especially not for a dubiously sane assassin. “As in, you’ll owe me one, that kind of favor?”

“I’m letting you hold my spaceship,” Barnes points out.

“And not letting me do anything fun with it,” Stark counters.

Barnes had expected as such. “When I get back,” he says. “You can scan my brain. And the arm. And the ship.” It’s probably the best case scenario for getting a solid medical assessment on what the hell is going on with his holy trinity of fuck. “I will cooperate with tests. Limited ones.”

“Hmm,” Stark says. “And in return?”
Barnes hesitates and lets him see it. “I don’t know if you can do it.”

“I’m Tony fucking Stark, spaceman. If I can’t, nobody can.”

“It’s very specific.”

“I do specific in my sleep. Come on. What’s this you need from little old me?”

Barnes feels the strange little pulls in his face that mean he wants to smile, but this time he holds it back. He has a negotiation to finish. “Well,” he says. “It’s about a car.”

-o-

Barnes comes back with Tony grinning, which he can tell worries everybody else in the group. Widow alone looks cool as a cucumber, which means she either heard everything perfectly or plans to bully it out of Steve later. “What the hell did you tell him?” Rhodes demands.

“Oh, nothing,” Stark says. “Nothing important. Nothing you need to know about.”

“Nothing that’ll blow up,” Barnes says, which appeases Wilson, sort of, but definitely doesn’t make Rhodes look any less riled up.

“Speaking of blowing up,” Wilson says. “How’s the whole faking death thing going down? Is there gonna be some kind of dead body involved?”

Stark flaps a hand. “That’s later, that’s all bio crap. We’re doing it tomorrow, I’m having the squishy bits picked up from the cutest little Dutch biotech lab right now.”

“That’s not gonna raise any flags, is it?” Steve asks. “We can’t have outside sources compromise opsec.”

Stark snorts. “Please. It’s part of a usual batch order from SI for no-cruelty vaccine delivery system testing. I pull bits for special projects all the time, it’s not gonna be a thing.”

“You have a site planned?” Widow asks Rhodes.

“Yeah,” Rhodes says. “We got lucky. There’s an old HYDRA storage place nearby, couple dozen miles outside the city. Probably hasn’t even been accessed in decades but hey, I gotta check it out. And it’ll be more than we thought it’ll be.”

“Good,” Widow says. “We’re headed out tonight. If you need me, you have my number.”

“We’ll see you all back in New York,” Stark says. “It’ll be great. It’ll be a party. You like parties, Iceman? You look like you can party. You’ll definitely like mine.”

“Let’s go, Tony, we are leaving,” Rhodes says, his hands and feet lighting up, and Stark makes a disgusted noise but snaps his face down anyway. Five seconds later they’re nothing but Motherfucker’s dataflow in Barnes’ brain and a couple of vanishing specks in the sky.

“Well,” Widow says, turning towards the hulking shapes of the freighters in the harbor. “Let’s go play hide the spaceship.”

They find the right cargo ship with no trouble, Widow looking at her phone and then pointing at one of the big ones moored between two loading piers. There are no sentries, no anybody - probably all the ship crew are in town, enjoying real food and real beds - so it’s the easiest thing to get aboard and find the Stark Industries containers. Widow punches a long string of numbers into
the door lock keypad, and the second one they try is mostly empty, only has a few sealed boxes stacked up at the back.

There’s plenty of room for the ship. Barnes guides it in, nudging it this way and that in his head to keep it from bumping off the sides. It blends easily into the darkness, hovering a foot or so off the floor, its sensors rippling curiously at its surroundings. Barnes steps back. It stays put. Steve and Wilson drag the container doors closed, and Widow seals it back up.

And then - that’s it. Barnes' bag is packed. His spaceship is stowed away, ready for its trip. As he thinks of it Motherfucker pings him, and since the feedback is practically instantaneous it immediately gets back to beavering through the elemental composition of everything in every container on the ship. It’ll go to Manhattan. There’ll be plenty for it to… explore, there. It knows where he is and it knows he wants it to stay there. That’s happy, for whatever value of happy it has.

When they climb down Steve pauses on the end of the pier, and Wilson and Widow glance back at them and then keep going, giving them some privacy again. Barnes looks at them go, then at Steve. In the dark Steve’s more or less all one color, a deep blued-out grey. Barnes probably looks pretty much the same.

“I think I’m going to get on a ship,” Barnes says. “For a little while. See where it takes me.” He looks out towards the ships again, then back at Steve. “Gotta keep my movements unpredictable.”

Steve nods slowly. “Our flight leaves in a couple hours,” he says quietly. “Natasha says me and her and Sam need to be seen somewhere else before all this goes down. And that we need to get all the… media things started. As soon as possible.”

Barnes nods. “Smart,” he says.

Steve half-smiles. “I think she thinks if I get a spare minute I might decide to run off with you after all.”

It’s unbearable, suddenly, to be standing across from each other like this like they’re about to shake hands like a couple of strangers. Barnes ends up against Steve’s side, trying for an embrace that’s more than an accident or a collision. “I’m coming back.”

Steve tucks his head into Barnes’ neck. “You’d fucking better,” he says. “Or I’ll talk your spaceship into taking me to you.”


“The best.” Steve turns his face into Barnes’ hair, inhaling slow and deep: taking in his smell. Barnes is suddenly glad the detangler stuff has such a distinctive odor of artificial scentlessness. He wants Steve to think of him, to know him, to be known - he wants it, a feeling almost too big for his body to hold. He wants to stay with Steve in every way there is, body and brain and whatever else in between, carried like the ship carries him.

He will. He’s coming back.

And then Steve pulls away, cups Barnes’ face in his hands and gives him a kiss, much smoother than Barnes' idiot attempt in the hotel, at the corner of his mouth and not long enough for Barnes’ nerves to wake up and start freaking over whether they liked that or not.

Barnes can only blink back, dumb, but Steve doesn’t seem to need an answer. His thumbs stroke Barnes’ cheeks, once, twice, and then slide away. “Send me postcards,” he says, stepping back,
his eyes big and serious but clear, too, his face set.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Barnes says, reflexive.

“Not without you,” Steve promises, and he’s even smiling as he turns away and walks, towards Wilson and Widow and the end of the pier. He doesn’t look back.

Barnes doesn’t need him to. The orientation point known to him as Steve is a constant, no matter where he is, no matter where he will go. He is more than he was, in ways that are probably too many to count. Steve’s not walking away from him, he’s walking towards their future.

Barnes is, too.

-o-

The woman’s voice over the airport PA system announces flights in Latvian, German, Finnish and Russian but not English, which makes it pretty easy to tune out. Steve stands close to the window and digs out his phone, dialing the number and hearing it ring, once, twice.

There’s a click. “Hey, Pegs,” Steve says. “It’s me again. Could you do me a favor?”

“Darling,” Peggy says, sounding pleasantly surprised. “Of course, if I can.”

Steve looks up at the flights board, where it is written in English and he can make out USA - DULLES INTERNATIONAL next to their flight number. “I need a lawyer,” Steve says. “With teeth.”

-o-

Stark and Rhodes choose a chemical plant slated for demolition, out in the middle of nowhere. It’s set on a river, in a hilly area that makes decent cover and more importantly prevents direct line of sight from all the nearby settlements and villages.

Iron Patriot will be raiding it on information received regarding potential HYDRA-AIM action, namely the movements of chemical weapons. When he arrives, he will be attacked by an operative who matches the description of the DC14 assailant, otherwise known as the Winter Soldier. The fight will be brutal, as later evidenced by footage submitted from the War Machine suit. The Winter Soldier, a canny and seasoned operative, will attempt to overwhelm the suit’s defenses with explosives and traps. War Machine will be walking into an ambush, and will have to fight for his life.

Nobody will be particularly shocked when the whole plant blows. Colonel Rhodes will emerge with his suit lightly charred but more or less unscathed. In the recovery and decontamination efforts, a chunk of metal will surface that might, at some point, have been a cybernetic arm. The badly melted electronics inside it will support this claim, as will parts of the metal that appear to have been embedded inside the body, affixed to bone.

Barnes rereads the encrypted email Widow sent him as he hikes up there, his backpack over one shoulder, favoring his healing side. He wasn’t lying when he told Steve he’d be getting on a ship, but in the harbor, looking for a good one, he’d thought: maybe not right now.

He has to be here, first.

Barnes watches his own funeral pyre through a scope, two miles upriver. It’s a little strange. James B. Barnes has a grave, and a memorial, and a death date carved and printed and embossed on thousands of papers and pedestals and plaques. Not a single one is accurate, and probably no one
has the right answer: that information is gone, lost forever.

Barnes doesn’t know when Bucky died, at which point in the stuttered, fractured years he slipped away and left what would become - something else. He’s not sure if there was a single break point or if Bucky was worn away like stone by the wind, dissolving into something entirely unlike himself.

But that’s not right either, is it. Deep down, in the little squeezed-up bits of him, Barnes can’t be sure Bucky died at all.

And if he did, he isn’t gone. Whatever’s left of him is hanging on. Not giving up.

Barnes thought for a long time that Bucky was the aggressor, the threat, because Barnes felt always on the defense, running from the enormity of who Bucky was. Bucky had been a real person and Barnes was the imposter, the thief, on territory he had no right to be in, and he had felt himself constantly on the edge of being routed.

But that hadn’t quite been true.

Barnes thought Bucky was an enemy, but he’s just a ghost. Just like Barnes was, before he became real. Just trying to hang on to what he had in an environment determined to destroy him.

Barnes closes his eyes. He thinks of the constellations he saw, dreaming Motherfucker’s dreams. He thinks of seeing the world, seeing Steve, of seeing himself. Of how much room there had been, in the endless ravel of light.

Maybe they don’t have to fight over the name, or the body. Maybe he can carry Bucky now, instead of being ridden. Maybe Bucky was only fighting Barnes because Barnes was fighting him.

“I don’t hate you,” he says. His voice sounds quieter and duller than he expects; the forest drinks in the sound. But it feels like something needs to be said. It’s a funeral, after all. “And I’m not gonna fight with you anymore. But. I’m not going away. And I’m going to do something different now. But you - you can come too.”

It might be his imagination, or wishful thinking, or whatever the hell else might be sparking wrong in his overcooked brain, but for a second it feels like something… lets go. Maybe it’s just him.

But he feels calmer. It’s settled now. One way or another, they are starting out on this new thing.

The Winter Soldier dies in a chemical fire outside Riga, on December 13th, 2015.

Bucky Barnes picks himself up, and gets up to go.

Chapter End Notes

- Yes, this is Ragnarok Thor. Personality-wise, at least. I dont do that whole “canon MCU timeline” thing i keep hearing about.

- I’ve made up everything about the “congress testimony” bc the last 10k of these 3 chapters was written in one feverish sprint
Capitol Hill is bleached out in the winter months, the lawns yellowed and the trees bone-grey. Sunlight reflects sharply off the grey and white buildings, the wind snapping the flags clustered on the plazas and avenues. Knots of black coats and spidery camera equipment are clustered intermittently amongst the streets and especially around the steps of the Hart Senate Office Building, and more in the hallways and doors, and most of all outside Auditorium 3B, where Captain America is giving his testimony as to the events of April 14th, 2014, also known as the day neonazis rained out of the sky.

“So you maintain that your actions that day were justifiable?”

“Sergeant Wilson, Agent Romanova, Agent Hill and I directly prevented the deaths of over three hundred thousand Americans,” Steve says. “Among them two Justices of the Supreme Court, the Speaker of the House, the director of the FBI and the United States President, according to the INSIGHT target logs. Our actions uncovered a fascist conspiracy and preempted a massive terrorist action against the United States. Should we not have done that?”

“In light of recent events, Captain Rogers, you understand that it’s just not possible for you to operate as you have been. Not anymore.”

“You’re right,” Steve says. “There should definitely be a much more well-thought-out plan in place for dealing with superpowered threats. By the way, I’m retiring.”

“... Captain Rogers?”

“I’m out. I’m done,” Steve says, and he really hadn’t anticipated the rush of it, the genuine relief, like the first breath of air when your head breaks the water. “I’m turning in my uniform. I finished my time in the Army, and I’d say my contract with SHIELD was pretty resoundingly terminated. I’m going to be a civilian.”

“Captain Rogers - ”

“If there arises a credible threat,” Steve says, “then of course I will cooperate with the relevant authorities to resolve the situation. Until then, I am a private citizen.” He straightens up. “If that’s all, ladies and gentlemen, I believe you’re waiting on the next testimony. It’s probably more comprehensive and definitely more recent.”

Tony’s waiting outside the room with a coffee in his hand and four large men in suits at either end of the hallway. They have discreet little SI pins on their lapels and they seem to be keeping the press around the corners more or less with facial expressions alone. “Was it good for you, baby?” Tony says as Steve shuts the door behind him. “Need a cigarette?”

“Only if they’re Luckies,” Steve says. “And I don’t know. Ma always told me if I had to get fucked by that many guys then I gotta get the money up front, and now I feel I should’ve listened to her.”

Tony chokes, but discreetly. “Seriously? They made something stick?”
“Nah,” Steve says. “Bernie says if they could stick me they would’ve already.”

“Jesus, what’s with this phallic language, Rogers? Is this what happens when you get within eight hundred feet of the Washington Monument? Not that I can blame you, every time I come up here I black out and suddenly it’s three days later and I’m four states over with two congressional staffers and no memory of how I got there. I’m joking. That’s a joke. How’s Bernie?

“She’s great. Peggy knows her lawyers.”

“Yeah, she’s a shark like that.”

“She says since I was a contractor for SHIELD to begin with the only other thing they can try is a long shot about how the superserum is technically government property.”

“Pfff,” Tony says. “What are they gonna do, try and make you extract it? Say your body’s the property of the US government? That’s not gonna backfire at all. And if they do, they can get in line and sharpen their lawyers. Dear old Dad had his hands on you first.”

“Did he ever,” Steve says, just to watch Tony spit fancy three-billion-dollar coffee all over his fancy three-billion-dollar suit.

“Do not tell me things like that,” Tony squawks. “You can not tell me things like that! Do you want to pay my therapy bill? Do you? And only answer yes if you have the GDP equal or greater than a small South Asian country, because hoo boy, let me tell you -”

“I think that’s you, Tony,” Steve says, because a disgruntled-looking staffer has opened the anteroom doors and is looking at them like she’d rather eat her own shoes than continue forward but knows she has to do it nonetheless.

“Right. Sure. Don’t think this is over. I’m coming back to finish this,” Tony says, pointing a finger at Steve’s nose as he goes for the staffer. “I have a long memory and absolutely no sense of priorities. Hello, Nancy, have you missed me? I know, darling, me too. Let’s get this quinceañera swinging -”

The doors close behind him. One of the SI guys nods at Steve, so he goes over there, steel himself and walks though the snapping, flickering canyon of yelling and flash photography until he gets to the third door down the hall. He loses a few of them there, and then some more after the next door, and finally he’s in the hallway Natasha had showed him, somewhere near the back of the building where people with folders of papers go clacking past but no press photographers.

Sam looks up from his phone from where he’s sitting in one of the wide windowsills. “Hey,” he says, standing up. “How’d it go? We going to jail yet? Aw, shit.” That’s to his phone, which is lighting up in his hand. “Hang on, I gotta take this, it’s my mom.”

Sam takes the call, walking back to the window, and Steve turns around to go find the bathroom and give him some privacy when he comes face to face with - a familiar face. Jesus. Steve has to do a bit of a double take, because he’d heard, of course, but it’d been so long ago, and besides, to see him here - “Coulson?”

“Captain Rogers,” Coulson says, inclining his head. He looks exactly the same as he was, a balding man in his forties with a perpetually mild smile. “Do you have a moment to talk?”

Steve’s still trying to figure out the most polite way to say so how aren’t you dead when Natasha materializes beside him, expressionless. She’d showed up in DC in what must be a wig, her hair shoulder length and red again, her face made up, looking so perfectly done it’s like she’d just reached into surveillance footage of herself from last year and extracted a perfect double. Steve
didn't know how used to the buzz cut he'd gotten until she covered it up and he's got to quit the
double-takes he keeps doing at her.

Coulson doesn't start, but he does blink at her. “I’d like to see your ID, please,” she says politely,
like she’s talking to a complete stranger. Steve glances at her again, his guard going up. Natasha’s
brand of hostility doesn’t look like much until about ten seconds into the subsequent mayhem and
violence, but he’s learned the signs.

He turns back to Coulson, who has calmly produced a badge that to Steve looks exactly like
standard issue SHIELD. “What can we do for you?” Natasha says, still in that polite voice.

Coulson nods at Steve. "I was hoping I could talk to you about your future plans, Captain."

That doesn't exactly sound like something Steve's dying to hear, but Natasha doesn't tell him to go
fuck himself so Steve inclines his head. "What about them?"

Coulson looks Steve in the eyes, a steady, honest gaze. “SHIELD isn’t gone,” he says. “We can
rebuild. The need for our capabilities, for the work SHIELD did, isn’t gone. And we need you.”

Steve stares at him, but that seems to be the end of it. He might be imagining it, but Coulson's mild
face might even look a little hopeful, which - really? Even apart from everything else, who
decided that now was the best time to go and ask him about it?

And Coulson’s clearly expecting an answer. To a proposition to rejoin SHIELD.

Rebuild SHIELD.

Steve looks out the window, across the hall. Despite the glare of winter sunlight he can just make
out the one of the American flags hanging outside the building. From here it looks blurry and
indistinct.

“I was clinically dead, on the operating table,” Steve says, still looking out. “For about six
minutes. I’d lost too much blood from the wounds sustained on INSIGHT 3 and it stopped my
heart. I was clinically dead in the ice, too - no brain waves, no heartbeat. But you knew that.” He
looks back at Coulson, not really bothering to have an expression. “That’s twice I’ve died for my
country, and it didn’t stick. They say third time’s the charm, but I didn’t expect you to be the one
to tell me to try it.”

That’s not much of an expression on Coulson’s face anymore either. “You wouldn’t have to take
on combat, if that’s no longer your interest.”

“Then what did you want me for? Paperwork?” Steve tips his head. “Fundraising, maybe? Bring
back the bond show, raise a few bucks?”

“A command role, Captain, is actually what we were thinking.”

“Pardon my frankness,” Steve says, “but if I get put in charge, something tells me a lot of people
on this hill won’t like it. And after I start making decisions, I think you won’t either.”

Coulson watches him for a second longer, then nods acceptingly and extracts a card from the
pocket of his shapeless suit. “If you change your mind, Captain Rogers, please don’t hesitate to
call.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, taking the card. “I won’t.”

“And you as well, Agent Romanova. You know how to get in touch.”
“Mm,” Natasha says.

“In that case, thank you for your time, Captain, Agent, and I wish you the best of luck,” Coulson says, and turns and walks away.

They watch him go and become just another suit, disappearing down the hall. “What was that?” Steve asks under his breath.

“Not sure yet,” Natasha says. She takes the card from his hand, looks it over and pockets it. “If you do end up trying to contact him, call me first.”

“Is it just me or was that dude eight different kinds of creepy?” Sam says, coming over to Steve’s other side, phone still in his hand.

“No just you,” Natasha says.

“Oh good,” Sam says. “I was starting to worry my freak-o-meter for this shit was broken. Aw, come on,” he says to his phone again. “I swear to god, you tell your family you’re going to testify before Congress for five minutes and they freak the fuck out. Hold on, I have to take this.” He swipes. “Sierra? What’s up? Did your flight get in okay?”

“Sam,” Steve hears a woman’s voice say, in deeply accusatory tones. “Why is there a Lamborghini parked in Mom and Dad’s driveway?”

Sam’s eyes bug out. There’s a couple minutes where Steve’s pretty genuinely concerned he’ll have to perform the Heimlich. “What,” he manages, very strangled.

“Wow,” Natasha says, as Sam gets on with asking his sister lots of half questions that mostly end in expletives. “Your Bucky really has a sense of humor, doesn’t he.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, just as there’s a vibration from his own pocket. It’s the pink phone, he knows without looking. He digs it out and glances at the name on the notification and can’t help his slowly spreading smile. “He really does.”

Chapter End Notes

ROLL CREDITS

Firstly: YES THERE’S A SEQUEL. It’s coming. Don’t panic. If y’all are still interested in these fictional idiots like I am, it will be here.

Secondly: for everybody who made fanart or podfic or otherwise poured gasoline onto this garbage fire - quietnight, aggressivewhenstartled, Vahlance, hatershunter, who did this one, and this one too, xn3city who did this, and THIS INCREDIBLE COMIC STRIP, and QUIETNIGHT AGAIN BC SHE ALSO DREW THIS MAGNIFICENCE, esaael, and of course RHODEY FOR PRESIDENT by sterlingsays, I’m looking at you - every single one of you is a goddamn miracle. People like you make the world go round. Hallelujah for fandom, indeed.
Most importantly, all the applause for my OG proofreader and partner in crime, who literally carried my bitch ass through this. Not a single word of it would have happened without them and I mean that. You know who you are, hoebag. You knew this pretentious ass end note was coming. Take a motherfucking bow.

TWO FUCKING YEARS Y’ALL!!!! GOTDAMN!!!!!